

Darfur conflict

Literature



By the middle of 2005, some 3.2 million people 50% of Darfur's population required humanitarian assistance to sustain their livelihood. With 12,500 aid workers from 81 NGOs and 13 UN agencies in the region, the international community had put in place a substantial support operation (1). Their task was to cope with the consequences of a 2-year old conflict that had displaced more than 2 million civilians and killed at least 200,000 and perhaps 300,000 people (1 and 2).

The fighting that produced this suffering is commonly understood to have begun in early 2003 when two rebel groups the Sudan Liberation Army (SLA) and the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM) began attacking Sudanese government and military installations in the province. As Julie Flint and Alex de Waal have written, Darfur's rebels are an awkward coalition... united by deep resentment at the marginalization of Darfur...Theirs is not an insurgency born of revolutionary ideals, but rather a last-ditch response to the escalating violence of the Janjiwiid and its patrons in Khartoum. (4)

This means that an appreciation of the conflict requires some understanding of the context that preceded the overt fighting of 2003. In a country whose axis of identity is most often said to run North/South, the residents of Darfur personify a complex of identity that cannot be reduced to the polarity of Northerners and Southerners. Darfur is variously thought to be made up of between 40 and 150 ethnic groups or tribes, with groups ranging in size from a few thousand to a million or more (4). Often nomadic, these groups have many points of encounter but only a loose linkage between territory and identity.

This mobility has meant that identities in Darfur have always been complex, subtle and fluid, with the possibility of individuals or groups changing identity in response to political and economic circumstance (5). However, little if any of this ethnographic hybridity has had an impact on understandings of the conflict. As Prunier (2005) argues, the multiplicity of group identities could be the objects of anthropological literature but they were extremely unlikely ever to be considered the subject of political analysis.

This is not to say that political analysis is devoid of an anthropology. Rather it is to note that as in the case of other conflicts, such as the war in Bosnia the political anthropology of contemporary analysis is one which postulates a fixed identity politics rather than a fluid politics of identity. Indeed, as Baldo et al. (2005) have concluded, there are worrying signs that a discourse over 'autochthony' (belonging) is emerging in Darfur and elsewhere. This stabilization of Darfur's multiple identities is most obvious in the way the conflict is rendered as one of Arabs versus Africans.

It is common to both media and diplomatic representations. (5) The problem is that this dichotomous understanding overlooks the fact that Darfur's Arabs are black, indigenous, African and Muslim just like Darfur's non-Arabs (6). This is not to suggest that the idea of Arabs versus Africans is of no significance with regard to Darfur. To the contrary, it remains a vital focal point of any analysis, but it needs to be understood as a contemporary political fracture rather than an ancient ethnic fault line.

It also needs to be understood as a consequence of the violence rather than a cause of the conflict. Arabism and Darfur Conflict Arabism in Darfur emerged from the politics of the Sahara in the early 1980s, spurred on by <https://assignbuster.com/darfur-conflict/>

Libya's drive for regional geopolitical authority. In addition to arming various groups in Chad and Sudan with weapons, this initiative introduced a discourse of Arab supremacy. This led to the establishment of an organization called Tajamu al Arabi, usually translated as Arab Gathering.

Arab Gathering emerged publicly in October 1987 when it sent an open letter to the then Sudanese prime minister calling for the Arab race to be given greater regional authority at the expense of the Fur and Zaghawa tribes, who they disparagingly termed *zurga*, a term connoting those non-Arab indigenous people who are sub-human, uncivilised, or pagan and thus enslaveable (7 and 4). Traces of this drive for supremacy were found in clashes with the Zaghawa in the late 1980s when attackers who had burned villages wrote *Tahrir Watan al Arabi* (The Liberated Arab Nation) in the ashes.

Such incidents led Zaghawa leaders to compose a 1991 memorandum to the Sudanese president charging the government with creating an apartheid region by condoning crimes against humanity (4). Unconcerned by such protests, the Khartoum government embarked on constitutional reform in 1994 that redrew Darfur's administrative boundaries, divided the Fur (making them minorities in the new regions) and gave the bulk of new political posts to those committed to Arab supremacy (13).

When popular resistance to these measures resulted in a conflict that saw hundreds killed and 100, 000 flee to Chad in 1996-1998, an official Sudanese government militia, the Popular Defence Forces (PDF), was tasked with keeping order. Non-Arabs were barred from the PDF, and its violence earned it the moniker *Janjaweed* (bandits) from the local Masalit tribes (4). While the political cleavages have thus been present for some time in Darfur, the scale

of the conflict post-2003 has been greater than before because of the hardening of the identity categories and the militarization of the Arab supremacist position.

