

Darfur--the crisis explained

by Alex De Waal

The collapse last year of African Union-led talks aimed at resolving the Darfur crisis leaves a solution as far away as ever. A Sudan expert who advised the AU during the talks explains the background to the conflict and asks whether it constitutes genocide

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The war in Sudan's Darfur region has perplexed experts on Africa and experienced diplomats alike, so it is unsurprising that it has bewildered the wider public. This guide to the conflict answers ten simple questions.

1. Where is Darfur?

Darfur is the westernmost region of Sudan, Africa's largest country. It straddles the Sahara desert, the dry savannahs and the forests of central Africa. Darfur borders Libya, Chad and the Central African Republic, and is equidistant from Africa's coasts at the Red sea and Atlantic ocean. It is as large as France, though sparsely populated. The people of Darfur live off the land, cultivating during the rainy season (June-September) and herding animals.

Darfur was an independent sultanate from about 1600 until 1916, when it was merged with neighbouring Sudan as it became the last big territory to be absorbed into the British empire. In an earlier era Darfur had been one of Egypt's main trading partners--its sultan exchanged letters with Napoleon in 1798. Under the British, Darfur was a backwater ruled by a few colonial officers, who delegated most of their powers to tribal chiefs. After Sudan's independence in 1956, Darfur was again neglected, with little economic development, few roads and the poorest education and health services in all of Sudan.

Darfurians?

Darfur literally means "land of the Fur," after the non-Arab ethnic group that controlled the sultanate and who live in the central part of the region. The Fur, however, comprise no more than 25 per cent of the population of the region (around 6.5m in total). There are another 30-odd non-Arab groups living in Darfur, including the Masalit and Zaghawa, who, like the Fur, retain their own languages while speaking Arabic as a lingua franca. Most are farmers, but some have a strong tradition of nomadic pastoralism.

About a third of Darfur's population are descended from Arabs who migrated across the Sahara from the 14th to the 18th centuries, intermarrying with locals so much that most are physically indistinguishable from their non-Arab neighbours. Cattle-herding Baggara Arabs predominate in southern Darfur, and camel-herding Abbala Arabs live in the north, seasonally migrating with their herds from the desert pastures to the central savannahs. Darfur also has a long history of migration from west Africa, and is home to many Hausa and Fulani, whose ancestors came from Nigeria.

Certain groups, notably the nomadic Abbala Arabs, were historically excluded from land ownership. This has increased their hunger for land today, exacerbated by drought and desertification.

All Darfurians are Muslims, and most are followers of the Tijaniya Sufi sect, originating in Morocco.

3. How is Sudan ruled?

The post-independence governments of Sudan (current population 40m) have all been dominated by an elite from Khartoum, which has controlled business, administration and the military. The Arab and Islamic orientation of this elite has provoked rebellions in southern Sudan among the non-Arab people of that region, mostly Christians and theists. Darfurians have also been marginalised in Sudan's governments, though many joined the army.

In 1989, a military coup brought President Omer al-Bashir to power. A devout Muslim brigadier, he was overshadowed by Hassan al-Turabi, a visionary Islamist who sought to build an Islamic state. Turabi's militancy exacerbated the war in the Christian south, provoked hostility from Sudan's neighbours and led to international isolation. But many Darfurians followed Turabi, hoping--vainly--that a common Islamic faith would be a route to equality.

Bankrupt and exhausted, the Islamists fell out among themselves in 1999, and Bashir jailed Turabi. Determined to hold on

to power, Bashir sought peace in the south, signing the "comprehensive peace agreement" with the southern-based Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) in January 2005. Meanwhile, Darfur had become increasingly ungovernable. Guns were plentiful, imported from the civil wars in southern Sudan and Chad.

4. Why did the war begin?

The first armed clashes in Darfur occurred in 1987 when a Chadian Arab militia, armed by Libya as part of Gaddafi's attempt to control Chad, was driven into Darfur by Chadian and French forces. This militia, known as Janjaweed, allied with drought-stricken Darfurian Arab nomads, to spark a brief but intense war for land with the neighbouring Fur.

In 1991, the SPLA tried to instigate rebellion in Darfur but was crushed by the Sudanese army and an Arab militia. Further clashes occurred sporadically through the 1990s, sparked mostly by disputes over land and livestock. In each case, while local leaders tried to sponsor inter-tribal peace conferences, the security services responded with divide-and-rule tactics, usually arming Arab militia and trying to disarm Fur and Masalit village defence groups. At no point were the underlying causes of the discontent--Darfur's poverty and marginalisation--addressed.

In retrospect, what is surprising is not that war broke out, but that it took so long to do so. Three things stood in the way of insurgency: the lack of opposition leadership after the failed SPLA incursion, the loyalty of many Darfurians to the Islamic movement, and the fact that the Chadian president, Idriss Déby, had a deal with Khartoum that neither would give sanctuary to rebels from the other country.

5. Who are the Darfurian rebels?

In 2002, Fur village defence groups were becoming organised and Zaghawa units were getting arms from their relatives in the Chadian army (behind their president's back). With support from the SPLA, they jointly formed the Sudan Liberation Army (SLA), staged raids on government garrisons in February 2003 and published a manifesto. The SLA's founding chairman was Abdel Wahid al Nur, a lawyer with a vision of equality for all Sudanese. He is Fur, but his supporters include members of all Darfur's tribes--including some Arabs. But the Fur and Zaghawa wings of the SLA failed to co-operate. While the SLA of Abdel Wahid had greater popular support, the Zaghawa wing, led by Minni Minawi, was more militarily aggressive. Capitalising on Abdel Wahid's absence from Darfur--he was travelling the world to drum up support--in November 2005, Minawi convened a conference and had himself elected chairman, creating an irrevocable split. Thereafter the two wings fought each other as often as the Khartoum government--with Minawi usually the aggressor.

