

Violence in Darfur, Sudan

A supplement to

Confronting Genocide: Never Again?



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Sudan is the largest country, by area, in Africa and the tenth largest country in the world. Sudan has been embroiled in internal conflicts since independence in 1956. Most recently, a violent conflict involving the central government, armed militias, and several opposition groups has devastated Darfur, the westernmost region of Sudan. Darfur's conflict is complex, involving many factions and spreading into neighboring countries. Some in the international community, including the United States, have called this conflict a genocide. Others have argued that the conflict, although exceedingly violent, cannot be called genocide.

Conflict in Sudan

The borders of Sudan encompass more territory than all of Western Europe. The country is made up of hundreds of different cultures with diverse ethnic, religious, and geographical backgrounds, and with many languages. Both Christianity and Islam have ancient roots in the area. There are two main ethnic groups in Sudan: black Africans and Arabs. Indigenous Africans have lived in the region since the Stone Age. Arab peoples were prominent traders in Sudan as early as 800 CE and the area was heavily involved in the Arab-African slave trade.

Sudan is made up of two distinct geographic regions. To the north, the area is very dry and is home to part of the Sahara Desert. In the south, the climate is tropical, with lush rainforests and swamps. The majority of the population lives in urban areas in the north. The north is largely Muslim and Arab, and tends to have closer ties to Egypt. African farmers make up most of the population in the south and the majority are Christian or prac-



tice traditional religions. African populations in the west, east, and south tend to have closer ethnic ties to populations in neighboring East African states such as Chad, Uganda, and Kenya. Much of Sudan's population lives in poverty, and the country ranked 146 out of 180 countries in the United Nation's Human Development Index (which measures things like life expectancy, literacy, and average income) released in 2008.

Sudan was a colony of Britain and Egypt in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Britain ruled Sudan as two distinct territories, with separate laws governing the north and south. Upon independence, northern Sudanese nationalists and the British planned to unify these two regions. Even before official independence in 1956, a civil war broke out between the north and south

Note:

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over control of the central government. This war lasted until 1972, and a second civil war, again between north and south, began in 1983. Millions of southern Sudanese were killed or displaced by violence in this second war.

What caused the second north-south conflict?

There were a number of issues at the root of the second civil war between north and south Sudan. Northern, Islamic Arabs have retained control over Sudan's central government since 1956. The 1972 peace agreement ending the first civil war granted southern Sudan a great deal of independence from the north. The second civil war began in 1983 when the north-controlled central government broke this treaty and tried to assert more power over the south. That year, the government implemented Islamic law across the entire country, which angered many non-Muslims in the south.

Another source of tension between the two regions was oil, discovered in Sudan in the 1960s. Most of the oil reserves are located in the central and southern regions, and the government controls all oil revenues. The second civil war lasted for twenty-one years, ending with a peace agreement in early 2005. Many argue that the peace treaty has achieved little. There have been occasional violent clashes since 2005 and the two sides still are highly distrustful of each other.

What is the Islamist National Islamic Front?

The Islamist National Islamic Front (NIF) is a powerful political party that took over Sudan's government by coup in 1989. Led by Omar Hassan al-Bashir, the current president of Sudan, the NIF controls both the military and the oil reserves. It has instituted an authoritarian government in Sudan. Upon coming to power in 1989, President Bashir dissolved parliament and banned all political parties. Many within the international community believe that the Sudanese government is pursuing an aggressively Islamic agenda. In the 1990s, Uganda, Kenya, and Ethiopia, which all border Sudan, formed an alliance backed by the United States to limit the influ-

ence of the NIF outside of Sudan.

Today, there is dissatisfaction in many regions of the country. Many Sudanese are frustrated with high levels of poverty and the lack of infrastructure such as paved roads, sanitation, and medical facilities outside Sudan's major towns. Groups in some regions are upset over what they consider to be a lack of representation within the government, while others wish to have a larger degree of self rule. In early 2003, while peace negotiations to end the civil war between north and south Sudan were underway, opposition groups in Darfur, a region in western Sudan, rose up against the government. The government and pro-government militias responded brutally to crush the new opposition. This began a new, even more violent conflict within Sudan.

