



THE DARFUR CRISIS: LOOKING BEYOND THE PROPAGANDA

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March 2004

WORKING FOR PEACE IN SUDAN

The Darfur Crisis: Looking Beyond the Propaganda

“There has been a breakdown in negotiations because of unacceptable rebel demands. The talks have been suspended.”
Chadian Government Peace Mediators, December 2003¹

“What is going on in Darfur is a war by proxy”
Sudanese Vice-President Ali Osman Taha, July 2003²

Introduction

Since February 2003, there has been a growing armed conflict between two armed groups and the Government of Sudan in Darfur. These groups launched their first attacks on government garrisons in the region. These armed groups call themselves the ‘Sudan Liberation Army’ (SLA) and the ‘Justice and Equality Movement’ (JEM).³ Darfur is home to some 80 tribes and ethnic groups divided between nomads and sedentary communities. The unrest, especially that associated with the SLA, appears to have been identified with one particular ethnic group, the Zaghawa tribe, which straddles the Sudan-Chad border. The JEM group has come to be identified with extremist Islamic political leaders hostile to the present Sudanese government.

Darfur presents a very complex situation with very complex problems. There can be no simple analysis of the issue. Darfur is an ecologically-fragile area and subject to growing - and often armed – conflict over access to water. There has also been considerable armed banditry and criminality within the area with many criminals having access to automatic weapons from Chad and the Central African Republic. In perhaps the most objective reading of the crisis in Darfur, the UN media service has made this analysis: “The conflict pits farming communities against nomads who have aligned themselves with the militia groups – for whom the raids are a way of life – in stiff competition for land and resources. The militias, known as the Janjaweed, attack in large numbers on horseback and camels and are driving the farmers from their land, often pushing them towards town centres.”⁴

What is clear is that just as Sudan was on the brink of resolving its long-running civil war in southern Sudan, another conflict has suddenly appeared – a conflict clearly fanned by external forces and Islamic fundamentalist extremists. It has also become apparent that the Darfur issue has been caught up in the sort of propaganda and misinformation that has characterised previous coverage of Sudan.

And for all the SLA’s pretence of pursuing a political agenda, the UN news service reported that “SLA rebels regularly attacked and looted villages taking food and sometimes killing people...The attacks present a real threat to people’s food security and livelihoods, by preventing them from planting and accessing markets to buy food.”⁵ The SLA had also sought to suppress

¹ “Sudan Govt, SLA Rebels Peace Talks Break Down in Chad”, News Article by Associated Press, 16 December 2003.

² “Government Accuses Rebel Leader of Being Behind War in Western Sudan”, News Article by Associated Press, 29 July 2003.

³ See, for example, “Darfur Rebels Adopt New Name: Sudan Liberation Movement/Army”, News Article by Agence France Presse, 14 March 2003.

⁴ “Widespread Insecurity in Darfur Despite Ceasefire”, News Article by Integrated Regional Information Networks, UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, 3 October 2003.

⁵ “Widespread Insecurity Reported in Darfur”, News Article by Integrated Regional Information Networks, UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, 30 July 2003.

opposition within the areas it has sought to dominate by the abduction, for example, of tribal leaders.⁶

What has Caused the Unrest?

The gunmen in Darfur claim to be acting because of the region's alleged underdevelopment. These claims are not immediately borne out by the facts. Before the present government came to power in 1989, there were only 16 high schools in Darfur: there are presently some 250 schools. In 1989 there were 27,000 students in schools; there are now more than 440,000. In 1989 there was not a single university in Darfur; there are now three. Before 1989 there was not a single airport in Darfur; there are now three. There has been a three-fold increase in paved roads since 1989. And, politically, Darfur is very well represented at all levels of Sudanese society from the federal cabinet on downwards. The claims made by the rebels to represent all Darfur, and that they are acting because of Darfur-wide "underdevelopment", are undermined by the fact that the SLA is based on almost exclusively upon the Zaghawa tribe.

