

The Darfur crisis in context

by Francis M Deng

The rebellion in Darfur cannot be viewed in isolation from events elsewhere in Sudan.

As a result of the crisis in Sudan's western region of Darfur an estimated 70,000 people have been killed, one and a half million displaced internally and 200,000 forced into refuge in Chad. A massive programme of humanitarian assistance has improved the situation but security remains precarious, even as the nascent African Union (AU) has stepped in to protect those monitoring the tenuous ceasefire between government and rebels with a planned peacekeeping force of over 3,000 and the AU chairman, President Olusegun Obasanjo of Nigeria, has initiated a peace process between the government and the rebels.

Monthly food distribution for Sudanese refugees, Iridimi camp, Chad

The crisis in Darfur is the latest in a series of conflicts pitting Sudan's Arab-dominated centre against the 'Black-African' marginalised majority at the periphery. These racial labels oversimplify the issue. Sudan suffers from an acute identity crisis resulting from a long history of stratifica-

tion and discrimination. Historically, being Muslim, Arabic-speaking, culturally Arabised and successfully making claims to Arab descent enhanced one's status – in sharp contrast with being black, heathen and from an area of Sudan long used as a hunting ground for slaves.

Although the British ended slavery and protected the South from Northern exploitation, they administered the two parts of the country separately, advancing the North and keeping the South underdeveloped. With independence, Northerners took over from the British as the rulers of the South, triggering a secessionist war by the Southern Sudan Liberation Movement and Army. The war was halted in 1972 by an agreement that granted the South regional autonomy but resumed in 1983 by the Sudan People's Liberation Movement and Army (SPLM/A). The declared objective of the SPLM/A is not secession but the liberation of the whole country to be free of

any discrimination on the ground of race, ethnicity, religion, culture or gender. The current war has killed over two million, displaced over four million internally and forced half a million into refuge abroad. The war also resulted in the return of what the government called abduction of women and children by Arab raiders but has been well documented as slavery.

The SPLM/A's recasting of the war from secession to the liberation of the whole country began to appeal to the non-Arab regions of the North, thereby exploding the simplistic myth of the dualism between the North and South. A third identity, comprising the marginalised Black Muslims in the North, began to assert itself. The Nuba and the Funj were the first to join the SPLM/A. The Beja to the east, the Black Darfurians and even the Nubians in the



far north have all organised opposition to centre.

Events in Darfur cannot therefore be understood without relation to developments in the country as a whole. In neighbouring areas of the Ngok Dinka of Abyei, the Nuba and the Funj, Arab militias known as the Murahleen have been the equivalent

Providing humanitarian assistance and protection of the civilian population must be highest on the agenda. A credible cease-fire and good faith negotiations are also essential to creating a climate conducive to humanitarian work and civilian protection. But high on the list of priorities should also be finalising the peace agreement between the government

and the SPLM/A which has been brokered by the Inter-Governmental Authority on Development (a regional association of Horn and

Eastern African states) with strong international support, especially from the US, Norway and the UK. This would result in the formation of a new government that would be far better equipped to resolve the conflict in Darfur and other regions of the North.

The agreement gives the South the right to decide through a referendum after a six-year interim period whether to remain within a united Sudan or become fully independent. At present, most Southerners would

prefer the secessionist option. It is, however, quite likely that the unfolding situation in various non-Arab regions of the North and increasingly among even the Arabs may persuade Southerners that, with a new Sudan emerging, their interests would be better served by being partners on the larger national scene rather than by carving out a small piece of this potentially great nation.

As for the government, unless it cooperates constructively, enabling a restructuring based on equality and shared dignity, it may ultimately fall victim to the convergent regional rebellions from around the country and, by resisting reform, inflict an even greater tragedy on the nation.

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of the Janjaweed of Darfur. So long as the rebels remain a threat, the government cannot be expected to have the will to disarm and punish the militias. Since the government would resist international intervention, the position taken by the AU – that this is an African problem to be solved by Africans – provides a strategic cover for managing the situation. It also gives the AU the opportunity to prove itself – with international support – capable of managing African crises.

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