

# The international response to Darfur

by Roberta Cohen

*Darfur is regularly debated by the UN Security Council, African Union forces have been deployed and some 9,000 humanitarian workers are trying to help over two million displaced people. Clearly, Darfur cannot be described as a 'forgotten emergency'. Why, then, does fighting persist and the needs of many of the uprooted go unmet?*

**H**undreds are still dying each day in Darfur from starvation, disease and violence. With fighting continuing between rebel forces and government troops, more and more people are being driven from their homes, joining

the ranks of the 2.4 million already internally displaced and the 200,000 refugees in Chad. Government military attacks continue on black African farming communities and on IDP camps, supported by the Janjaweed militia. Women and girls continue

to be raped searching for firewood outside the camps while those inside remain totally dependent on international aid.

Being on the world agenda has not yet led to meaningful steps to end the fighting or even adequately to address the needs of those uprooted. So what is it that has impeded the international response, and what positive elements can be identified that can be built upon in responding to this and future emergencies?

One reason the international community finds the Darfur problem difficult to address is that state reliance on excessive force against ethnic or racial groups seeking greater autonomy is not unique to Sudan. Other governments bent on maintaining the dominance of a particular ethnic group have also waged brutal wars against their own populations. The Russian Federation, for example, has conducted a scorched earth campaign against the Chechens. A veto-wielding permanent member of the Security Council, Russia has opposed diplomatic pressure or sanctions against the Sudanese government for fear of setting a precedent.

A second reason for the lack of strong international response is the absence of tools and structures available to the international community to address internal crises. Other than the International Committee of the Red Cross, which is often denied entry into internal strife situations, there exists no international machinery readily available to protect civilians caught up in violence within their own countries. There is a Genocide Convention<sup>1</sup> but there are no international mechanisms for preventing genocide or mass killings and no enforcement machinery.

Only during the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century did the international community become involved in trying to assist and protect persons uprooted and at risk within their own countries. International involvement

*IDP mother and daughter return from collecting wood in the bush, outside Manjura camp, Darfur.*



with internally displaced persons (IDPs) is therefore still *ad hoc* and fledgling. While there is a Representative of the UN Secretary-General on the human rights of internally displaced persons it is a voluntary position and the small internal displacement division within the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) is non-operational. On the ground, there are increasing numbers of international humanitarian organisations and NGOs that provide material aid to IDPs but little in the way of protection of IDPs' physical security and human rights.<sup>2</sup> In Darfur, an area the size of France, the Secretary-General reports only 26 international staff with protection responsibilities and 16 human rights observers.<sup>3</sup>

By and large, the international community can be relied upon to respond effectively to famines or to natural disasters. In cases of genocide, large-scale massacres or 'ethnic cleansing', as in Darfur, international action is dependent on whether states consider it in their interests to take the risks required. In 1999 the UN Secretary-General spoke of a "developing international norm in favour of intervention to protect civilians from wholesale slaughter"<sup>4</sup> and a recent high-level UN panel talks of an international "responsibility to protect"<sup>5</sup> but in fact only in a small number of cases has the Security Council authorised the use of force to protect IDPs and other civilians at risk. Nor is there any international enforcement machinery, whether a standby police force or a rapid reaction military force, to protect IDPs in camps or on return home. There is not even assurance that perpetrators of crimes against humanity in Darfur will be prosecuted before the International Criminal Court (ICC) despite a Security Council resolution referring such cases to the court.

### Wider interests stymie humanitarian intervention

The geopolitical concerns of Security Council members constitute a further impediment to strong action. Algeria and Pakistan, which have close political ties to Arab and Islamic governments, have worked to delay and weaken international action on Darfur. As the main foreign investor in Sudan's oil industry, China holds

a 40% share in the international consortium extracting oil in Sudan.<sup>6</sup> China has abstained on resolutions threatening sanctions against Sudan, in particular against its petroleum sector, and threatened to use its veto against resolutions if they were too strong.

The US and the EU have also had reasons to avoid confrontation with Sudan. Even though the US did initiate action in the Security Council, it feared, like the EU, that pressing the Sudanese government too far on Darfur could jeopardise the peace agreement about to be finalised between north and south. The US had invested heavily in the peace process and did not want to give any excuse to Sudan to walk away from it. Sudan played this card skillfully, using the progress it made in the north-south peace process to deflect attention from the situation in Darfur. A further impediment to robust action is the secondary status of Africa itself. By and large, western governments do not consider it to be in their national or strategic interest to take the political, financial or military risks needed to stop killings on the African continent. While they readily denounce the atrocities and provide generous humanitarian help, the costs of becoming involved in trying to stop the killings are considered too high.

US threats to veto any Security Council resolution referring war crimes in Darfur to the ICC – only lifted at the end of March – deadlocked the Security Council. Moreover, fallout from the US invasion of Iraq has had significant impact. Although Iraq was not occupied for humanitarian or human rights reasons, the Bush Administration fell back on this rationale when no weapons of mass destruction could be found. US expressions of concern about Darfur have therefore been met with much scepticism in the Arab and Muslim worlds and encouraged speculation that the US was preparing to invade another Islamic state. The whole idea of humanitarian intervention to protect civilians in Darfur was undermined by the US action in Iraq, even though the situation in Darfur had deteriorated to the point where humanitarian intervention should have been an option to consider.

All these factors have worked to enfeeble the international response. It took more than a year for the Security Council to adopt a resolution on Darfur, which it finally did in July 2004. No sanctions were introduced until March 2005 and then only symbolic ones (travel bans and asset freezes) even though Sudan had failed to halt attacks against its civilian population or to disarm and prosecute the Janjaweed. Moreover, abstentions by China, Algeria, Pakistan and Russia weakened the authority of the resolutions.

