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Dump the “Ethnic Cleansing” Jargon, Group Implores

A team of researchers is urging doctors and scientists to lead the world in closing the book on the phrase “ethnic cleansing,” which has become common in the past two decades.

Call mass ethnic killing what it is—genocide, the researchers declared in an indignantly-toned paper in the May 18 advance online issue of *The European Journal of Public Health*.

The curious phrase “ethnic cleansing,” first popularized by accused Serbian genocide mastermind Slobodan Milosevic, is now applied to all sorts of massacres, they wrote; but it masks the problem’s urgency and thus helps excuse inaction.

Moreover, they argued, the term—while sometimes used well-intentionedly—offers a perverse hat-tip to the murderers’ own twisted worldview, in which victims are filth to be scrubbed away.

The insidious catchphrase has found its way into the official language of diplomacy and international law, even into medical journals, the researchers wrote. They analyzed the term’s bizarre and, in their view, blood-stained history in the paper, entitled “‘Ethnic cleansing’ bleaches the atrocities of genocide.”

Although never recognized as a legal term, many have taken “ethnic cleansing” to mean a campaign of forced expulsions, as distinct from one of killing. But in practice the two things often go together, the researchers said, and users of the term seldom make such distinctions either.

The scientists analyzed use of the term in *The New York Times* for 1990-2005; U.N. press statements; international legal literature; and statements from human rights groups. They concluded that the choice of term “ethnic cleansing” or “genocide” was unrelated to actual death tolls from various events.

The choice is critical because “genocide” requires nations to take steps to stop the killing under the 1948 U.N. Genocide Convention, wrote the researchers.

The issue is also partly a scientific one, said report co-author Elihu Richter of the School of Public Health and Community Medicine at Hebrew University-Hadassah, Jerusalem. That’s because official decisions to call something a “genocide” can be based on epidemiological investigations. One such “flawed” probe by the U.N. led to a decision not to call the current massacres in Sudan’s Darfur region a genocide, Richter said in an email. A previous U.S. State Department study had concluded with the opposite choice.

U.N. officials did not respond to requests for comment. This month, U.S. President George Bush did declare the Sudan killings a genocide. That earned plaudits from some newspapers, which editorialized that this could pave the way for finally stopping the deaths.

The four *European Journal* authors, who also include scholars from University of Mary Wash-

ington in Fredericksburg, Va. and from Hebrew University Law School in Jerusalem, wrote that the “ethnic cleansing” euphemism “may well have become one more tactic to preempt public recognition of genocide.”

The phrase’s history begins with Serbian commanders in the Bosnian genocide of the early 1990s, who used code words such as *etnicko ciscenj* (“cleansing of the region”) to mean “leaving nobody alive,” the researchers wrote. Such phrases, they added, echoed an earlier Nazi catchword, *Judenrein* (“Jew-free.”)

“From July 1991, journalists and politicians began adopting the term ‘ethnic cleansing’ which gradually penetrated the official language of diplomacy and international law,” apparently to denote events where genocidal intent was hard to legally establish, the researchers wrote.

The U.N. used the phrase in seven Security Council Resolutions, they added; interestingly, U.N. documents at first put the words in quotation marks, then dropped them. “The term, often used without quotation marks, has already penetrated the medical literature,” including the prestigious journal *The Lancet*, they wrote.

But if the “ethnic cleansing” talk is to stop, what should one call a campaign that really does consist mainly of forced expulsions, rather than killing? Just call it what it is, Richter advised in an email; for instance, “forced mass expulsions.”

“We call on the medical world,” the team concluded in its paper, “to lead the way in expunging the term ‘ethnic cleansing’ from use by the media, national and international governmental agencies, diplomats, legal bodies and human rights” groups.

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