

JOHN PRENDERGAST, HUMAN RIGHTS ACTIVIST AND FOUNDING DIRECTOR OF THE ENOUGH PROJECT, AN AFRICA-FOCUSED ORGANIZATION THAT WORKS TO END GENOCIDE AND CRIMES AGAINST HUMANITY

By Cynthia Cwik

Under the auspices of the Enough Project, John Prendergast and actor George Clooney co-founded the Satellite Sentinel Project, which utilizes satellite imagery to help prevent conflict and human rights abuses. Mr. Prendergast is also a board member of Not On Our Watch (NOOW), the international relief and humanitarian foundation founded by George Clooney, Matt Damon, Don Cheadle, Brad Pitt, and others. NOOW has recently partnered with 100 Lives, an initiative to combat genocide and human rights violations around the world. The two organizations are involved in the launch of the Aurora Prize to Awaken Humanity.

Cynthia Cwik: Please describe your current humanitarian work and the path that led you to your current position.

John Prendergast: Like many people in international careers, there have been multiple twists and turns. I'm currently focused on building an initiative called The Sentry that I co-founded with George Clooney. We are tracking the assets of war criminals in order to eventually create real consequences for the commission of war crimes. This came about as a result of my frustration with having dedicated 30 years of my life to policy tools that are inadequate in the face of today's wars in Africa. I started out doing humanitarian aid, moved to development assistance, then human rights investigations, then conflict resolution when I worked for President Clinton. Watching the



John Prendergast. © Jeff Trussell

kleptocrats hijack their governments and profit from war, I decided that I needed to focus on the massive theft of resources that these leaders were engaged in, as they stole all the proceeds from diamonds, gold, oil, and other precious commodities while their countries continue to burn.

Cwik: What role do science and technology issues play in your current work?

Prendergast: We were really fortunate to be able to employ technology for a really good cause over the last few years. George and I previously founded the Satellite Sentinel Project, and we used satellite imagery to shine a spotlight on areas of Africa that were largely cut off from outside witnesses of major human rights abuses. So we found photographic evidence in Sudan and South Sudan of mass graves, aerial bombings, village burnings, and other atrocities. The technology helped

expose human rights crimes that otherwise would have gone unremarked.

Cwik: What background do you have with science and technology issues?

Prendergast: Sadly, I still use a Blackberry and look longingly at people with i-Pads and such, so the answer is not much. :-)

Cwik: What is the best way that people with an interest in science and technology can get involved in humanitarian work?

Prendergast: A number of tech organizations have corporate social responsibility departments that try to make a positive difference. We worked closely with many of these departments from companies like Intel, Apple, and others to create awareness of the links between cell phones, laptops, and other electronics products and the deadliest war in the world being waged in the Congo. Raw materials for the



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electronics products are sourced in part from Congo and were helping to fuel the war there. Working with the tech companies, we were able to ensure major reforms to remove conflict from the supply chain for our favorite products. So one way that anyone can get involved in changing the world is by working with the corporate social responsibility (CSR) departments in the companies where they work.

Cwik: What keeps you up at night when it comes to your job? Why?

Prendergast: I think the hardest part of the job is to hear about some of the worst atrocities in the world. It can be quite demoralizing to receive news of

a massacre in a place we were just visiting or a mass rape committed by soldiers in a place that had been relatively peaceful. So that is what really worries folks like us in the human rights world: where will the next setback occur.

Cwik: What is the best career advice you have received? What career advice do you have for people who want to focus on humanitarian issues?

Prendergast: The former National Security Adviser of the United States used to tell me when we were working on a peace negotiation in Africa to never be too optimistic or pessimistic

about the chances for success, to keep an even keel and humble outlook. That was really useful because I think we can all tend to personalize things and not understand that these are very difficult issues we are attempting to influence. We just need to respect the dynamics and maintain a focus for long term change. The advice I would give is two-fold: the people living in the communities we work with are the ones that will change things for the better, so always remain open to learning from them. And don't brush your own problems under the rug because those of the people you are working with and for might seem much greater. Take care of yourself along the way! ♦