

Darfur: no quick fix

by Alex de Waal

The people of the ethnically-diverse Darfur region of Sudan face destitution, hunger and infectious disease. In addition to 1.2 million displaced people living and dying in camps on both sides of Darfur's border with Chad, hundreds of thousands more are struggling to survive in their homes in the vast areas held by the rebel movements fighting the Khartoum government. Apocalyptic predictions of mass starvation were made after the 1984 drought - up to a million dead, aid agencies warned, if there wasn't food aid. The food didn't come, and many died - around 100,000 - but Darfur society didn't collapse because of the formidable survival skills of its people. They had reserves of food, they travelled huge distances in search of food, work or charity, and above all they gathered wild food from the bush. Today, food reserves and animals have been stolen. What use is the ability to gather wild grasses, edible roots and leaves if leaving a camp means risking rape, mutilation or death? Predictions of up to 300,000 famine deaths must be taken seriously.

A huge aid effort is grinding into gear. But the distances involved mean that food relief is expensive and unlikely to be sufficient. It's tempting to send in the British army to deliver food, but this would be merely symbolic: relief can be flown in more cheaply by civil contractors, and distributed more effectively by relief agencies.

The biggest help would be peace. In theory, there's a cease-fire; in practice, the government and Janjaweed are ignoring it, and the rebels are responding in kind. The government denies that it set up, armed and directed the Janjaweed. It did but the monster that Khartoum helped create may not always do its bidding: distrust of the capital runs deep among Darfurians, and the Janjaweed leadership knows it cannot be disarmed by force. The best, and perhaps the only, means of disarmament is that employed by the British 75 years ago: establish a working local administration, regulate the ownership of arms, and gradually isolate the outlaws and brigands who refuse to conform. It took a decade then and it won't be any faster today. Not only are there more weapons now but the political polarities are much sharper.

Another issue is human rights: investigating claims of genocide and who's responsible. This issue is best parked with an international commission - perhaps a special investigator from the International Criminal Court.

A political solution can be framed as these immediate issues are tackled. At the moment the sides are far apart, their public language one of mutual recrimination. In theory, a settlement of Darfur's provincial issues should not be too difficult. The rebels have no desire to purge Darfur of its indigenous black Arabs.

They do not seek self-determination or separation. Their demands, for equitable development, land rights, schools and clinics and local democracy, are perfectly reasonable. Formulae for provincial autonomy are also negotiable.

The Darfur process can be speeded up by implementing the Naivasha agreement - the internationally-brokered landmark agreement that lays out a formula for sharing power and wealth between the government of Khartoum and the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM). However, many of the Naivasha formulae, which were drafted on a simplified north-south dichotomy, must be revisited. Senior government jobs have been divided between the ruling Congress Party and southerners but who is going to stand aside to allow Darfur its fair share of representation?

Bringing the southern leader John Garang to Khartoum as vice president should bring dividends. Garang aspires to represent a coalition of all Sudan's non-Arab peoples, including Darfurians, and it will be politically impossible for him to endorse a war in Darfur.

The African Union has put 60 cease-fire monitors on the ground so far and, at the time of writing, 300 African troops are also on their way to ensure that the monitors can move in safety. The AU is negotiating an expanded force of 2,000 with a mandate to provide security for Darfur's terrified civilian populace. These troops, from Nigeria, Rwanda and Tanzania, could well be augmented by non-African soldiers under the same command. If they respect good local intelligence and a political process is afoot the hazards should be minimal. But reconstituting Darfur will be slow, complicated and expensive.

*Alex de Waal is the director of Justice Africa (www.justiceafrica.org) and the author of *Famine that Kills: Darfur, Sudan 1984-85* (a revised edition is to be published by Oxford University Press later this year). Email: alex_de_waal@compuserve.com*

*Kubum, Darfur,
August 2004*

