GEOINT Focuses World Attention on the Troubled Darfur

By Dr. Gary E. Weir

Very often the most casual effort to communicate can produce extraordinary results. Upon receiving a new regional account in 2003, one of NGA's imagery analysts decided to call his colleagues in other Intelligence Community agencies to inform them of his account change and offer his assistance if needed. He had been assigned a region of Africa that showed distinct signs of instability, and he knew that a time for mutual assistance might soon come.

Early in 2003 the Sudanese Liberation Army and the Justice and Equality Movement began attacking government targets in Sudan, accusing the government in Khartoum of oppressing black Africans in favor of Arabs. After receiving an urgent request for help from a colleague he had contacted earlier, the analyst began developing a baseline of imagery and maps to document events in the Darfur region, which formed part of his new account. At about the same time, other NGA analysts studying images in the area of Darfur began noticing changes in population distribution. By April and May 2004, they all began to see evidence of several hundred villages completely destroyed by fire.

The application of geospatial intelligence (GEOINT) tradecraft and effective interagency collaboration revealed a humanitarian crisis to that point hidden from the outside world. An exhibit at the NGA Museum in St. Louis, Mo., opened in September, examining the ways analysts used available technologies to create the GEOINT products that played a role in bringing the conditions in Darfur to the attention of the world.

In April 2004, the State Department Humanitarian Information Unit formally tasked NGA to look for relevant imagery. The requirement was to combine data about damaged and destroyed villages with commercial imagery and displaced population information to create a series of maps and graphics titled "Sudan (Darfur) – Chad Border Region: Confirmed Damaged and Destroyed Villages."

In addition to refugee camps and demolished villages, the maps also indicated the spatial relationship of internally displaced persons camps, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) camps, groundwater, roads, airfields and healthy vegetation, as well as general accessibility during the rainy season. Camp locations were provided by UNHCR, baseline data came from NGA and the Army Corps of Engineers contributed hydrologic data. Additional data sources included the UN World Food Program and NASA. NGA used many imagery and cartographic resources to provide information to national and international leaders. Some of those sources included panchromatic and multispectral images.

As the crisis in Darfur escalated, Sen. John McCain received a briefing from NGA analysts. In June 2004, he took that knowledge, along with unclassified NGA briefing boards, to the Senate floor where, with

the help of GEOINT, he was able to bring global attention to the crisis. What began as an effort to contact fellow professionals ended by illuminating a humanitarian tragedy that needed international attention.

The recent history of Sudan's Darfur region demonstrates the importance of collaboration across the Intelligence Community, the power of geospatial tradecrafts to derive essential knowledge and the unique contribution GEOINT can make to international security and world peace. Although GEOINT cannot provide tangible relief to displaced Darfuris, it has educated decision makers and reminded governments that the world is watching their actions. It has also enabled aid workers to locate existing refugee camps, select sites for new camps, facilitate food distribution and quantify the effects on the population of the Darfur region of a crisis almost too great to comprehend. P

Dr. Gary E. Weir is the NGA Historian.

Internally displaced persons in Darfur, Sudan.
USAID photo