In March 2003, dissident Islamists recently ousted from power in Khartoum created the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM) and joined the SLA's rebellion. Smaller and more cohesive than the SLA, JEM has relied heavily on the base of its leader, Khalil Ibrahim, among the Kobe clan of the Zaghawa.

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6. Who are the Janjaweed?

The original Janjaweed of the 1980s were a coalition of Chadian Arab militia and a handful of Darfurian Arab nomads. For years, these militia were tolerated and intermittently supported by Khartoum. When the SLA insurrection gathered pace, and especially when the rebels mounted a daring raid on Darfur's main air base and military headquarters in April 2003, the government turned to the Janjaweed as the vanguard of its counter-insurgency. The Janjaweed burned, killed and raped their way across the territory of the insurgents, looting what they could and seizing whatever land they coveted.

Most of Darfur's Arabs, including the majority of the big Baggara tribes of south Darfur, didn't join the Janjaweed. But as the war spread in 2004, military intelligence continued arming sections of tribes and encouraging them to clear their neighbourhoods of suspected rebel supporters. More than 2m Darfurians--the great majority "African" Fur, Masalit and Zaghawa--fled to displacement camps and tens of thousands have been killed since 2003.

In defiance of a UN security council resolution that it should disarm the Janjaweed, the government absorbed large numbers of militia into its army and continues to deploy them against villagers suspected of siding with the rebels.

7. Is it genocide?

In response to an outcry from human rights activists, in July 2004 the US mounted an investigation into whether the atrocities in Darfur constituted genocide. The conclusion, announced by then secretary of state Colin Powell, was that they did. But to the dismay of activists, Powell went on to say that this did not entail any change in US policy. Instead, he passed the matter to the UN security council, whose investigations found that there were war crimes and other violations "as heinous as genocide" in Darfur, but that the charge of genocide was unwarranted. The security council referred the case to the international criminal court, which is due to issue its first indictments any day now.

Certainly, the crimes of the Janjaweed and their backers seem to fit the genocide convention definition of acts intended to destroy, in whole or in part, an ethnic, racial or religious group. But major human rights organisations (including Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch) and humanitarian agencies (such as Médecins Sans Frontières) have refused to use the term. Their analysis is that Darfur is not the determined attempt to wholly exterminate a group, as with the Holocaust and Rwanda, but rather crimes against humanity committed in the course of a counter-insurgency.

8. Who is protecting civilians?

Following talks in the Chadian capital N'djamena in April 2004, Khartoum and the rebels agreed to a ceasefire, to be monitored by a team of African Union (AU) observers. The ceasefire was violated by both sides, making the task of the African Union Mission in Sudan (AMIS) impossible. AMIS grew to 7,000 troops, but its operations were hampered by shortages of funds and fuel--as well as a weak mandate that didn't allow it to protect all civilians at risk.

No western country has seriously contemplated sending soldiers to protect Darfur's civilians from the Janjaweed and other marauders. But the White House decided that AMIS should be replaced by a larger UN peacekeeping operation, with the authority to use force. For the last 18 months, efforts to impose this force on a reluctant Sudan have consumed most of the diplomatic energies expended on Darfur by the west. A 20,000-strong force was authorised by the security council in August 2006. But Omer al-Bashir has dug in his heels and rejected any UN military role. The most he has conceded is an AU force strengthened by UN advisers and logistics. He can rely on China--Sudan's biggest trading partner and oil importer--to block tougher action at the UN. It amounts to a failure of effort by the US and Britain, as well as a failure of policy design--UN peacekeepers have never been a solution to war.

9. Why did the peace talks fail?

The AU, supported by the US, Britain and others, held seven rounds of peace talks, culminating in a six-month continuous session in the Nigerian capital, Abuja, from November 2005 to May 2006. During those talks, the government sat tight while the rebels scarcely budged from their opening demands. Disunity on both sides impeded any real negotiation. Under pressure from the security council, and especially the US, the AU mediation drafted its own compromise proposals and tabled them on 25 April 2006. Within a week, the parties were expected to read, absorb and agree to an 87-page text on power-sharing, wealth-sharing and security. Under severe pressure, especially from the US, Khartoum and Minawi agreed. JEM's leader Khalil Ibrahim rejected the package outright. Abdel Wahid, who commanded the greatest support in Darfur, held out, asking for just a handful of relatively minor concessions.

The Darfur peace agreement (DPA) could have worked. But the international community, led by the US, tried to bully the rebels into acceptance which created a backlash; after signing the deal Minawi was deserted by most of his own commanders.

10. What is to be done?

Since last May a combination of the cynicism of the government and the erratic leadership of the rebels has led to a worsening of the Darfur crisis. The war intensified and is now in part a proxy war between Chad and Sudan, with each backing the other's rebels. A reunifying of the rebels is necessary before any meaningful talks can be held. Khartoum has flouted its commitments to control and disarm the Janjaweed. Attacks on aid workers have increased and agencies may start to withdraw, leaving millions of displaced people without sustenance.

Darfur is a failure of the international community's responsibility to protect. The best chances for political agreement have been squandered through undue haste to dispatch a UN force to Darfur.

Darfur's political solution is now further away than at any time since the war began. The small revisions to the DPA that might have settled the matter last May or June won't work now. This frustrating complexity is not a reason to call for another half-baked quick fix: it's a reason to grapple with the complicated political processes more seriously.

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