Nonetheless, some positive features have emerged from the crisis. Diplomatic pressure, when exerted, has produced results. Visits to Darfur by Secretary-General Kofi Annan and US Secretary of State Colin Powell in July 2004 led the Khartoum regime to significantly, but not entirely, lift restrictions on humanitarian organisations – they still lack access to some 500,000 IDPs. The government also allowed entry to international human rights monitors and to the UN team investigating whether genocide had occurred. Furthermore, the government resumed talks with the Darfur rebels, under the auspices of the African Union (AU) although little progress has been made. More pressure is needed now, ideally from countries like China and members of the Arab League as well as from the US.

### *The role played by the AU offers promise*

The role played by the AU, if developed to its full potential, also offers promise. With the international community unwilling to act, the AU came forward to try to stop the violence in its own region. After helping to negotiate the April 2004 ceasefire between the Darfur rebels and the government, the AU deployed several hundred unarmed observers to monitor it. When the fighting continued, the AU deployed armed peacekeepers to protect the monitors and then expanded the numbers to be sent in and the mandate itself so that its police and troops could increase security for IDP camps and IDP returns, and protect civilians under 'imminent threat'. Rwanda's President, Paul Kagame, even announced publicly that Rwandan troops would not stand by if civilians were attacked.



UNHCR/K McKinsey

At the same time, AU forces have done little in fact to protect IDPs because the Sudanese government has opposed an AU protection role and the AU mandate is insufficiently strong. Nor does the AU have adequate resources or staff to do the job. To date, it has been able to field only 2,300 monitors, troops and police to Darfur but even the 7,700 intended would be far too small for an area which, experts say, needs as many as 50,000. The organisation has few aircraft or vehicles to transport its police and troops and insufficient communications equipment, tents, boots and other basic equipment. Western and other countries have tended to exaggerate the capability of the AU because they do not want to become involved in a more robust way. Nonetheless, they have pledged funds and logistical support and are also airlifting AU troops into Darfur, albeit slowly. This combination of regional involvement backed up by international support has the potential to become a more viable permanent arrangement for responding to conflict and displacement in Africa. Regional involvement, moreover, has proved a more palatable arrangement for the Sudanese government than international forces. Still, matters have reached such a pass that bringing in international peacekeepers to bolster the AU forces is now being considered.

Another development worth noting is the attention being paid to political solutions to the crisis. Whereas in most humanitarian emergencies the main focus of the international effort is to deliver aid, in this crisis international pressure brought about a north-south peace agreement in January 2005, which could provide the basis for addressing the conflict in Darfur. The north-south agreement provides for power and wealth sharing between the government and southern black African tribes with annexes extending to ethnic groups in Abyei, the Nuba Mountains and the southern Blue Nile. Certainly, an annex could be negotiated for Darfur. Moreover, southern Sudanese leader John Garang, soon to become Vice President, has promised to promote a fair and just settlement in Darfur.

The agreement, if carried out, should move Sudan in the direction of becoming a multi-ethnic, multi-racial and multi-religious society, an important development given that more than 50% of Sudan's population is black African. Francis Deng, former Representative of the Secretary-General on Internally Displaced Persons, and a southern Sudanese, has noted that the efforts of the ruling Arab-Islamic minority to depict Sudan as an Arab Muslim country distorts realities of the country as

a whole and the racial composition of those who view themselves as Arab.<sup>7</sup> Enabling Sudan to reflect its diversity is one sure way of resolving the Darfur crisis and bringing the displaced home.

The continuing violence in Darfur makes it abundantly clear that there is a long way to go before an international system to protect people caught up in violence in their own countries can be put in place. Nonetheless, there are elements to build on.

Greater attention should be paid to strengthening the AU and supporting a role for it in promoting the security of IDPs on the continent – a step not only important for Darfur but for the more than 12 million IDPs in Africa. Governments and civil society around the world whose voices have been influential on Darfur should now press for the expansion of the north-south peace agreement to Darfur and oppose the going forward of any economic aid and investment or debt relief for Sudan's government until the conflict and displacement currently overwhelming western Sudan are brought to an end.

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The next issue of FMR will focus on Sudan. Deadline for submissions: 15 June.

1. [www.preventgenocide.org/law/convention/text.htm](http://www.preventgenocide.org/law/convention/text.htm)
2. See interview with Walter Kälin on page 4 and *Protect or Neglect: Toward A More Effective United Nations Approach to the Protection of Internally Displaced Persons*, Brookings-SAIS Project on Internal Displacement and the Internal Displacement Division, OCHA, 2004. [www.brook.edu/fp/projects/idp/protection\\_survey.htm](http://www.brook.edu/fp/projects/idp/protection_survey.htm)
3. Report of the Secretary-General to the Security Council on the Sudan, S/2005/140, 4 March 2005, para.26.
4. [www.un.org/News/Press/docs/1999/19990920.sgsm7136.html](http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/1999/19990920.sgsm7136.html)
5. *A more secure world: Our shared responsibility*, Report of the Secretary-General's High-level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change, United Nations, 2004 [www.un.org/secureworld](http://www.un.org/secureworld)
6. Peter S Goodman, 'China Invests Heavily in Sudan's Oil Industry', *Washington Post*, December 23, 2004. [www.genocidewatch.org/SudanChinaInvestsHeavily23December2004.htm](http://www.genocidewatch.org/SudanChinaInvestsHeavily23December2004.htm)
7. See FMR22, [www.fmreview.org/FMRpdfs/FMR22/FMR2225.pdf](http://www.fmreview.org/FMRpdfs/FMR22/FMR2225.pdf)

*UNHCR protection assistant, Rihab Kamal, talks with displaced Massalit woman, Riyadh Geneina, West Darfur.*