What has become obvious is that whatever legitimate issues may have arisen out of concerns about underdevelopment they have been hijacked by various opportunistic forces to serve different ends. Eritrea has militarily, logistically and politically assisted the Darfur gunmen in its continuing attempts to destabilise Sudan. Khartoum has lodged official complaints with the United Nations and African Union.⁷ The Sudanese government has also pointed to the agreement signed in the Eritrean capital between Darfur gunmen and elements of the Beja Congress, an armed anti-government group based in Eritrea.⁸

Islamic extremists identified with the party of Islamic fundamentalist leader Dr Hasan al-Turabi are politically involved with the rebels. Dr Hasan al-Turabi, the leader of the Islamist Popular National Congress (PNC) party, has admitted that 30 members of his party have been arrested in connection with activities in Darfur.⁹ Turabi has also admitted supporting the Darfur insurrection: "We support the cause, no doubt about it...we have relations with some of the leadership."¹⁰ In November 2003, an unnamed PNC official admitted that some party members were involved in the Darfur conflict.¹¹

In any instance, it is clear that the gunmen who have caused so much havoc in Darfur have had considerable outside assistance. The 'Sudan Liberation Army' were reported by Agence France Presse to have "weapons, vehicles and modern satellite communications".¹² UN media sources have also noted claims by tribal leaders that the rebels have better weapons than the Sudanese army.¹³ The rebels have also been receiving military supplies by air.¹⁴ And, in a disturbing

⁶ See, for example, "Khartoum Forces Free Tribal Leaders Held Hostage in Darfur: Press", News Article by Agence France Presse, 30 March 2003.

⁷ See, for example, "Sudan Calls on U.N. to Take Action Against Eritrea", News Article by Deutsche Press Agentur, 5 January 2004; and "AU to Consider Sudan Complaint Against Eritrea", News Article by Agence France Presse, 10 January 2004.

⁸ See, for example, "Sudan Rebels Form Alliance Against Khartoum Government", News Article by Africa Online, 28 January 2004.

⁹ "Al-Turabi Denounces US Role in Peace Process", News Article by Al-Hayat (London), 26 January 2004.

¹⁰ "Peace Still Some Way Off in Sudan", Middle East International (London), 8 January 2004.

¹¹ "Sudanese Government Warns Opposition Party to Stop 'Sedition' in West", News Article by Associated Press, 23 November 2003.

¹² "New Rebel Group Seizes West Sudan Town", News Article by Agence France Presse, 26 February 2003.

¹³ "The Escalating Crisis in Darfur", News Article by Integrated Regional Information Networks, UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, 31 December 2003.

¹⁴ See, for example, "Sudan Accuses Southern Separatists of Supplying Arms to Darfur Rebels", News Article by Agence France Presse, 28 April 2003, and "Sudanese Armed Forces Attack an Unidentified Plane for Helping Western Rebels", News Article by Associated Press, 28 August 2003.

resonance of the gunmen who have dominated parts of Somalia in four-wheel drive “technical”, the gunmen have also been operating in groups of up to 1,000 men in four-wheel drive vehicles.¹⁵

National and Regional Implications

UN media sources have noted that it has been said that attempts to link Darfur to the wider Sudanese peace process might retard the Kenya talks between the Government and SPLA, and would be viewed as a “reward” for armed insurrection.¹⁶ It is a matter of record that the violence in Darfur was initiated just as the long-running Sudanese civil war is reaching a peaceful, negotiated conclusion through lengthy IGAD-brokered talks in Kenya.

Mr Tom Vraalsen, the UN secretary-general’s special envoy for humanitarian affairs for Sudan, has pointed out the regional implications of the Darfur conflict: “A continuation of the problems in Darfur could have serious political repercussions in the sense that it could destabilize the area along the Chad-Sudan border and it could have repercussions also regionally if it continues. It has to be brought to an end.”¹⁷ The danger of another Somalia is looming. Do we want to surrender Darfur to rootless Somalia-type gunmen motivated by opportunism and greed?

The Need for a Negotiated Settlement

The Government of Sudan has declared its commitment to a peaceful solution to the Darfur conflict.¹⁸ The Sudanese interior minister restated this in January 2004: “Whenever (the rebels) are ready to talk, we are ready to talk to them. We have no conditions at all.”¹⁹ As early as February 2003, the government sought to defuse the conflict through negotiations.²⁰ In 2003, the Chadian government, parts of which are drawn from the Zaghawa tribe (Chadian President Idriss Deby is Zaghawa), offered to mediate between the government and rebels. The Sudanese government has welcomed continuing Chadian mediation in the conflict²¹, and Sudanese Vice-President Ali Osman Taha has also had meetings with Darfurian opposition leader Ahmed Ibrahim Diraige with a view to an immediate ceasefire.²² Vice-President Taha and Mr Diraige agreed that the proper way to settle the conflict is through “dialogue”.²³