What are the origins of the conflict in Darfur?

The region of Darfur is roughly the size of France. The people of Darfur are predominantly Muslim. There are large populations of both Arabs and Africans. Tensions over land and grazing rights between Arabs, most of whom are nomadic herders, and Africans, who are mainly farmers, have existed for most of the region's history.

More recently, the African population has been frustrated by what it claims is the central government's lack of support during prolonged droughts and near-famine conditions. Many believe the government favors Darfur's Arab population. Opposition groups also say that the African populations of Darfur have long been marginalized by the government. They say that Darfur was left out of the peace negotiations with southern Sudan in which issues such as representation within the government were discussed. The Sudanese government, on the other hand, claims that the conflict in Darfur is rooted in competition for land among various ethnic groups in the region.

Who is involved in this conflict?

Initially, there were two main African opposition groups in Darfur: the Sudanese Liberation Movement (SLM), also known as

the Sudanese Liberation Army (SLA), and the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM). Both of these groups splintered into smaller factions over the course of the conflict. The UN estimates that there are now as many as thirty opposition groups in Darfur. Many of these factions are competing with each other for power and influence.

On the opposing side of the conflict are the central government and pro-government militias, such as the Arab Janjaweed. Most parties in the conflict say that the Janjaweed, a group of armed horsemen, is responsible for the majority of violence. Opposition groups claim that the government supports the Janjaweed and the “Arabization” of Darfur because it wants to eliminate opposition from the black Africans in the region. For its part, the government denies any connection to the Janjaweed and asserts that it only supports government forces fighting rebel groups in Darfur. But many within the international community believe that the Janjaweed has ties to the government. Although the government has called the Janjaweed “thieves” and “gangsters” it has done little to limit the violence of this group.

What has been happening in this conflict?

Since the initial rebellion in 2003, violence between rebel forces and government militia and the Janjaweed has spread across the region. The government militia and the Janjaweed have targeted civilians and villages that it claims are harboring rebel forces. Aerial bombing has destroyed numerous villages. Although the government denies its involvement in the bombings, it is the only force in Sudan that owns helicopters and planes. At the same time, the Janjaweed have looted and burned villages and crops, and poisoned water supplies. Tens of thousands of civilians have been killed by various groups in the conflict and many more have been raped. Opposition groups have forced many young boys within refugee camps to join their forces. Fighting among rebel factions occurs both within the camps and outside of them. Other groups, capitalizing on the instability, rob supply convoys and international aid efforts.

By early 2006, the humanitarian crisis was acute. UN officials currently estimate that about 300,000 people have been killed in the conflict through violence, starvation, and disease. Well over two million people have been displaced from their communities and some have fled to refugee camps in neighboring Chad and the Central African Republic (CAR). Refugees are dependent on foreign aid for survival. The majority of victims are farmers, mostly African civilians. But many Arab farming communities also have been displaced by violence from African opposition groups. Humanitarian groups have struggled to access the region because of the violence and lack of government cooperation. Rebel groups have targeted peacekeeping operations and in December 2008, a Senegalese UN peacekeeper was killed in an attack.

There are fears that the violence in Darfur could spread to other parts of the country. It has already spilled across the border into Chad and the CAR, threatening to destabilize the region. Refugees, militia, rebels, and bandit raiders flow across Sudan’s porous borders. Africans in bordering regions of Chad and the CAR have been attacked by armed Arab groups on horseback, similar to the pattern of violence in Darfur. At the same time, some observers believe that the Arab population in eastern Chad is facing persecution as well. By July 2007, more than thirty thousand Chadian Arabs had fled across the border into Sudan and claimed refugee status. Tensions have grown as the governments of Chad and the CAR have accused Sudan of supporting rebel groups in their countries, while Sudan has accused Chad of supporting opposition groups aiming to destabilize its government.