Indeed, Arab supremacy and the militias come together in the figure of Musa Hilal, recognised as both the most prominent Janjaweed leader and the head of the Arab Gathering, who operates with the backing of the Khartoum government (8 and 9). Commanding a force of 20, 000 fighters, Hilal is clear in his aims. An August 2004 message from his headquarters to the commander of ' the western military area' stated: ' You are informed that directives have been issued...to change the demography of Darfur and empty it of African tribes' through burning, looting and killing of ' intellectuals and youths who may join the rebels in fighting' (4).

The functions and operation of Hilal's militia are not unique to contemporary Sudan. As Prunier argues, ever since the current regime came to power in Khartoum in 1989, Sudan has been in a state of permanent war with counter-insurgency against various peoples as permanent policy(2). In campaigns against the Sudanese Peoples Liberation Army (SPLA) in the South, Bar-le-Ghazal in 1986-1988, the Nuba mountains in 1992-1995 and the Upper Nile in 1998-2003, the government of Sudan (GoS) has used militias supported by military intelligence and aerial bombardment in a strategy that can be called counter-insurgency on the cheap (4).

From this, Prunier concludes that the whole of GoS policy and political philosophy since it came to power in 1989 has kept verging on genocide in its general treatment of the national question in Sudan (2 and 14). The problem for those seeking a response to the effects of this permanent war on

civilians is that despite the visibility of Janjaweed leaders like Musa Hilal, the Janjaweed remain poorly defined, making calls for the disarmament difficult to implement.

The International Commission of Inquiry on Darfur (ICID) established by the UN Security Council declared that the Janjaweed were Arab militia acting, under the authority, with the support, complicity or tolerance of the Sudanese State authorities, and who benefit from impunity for their actions (10). Although the Janjaweed, in its various guises, is deemed to be Arab, the ICID was keen to note that the situation on the ground was more complex than that label suggested: The fact that the Janjaweed are described as Arab militias does not imply that all Arabs are fighting on the side of the Janjaweed.

In fact, the Commission found that many Arabs in Darfur are opposed to the Janjaweed, and some Arabs are fighting with the rebels, such as certain Arab commanders and their men from the Misseriya and Rizeigat tribes. At the same time, many non-Arabs are supporting the Government and serving in its army (10). Despite these complexities, and in response to the rise and impact of the political discourse of Arab supremacy, non-Arabs in Darfur have mobilised around an African identity. From the late 1990s onwards, those the Arab supremacists designated as Zurga have grasped and inverted the term, inflecting it with a series of positive meanings.

As a mark of difference and a sign of solidarity, it functions as a declaration of aboriginality and land ownership in the face of dispossession and displacement (6, 7, 16). It also serves to align the cause of those subject to Arab supremacism with the main southern rebel movement (the SPLA) that is <https://assignbuster.com/darfur-conflict/>

organised in identity terms familiar to the international community (the 'African south' versus the 'Arab north'), thereby giving the Darfur resistance potential influence with the international community (5).

This production of the lines of difference along the 'Arab'/'African' axis, and its adoption by various groups that do not fit naturally into this dualism, demonstrates how fixed and exclusive renderings of identity are the product, rather than the a priori condition, of large-scale violence. As de Waal (2004) concludes, identity markers that had little salience in the past are extremely powerful today, and the overwhelming reason for this is the appalling violence inflicted on people. (6)

The constitutive role of violence in the production of new identities can be seen in the July 2001 formation of a Fur and Zaghawa alliance that swore a solemn oath on the Quran to work together to foil Arab supremacist policies in Darfur (4). Containing the future military leaders of Darfur's rebellion, this alliance then reached out to other non-Arabs, including the Masalit, to construct a united front. Unlike their southern counterparts in the SPLA, few of Darfur's emerging rebels, said to comprise a group called the Darfur Liberation Front (DLF), had the military experience necessary to resist the Janjaweed attacks.

Organising military training was, therefore, the first priority of the new resistance. Once such training was completed in early 2002, the rebel groups began a series of attacks on government garrisons which continued throughout the year with considerable success. (19) While this violence was a concern for the government in Khartoum, it went largely unnoticed outside Sudan. It was not until the putative DLF developed and announced a political

strategy a struggle on behalf of all the marginalised people in Sudan that involved renaming itself the Sudan Liberation Army/Movement did it start to register internationally (4 and 18).