The government of Chad has been instrumental in negotiating ceasefires in western Sudan in September 2003 and earlier. Chadian Government mediators declared in December 2003 placed the blame for the stalling of peace talks on the rebels: “There has been a breakdown in negotiations because of unacceptable rebel demands. The talks have been suspended: it’s a failure”.²⁴ In what was seen as a deliberate attempt to derail the peace talks, the SLA demanded military control of the region during a transitional period, 13 percent of all Sudan’s oil earnings and SLA autonomy in administering Darfur.²⁵ It was claimed that the Islamic fundamentalist

¹⁵ “Dozens Reported Killed or Wounded in Attack in Western Sudan”, News Article by Agence France Presse, 6 October 2003.

¹⁶ “The Escalating Crisis in Darfur”, News Article by Integrated Regional Information Networks, UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, 31 December 2003.

¹⁷ “Situation in Sudan’s Darfur Region ‘Very Serious’, Says UN Envoy”, News Article by Africa Online, 16 January 2004.

¹⁸ “Government Prefers Political Solution to Darfur Problem, Sudan’s FM Says”, News Article by Agence France Presse, 20 January 2004.

¹⁹ “Sudan Says Ready to Talk Peace to Darfur Rebels”, News Article by Reuters, 13 January 2004.

²⁰ See, for example, “Sudan to Hold Conference in Bid to Quell Tribal Violence in Darfur”, News Article by Associated Press, 22 February 2003.

²¹ “Sudan Hails New Chad Mediation in Rebellion-hit Western Darfur: Report”, News Article by Agence France Press, 3 February 2004.

²² “West Sudan Rebels Agree to Face-to-Face Aid Talks”, News Article by Reuters, 3 February 2004.

²³ “Sudan Vice-President Holds Talks With Rebel Leader”, News Article by Xinhua, 24 January 2004.

²⁴ “Sudan Govt, SLA Rebels Peace Talks Break Down in Chad”, News Article by Associated Press, 16 December 2003.

²⁵ “Peace Talks Break Off Between Sudan Government and Darfur Rebels”, News Article by Agence France Presse, 16 December 2003.

opponents of the Sudanese government had been instrumental in sabotaging the negotiations.²⁶ The government named senior PNC members Hassan Ibrahim, Suleiman Jamous, Abubakr Hamid and Ahmed Keir Jibreel as having been responsible.²⁷ JEM has refused to join in mediated peace talks.²⁸

Humanitarian Issues

The escalation of conflict since February 2003 has led to the displacement of hundreds of thousands of civilians. Many have fled into neighbouring Chad. A humanitarian crisis has ensued. The usual propagandistic allegations have been made that the Sudanese government has been deliberately denying aid to areas affected by the conflict. In September 2003, the Government of Sudan and the SLA signed an agreement allowing “free and unimpeded” humanitarian access within Darfur.²⁹ The UN have, however, quoted the Government as saying “The problem is in areas controlled by the SLM. Our experience has made us hesitant to send relief to areas under the SLM because of kidnapping and attacks on trucks.”³⁰ The difficulties of relief operations in western Sudan were starkly highlighted one month after the aid access agreement by the murder of nine World Food Programme truck drivers, and the wounding of 14 others, in an attack on a relief convoy in October 2003.³¹ The extent of the insecurity for humanitarian workers led to the United States government asking the Sudanese government for help with security and access.³² One month later, rebel gunmen killed two other relief workers and abducted three others.³³ In a further example of interference with humanitarian work, JEM gunmen admitted abducting five aid workers working for the Swiss humanitarian group Medair.³⁴

In January 2004, UN media sources reported that “about 85 percent of the 900,000 war-affected people in Darfur...are inaccessible to humanitarian aid, according to the UN, mainly because of insecurity.”³⁵ The UN humanitarian relief spokesman stated: “You can’t give aid when there are bullets flying.”³⁶ The Sudanese government’s commitment to the provision of aid is clear. In December 2003, Khartoum provided five thousand tonnes out 19,000 tonnes of food aid destined for immediate distribution in Darfur.³⁷

Human rights

There has been considerable hypocrisy from the human rights industry on Darfur. The fact is that scores of Sudanese soldiers and policemen have been killed while intervening in tribal conflicts and trying to apprehend those suspected of criminal acts. Amnesty International has previously

²⁶ “Sudan Charges That Meddling Sabotaged Chad-Hosted Peace Talks”, News Article by Agence France Presse, 17 December 2003.