The Response of the International Community

There is disagreement in the international community over whether the conflict in Darfur is genocide. In July 2004, the U.S. Congress passed a resolution declaring the conflict genocide. In September 2004, U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell made a public statement declaring Darfur a site of genocide.

“We concluded—I concluded—that genocide has been committed in Darfur and that the government of Sudan and the Janjaweed bear responsibility—and genocide may still be occurring.”

—Colin Powell, Secretary of State,
September 2004

In early 2005, the UN released a report saying that although there was massive violence in the region, it could not be called genocide because there was no evidence of intent to kill an entire racial, ethnic, or religious group.

“The Commission established that the Government of Sudan and the Janjaweed are responsible for serious violations of international human rights and humanitarian law amounting to crimes under international law....However, the crucial element of genocidal intent appears to be missing, at least as far as the central Government authorities are concerned. Generally speaking, the policy of attacking, killing and forcibly displacing members of some tribes does not evince a specific intent to annihilate, in whole or in part, a group distinguished on racial, ethnic, national, or religious grounds.

—UN report, January 2005

Later that same year, U.S. President Bush claimed that violence in Darfur was “clearly genocide.”

Nevertheless, until recently international troop presence in Darfur was minimal. In late 2004, a regional organization called the African Union (AU) sent troops to serve as a small observer mission. The AU force was funded largely by the United States, European Union, and Canada. But with only six thousand troops, the force was too small and ill-equipped to be effective in quelling violence over such a large area. Additionally,

many AU soldiers were targeted in shootings and kidnappings.

How has the UN responded?

Starting in March 2006, many in the international community began to call for a UN peacekeeping force to be sent to Darfur. Initially, Sudan’s government was hostile to this suggestion, claiming that the presence of international troops would be tantamount to occupation. After months of negotiations with UN officials, the Sudanese government relented. In July 2007, the UN Security Council unanimously approved a resolution to create a combined AU-UN force of up to 26,000 troops and police in Darfur. The Council approved the use of force for self-defense as well as for the protection of civilians by these troops. The UN, along with the European Union, also pledged to send troops to help stabilize Chad’s eastern border with Sudan.

The African Union/United Nations Hybrid Operation in Darfur (UNAMID) has been in charge of all peacekeeping operations in Darfur since December 31, 2007. If the UN deploys all 26,000 troops, it will be the largest peacekeeping force in the world. As of December 2008, only about 60 percent of the troops had been deployed and many critical supplies were still missing. Some point out that even 26,000 troops is too few to cover the large area of Darfur. Others argue that peacekeepers can do little until there is a peace agreement to enforce.

What are the prospects for peace?

Thus far, peace negotiations have achieved little. A peace treaty mediated by the AU in 2006 was signed only by the government and one rebel faction. Further negotiations led by the AU and UN in Libya in 2007 also were unsuccessful. Most recently AU and UN officials have worked to organize a new round of talks in Qatar but have struggled to bring representatives from all of Sudan’s many rebel factions to the negotiating table.

A development in 2008 has complicated efforts to mediate the peace process. In July, a

prosecutor at the International Criminal Court (ICC) accused President Bashir of war crimes and genocide. Many in the international community have opposed this measure, fearful that it will further inflame tensions in the region. Some within the UN Security Council have supported a proposal to suspend the case against Bashir in return for his full cooperation in negotiating a peace agreement. Others have argued that suspending Bashir's case would undermine the international criminal justice system. If the UN Security Council does not block the measure, experts believe an arrest

warrant will be issued for President Bashir in early 2009.

Although the Sudanese government claims that the ICC has no jurisdiction in Sudan, the court has charged others involved in the conflict. In early 2007 the ICC issued arrest warrants for a government minister and a Janjaweed leader, both of whom the Sudanese government refused to turn over to the court. In 2008 the ICC also began investigating a number of rebels for their involvement in a 2007 attack on peacekeepers.