Even then, knowledge of the violence in Darfur was limited to Sudan specialists. Darfur Conflict and International Interventions The UN was in a terrible position regarding the Darfur conflict for a number of reasons. First, it was deeply involved in the Naivasha process, boosting the capacity and resolve of regional governments in what ended up being a saga of endless procrastination and obfuscation. Khartoum kept playing Darfur against Naivasha in order to win at both levels or, if a choice had to be made, at least to keep Darfur out of the military reach of the international community.

Second, the UN was at the forefront of the humanitarian effort both in southern Sudan and in Darfur. Third, UN Secretary General Kofi Annan knew that the US administration hated him (and the UN in general) and would do anything in its power to make the world body and its secretary general make a potentially fatal false move. Fourth, the Arab/black African split that was implicit in the Darfur conflict had many echoes inside the UN. And finally, the EU member states and America kept pushing the world body to act as if they were not themselves responsible for it.

Annan knew that the December 1948 genocide convention only obliged the member states to refer such a matter to the UN, but that once the world body had accepted the challenge, it became mandatory for it to act. Therefore, his permanent nightmare over Darfur was that member states would corner him into saying genocide, thereby forcing him to act, and then fail to give him the necessary financial, military, and political means to do so.

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For the United Nations, which had been shaken by the United States' bypassing it on the Iraq question, such a debacle would have been a catastrophe.

Caught on the horns of so many dilemmas, Annan tried to act without upsetting things, to scold without being threatening, and to help without intruding too much. The result was that he appeared weak and irresolute at a time when the United States and some of his own staff were insisting on more action, even if it was no more than symbolic. In June 2004, after he had been booed by demonstrators in Harvard Square, Annan declared: Based on reports I have received, I cannot at this stage call it genocide or ethnic cleansing yet.

This was the worst of both worlds: he had uttered the big taboo words, but prevaricated over their relevance. The pressure kept building on the UN to come up with some radical solution. And the more the pressure built up, the more the secretary general resisted it, because he knew only too well that those who were applying it had no real intention of doing anything. The Report of the UN Commission of Inquiry on the Darfur Violence provided an example of the world body and the United States each acting their parts in a coordinated show of egregious disingenuousness.

The report documented violations of international human rights by people who might have acted with genocidal intentions; yet the situation was not a genocide, although it was definitely war crimes. (37) But the United States did not like the International Criminal Court (ICC), fearing that some of its own human rights violations, particularly in Iraq, might make it liable to prosecution. It therefore did not favor the UN suggestion that Darfur war

crimes should be brought to the ICC, suggesting instead that a special tribunal might be set up in Arusha on the model of the Rwanda tribunal.

Off the record, everyone worried about naming names in an eventual prosecution because the perpetrators of the Darfur war crimes were the same people who, according to the January 9, 2005, peace agreement, were now supposed to implement the Nairobi settlement and turn Sudan into a brave new world of peace and prosperity.

Once the OAU had decided to shed its skin and be reborn as the African Union (AU), it had known that it would be judged, both by its member states and by the broader international community, on the basis of its competence in conflict management.

Darfur was the first major conflict to face the organization since its transformation, and its commission chairman, Alpha Konare, and the AU chairman in 2004–2005, President Olusegun Obasanjo of Nigeria, knew that the moment of truth had arrived. But the financial provisions under which the AU operated were highly unrealistic. Its 2003 budget had been a meager \$43 million and out of this the member states had neglected to pay \$26 million. (42)

This did not prevent Konare from requesting \$1.7 billion for a strategic plan for the AU, which was to have its own peace fund, a pan-African parliament (based in South Africa), a court of justice, and even a standing army. When the dreaming stopped, the Addis Ababa-based organization finally settled for a budget of \$158 million, with \$63 million financed by obligatory payments and another \$95 million by voluntary contributions. In the short term, the

estimated cost of a peacekeeping operation in Darfur nearly \$250 million had to be financed entirely by foreign donors.

In many ways they were only too glad to contribute. Brussels promised \$110 million and others, including Washington and the UN, pledged the rest. The AU decided to send 132 observers to Western Sudan, with 300 troops whose mandate would be restricted to protecting the observers. It also declared that in its opinion, this was not ethnic cleansing in Darfur. This was to be a recurrent problem for the AU: in many ways it has not stopped being the heads of state trade union, which President Julius Nyerere of Tanzania had denounced in 1978.

Denounced in 1978. (40) Afraid of Darfur's potential for splintering the organization between Arabs and black Africans, Konare tried his best to minimize the racial angle of the conflict. Worse, he systematically refused to condemn Khartoum or even to put the responsibility for the massacres squarely on the janjaweed. For the AU, Darfur remained a case of mass murder without any known perpetrators, and Khartoum was even discreetly advised on how to handle the whites.