²⁷ “Sudan Accuses Eritrea, Popular Congress Party of Supporting Darfur Rebels”, News Article by Agence France Press, 19 December 2003.

²⁸ “W. Sudan Rebels Say Killed 1,000 Govt Troops, Militia”, News Article by Reuters, 19 January 2004.

²⁹ “Agreement Reached Allowing Humanitarian Access to Darfur Region of Sudan”, Press Release by United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, New York, 17 September 2003.

³⁰ “Feature - Death and Destruction in Darfur”, News Article by Integrated Regional Information Networks, UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, 11 December 2003.

³¹ “Workers in Sudan Aid Convoy Killed”, News Article by BBC News, 28 October 2003.

³² “USAID Seeks Security for Aid Convoys to War-Torn Area of Sudan”, News Article by Agence France Presse, 26 October 2003.

³³ “Sudanese Government Accuses Rebels of Murdering its Relief Workers”, News Article by Agence France Presee, 17 November 2003.

³⁴ “Rebel Faction Admits Abducting Relief Workers in Sudan”, News Article by Agence France Presse, 20 November 2003.

³⁵ “Authorities Forcibly Close IDP Camps in Southern Darfur”, News Article by Integrated Regional Information Networks, UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, 16 January 2004.

³⁶ “Aid Workers Unable to Reach Most War Zones in Darfur, Western Sudan”, News Article by Deutsche Presse Agentur, 13 January 2004.

³⁷ “Sudan Says Trying to Secure Access for Relief to Darfur Region”, News Article by Agence France Presse, 7 January 2004.

criticised government inaction in responding to the violence and banditry in the region and has then condemned the government when it sought to restore order. In February 2003, for example, Amnesty International stated that “government responses to armed clashes have been ineffective”.³⁸ Firmer government responses, including the arrests of persons suspected of involvement in violence, have then been criticised by Amnesty.³⁹ Amnesty International have also been critical of the special criminal courts created by presidential decree to deal with offences such as murder, armed robbery, arson and the smuggling of weapons., and the firm sentences these courts have subsequently handed down.⁴⁰

Propaganda Distortions

The government has stated that: “Those with their own agendas are trying to give a very sad view of what is happening. The propaganda in the west is trying to exaggerate what is taking place in Darfur.”⁴¹ Khartoum’s concerns about propagandistic distortion of the issue appear to be well founded. Partisan or lazy analysts or journalists seem to be unable to resist projecting the image of government-supported “Arab” – Janjaweed – militias attacking “African” villagers - this despite the scarcity of reliable information. UN media sources, for example, have noted “a lack of accurate information on the conflict”⁴² and Reuters has also stated that “it is hard to independently verify claims by government or rebels in Darfur.”⁴³

A January 2004 **New York Times** article has been typical of the unprofessional reporting that has characterised coverage of the Darfur crisis. While repeating claims of killings, kidnappings, ethnic cleansing, forced displacement, attacks by “Arab” militias supported by Sudanese soldiers and an Arab versus African clash, **The New York Times** admitted that “it is impossible to travel in Darfur to verify these claims”.⁴⁴

The simple fact is that there is very little, if any, racial difference between the many tribes of Darfur, “Arab” or “African”. The UN media service noted: “In Darfur, where the vast majority of people are Muslim and Arabic-speaking, the distinction between ‘Arab’ and ‘African’ is more cultural than racial.”⁴⁵ Even hostile Amnesty International researchers have said that observers should be “cautious” about describing clashes as ethnic cleansing.⁴⁶ Nevertheless, **The New York Times** has fallen back on sloppy stereotypes, speaking of a “an already ugly conflict between Arabs and Africans”.⁴⁷

It is very clear that the government has repeatedly taken very firm action against those “Arab” tribesmen who have attacked “African” communities. In April 2003, for example, Sudanese courts sentenced 24 Arab armed bandits to death for their involvement in the murder of 35 African villagers in attacks on pastoralist villages. Judge Mukhtar Ibrahim Adam described the

³⁸ “Sudan: Urgent Call for Commission of Inquiry in Darfur as Situation Deteriorates”, Press Release by Amnesty International, 21 February 2003.

³⁹ “Khartoum Stepping Up Arrests in Strife-Torn Darfur: Amnesty”, News Article by Agence France Presse, 6 August 2003.

⁴⁰ See, for example, “Sudan: Alarming Increase in Executions in Darfur Region”, Press Release by Amnesty International, London, 28 June 2002.

⁴¹ “The Escalating Crisis in Darfur”, News Article by Integrated Regional Information Networks, UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, 31 December 2003.

⁴² “The Escalating Crisis in Darfur”, News Article by Integrated Regional Information Networks, UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, 31 December 2003.

⁴³ “Pressure Seen as Key to Ending Sudan’s Western War”, News Article by Reuters, 28 January 2004.

⁴⁴ “War in Western Sudan Overshadows Peace in the South”, **The New York Times**, 17 January 2004.

⁴⁵ “The Escalating Crisis in Darfur”, News Article by Integrated Regional Information Networks, UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, 31 December 2003.

⁴⁶ “Sudanese Gov’t ‘Largely Responsible’ for Abuses in Darfur, Says Watchdog”, News Article by Integrated Regional Information Networks, UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, 27 November 2003.

⁴⁷ “War in Western Sudan Overshadows Peace in the South”, **The New York Times**, 17 January 2004.

attacks as “barbaric and savage conduct” reminiscent of “the dark ages”.⁴⁸ In a further examples of the government’s firm stance, in October 2003, 14 other Arab tribesmen were also sentenced to death for the murder of non-Arab villagers during attacks and arson within villages in south Darfur state.⁴⁹

There is also abundant evidence that there has been considerable “Arab” on “Arab” violence. In one incident alone in May 2002, as reported by the UN media service, 50 Arab tribesmen were killed in such clashes between the Arab Rizayqat and Ma’aliyah tribes.⁵⁰ A special criminal court sentenced 86 Rizayqat tribesmen to death for involvement in the murder of these members of the Ma’aliyah tribe (the sentences are still pending appeals). These are the Arab tribesmen that it is alleged the government are militarily supporting.

The reliability of rebel claims has also been highlighted by their January 2004 to have shot down 3 Apache helicopter gunships.⁵¹ This will come as news to the American army who have strictly controlled purchases of the Apache helicopter: Apaches have not yet even been deployed by the British army.

Conclusion

There is a crisis in Darfur. The fighting has resulted in a humanitarian crisis. And external forces have undoubtedly played a part in the development of the conflict.

It is essential to cut away the propaganda that is already clouding the Darfur issue. The issue is far too important to leave to extremists, propagandists, flawed analysis and those who wish to see continued conflict in Sudan. The Sudanese government has spent several years successfully normalising its relations with the international community and is on the verge of signing a landmark peace agreement with southern rebels. Those who claim that the Sudanese government has deliberately provoked the conflict with a pre-set agenda of “ethnic cleansing” and “genocide” are either naïve or malicious.

The Sudanese government has clearly sought to address Darfur’s historical underdevelopment. Khartoum’s record since 1989 speaks for itself. While the rebels claim to be fighting for federalism, it is clear that Khartoum’s decentralisation of power since 1989 has itself perhaps led to a slower response to the crisis than might have been expected.

A negotiated settlement of the conflict must be reached. International pressure must be brought to bear upon those external forces – such as Eritrea – that have been fuelling the fighting. The humanitarian needs of those who have been displaced must be met until those affected are able to return to their homes. Khartoum must address the criminality and armed banditry that has undermined law and order in Darfur. Human rights organisations cannot have it both ways in criticising the Sudanese government for inaction and then attacking Khartoum for responding firmly to terrorism and lawlessness.

⁴⁸ “Court Sentences 24 to Death for Killing 35 People in Tribal Raid”, News Article by Associated Press, 27 April 2003.

⁴⁹ “Sudan Sentences 14 to Death for Arson in Turbulent Western Province”, News Article by Agence France Presse, 16 October 2003.

⁵⁰ “State of Emergency After Southern Darfur Tribal Clashes”, News Article by Integrated Regional Information Networks, UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, 22 May 2002.

⁵¹ “W. Sudan Rebels Say Killed 1,000 Govt Troops, Militia”, News Article by Reuters, 19 January 2004.

