

Ideas on the Background of the Present Conflict in Darfur

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According to UN sources, about 10,000 civilians have already lost their lives as a consequence of the current war in western Sudan since it began early in 2003 (BBC, 23 April 2004). One million are suffering from displacement and more than 100,000 have fled into neighbouring Chad. An end of the atrocities cannot be foreseen. In order to fully understand what this war is about and which problems have to be tackled in order to reach a solution, we must consider various aspects, among them the following:

1) Some facts about the history of the region (cf. Fig. 1)

Only 90 years ago, Darfur was still an independent sultanate. It was in 1916, that the British defeated and killed its Sultan Ali Dinar and annexed Darfur by force.

Earlier, in 1820, when the Turks invaded the Sudan, they found two large kingdoms in the northern part of the country :

- the kingdom of Sennar in eastern Sudan
- the kingdom of Darfur in western Sudan.

The Turks overran the kingdom of Sennar, but failed to conquer Darfur.

For the history of the kingdom of Darfur three different dynasties were decisive:

(1) The Dajo dynasty:

Its political centre lay in the southeast of Jebel Marra. It ruled from about the 13th century to the 16th century.

(2) The Tunjur dynasty:

Its centre of power lay north of Jebel Marra. It ruled over Darfur up to the 17th century.

(3) The Keira dynasty:

Its centre was in Turra in Jebel Marra and later in El-Fasher. It was defeated by the Turks in 1874.

However, the Fur never gave up their resistance.

During the Mahdiya, they formed a strong opposition and fought for their freedom and independence.

So when the Mahdiya came to an end in 1898, Ali Dinar of this dynasty declared himself Sultan of Darfur.

He bravely resisted the British when they invaded his sultanate, but he fell by their hands in 1916.

This was the end of an independent Darfur.

When historians in Khartoum write the history of the Sudan, they constantly neglect the role of the Darfurians in fighting the Turks as well as the British. Politicians do not appreciate the historical heritage either. So, after the Sudan became independent in 1956, Darfur was ruled by commissioners who neglected the basic needs of the people of Darfur and merely fulfilled the interests of the central government. Only after the inhabitants of El-Fasher revolted against Khartoum in the early 1980s, were they allowed to have several regional governors from Darfur in brief succession. However, since the Islamists usurped power in Sudan in 1989, the majority of the governors appointed in Darfur have been of Arab origin.

According to the motto “divide and rule” and constantly trying to weaken the spirit of unity among the Darfurians, the Khartoum government divided Darfur, which was originally one state, into three smaller states with three capitals:

- El-Fasher for Northern Darfur
- Nyala for Southern Darfur
- El-Geneina for Western Darfur.

2) The ethnic background of the conflicting groups (cf. Fig. 2)

The majority of the population of Darfur are indigenous Africans. Most of them still retain their native languages, but speak Arabic as a lingua franca. They are mostly sedentary small-holders. A few are partly pastoralists, such as the Zaghawa and the Midob of northern Darfur.

The principal ethnic group is that of the Fur. They are concentrated in Jebel Marra and its foreland. Two of the opposition groups involved in the current conflict belong to the Fur ethnic group:

- The Sudan Liberation Movement/Army (SLM/A)
- The Sudan Federal Alliance (SFA).

Another ethnic group involved in the conflict is that of the Zaghawa.

They form the following two groups:

- The Justice and Equality Movement (JEM)
- The Sudan Union of the Marginalized Majority (SUMM).

About half of the Zaghawa land lies in Chad, the other half in Sudan.

During the drought disasters of 1972-1973 and 1984-1985, large numbers of Zaghawa migrated southward and settled not only in rural areas, but also in the major towns such as El-Fasher, Nyala and Omdurman. Today the Zaghawa living in any of these towns outnumber those living in Dar Zaghawa itself. The diaspora Zaghawa have learnt to be good traders. They control the markets of all towns in Darfur today and compete with the Ja'ali traders in Omdurman. A great part of their capital was earned not in the Sudan, but in the oil-rich Arab countries. Settling outside their home areas forced the Zaghawa to struggle for their recognition as citizens. This is quite evident in Ed'Daein in southern Darfur, whose Rezeigat Arabs frequently attack the Zaghawa, burn their houses and kill them.

The third indigenous African group, one which also lives in conflict with the Arab groups, are the Masalit. About half of them live in Chad. Unlike the Zaghawa, they are poor today and stick to their home area. However, they have been longer than the Zaghawa the target of ethnic cleansing, since they opposed the present regime of Khartoum.

Not all Arab tribes are equally aggressive against the African ethnic groups. For instance the Beni Hussein and the Zeiyadiya of Northern Darfur have been living along with them quite peacefully.

Conflicts between the strong Arab nomadic groups and the sedentary African cultivators over water and grazing resources were not seldom in the past. But they were resolved by holding tribal conferences for compensating the victims.

The situation began to deteriorate when in 1986, during the rule of Al-Sadiq Al-Mahdi, the government formed armed militias, especially of the Messiriya and the Rezeigat ethnic groups, to attack the Dinka. The atrocities carried out by the Arab militias were not limited to the war areas alone, but were extended to central Darfur. So the Rezeigat committed the massacre of Ed'Daein, killing more than 1000 Dinka refugees without being prosecuted by the government (MAHMUD and BALDO 1987).

The present government is following the same policy of wiping out the opposition: The Arab groups, mainly the Rezeigat, are provided with arms to attack the civilians. Since they perform their raids on horseback, they are called "*janjawid*" ("the men

riding on horses and shooting with GM 3 machine-guns”). They are often accompanied by regular Sudanese armed forces.

For a long time, the international community has turned a blind eye on the atrocities in Darfur, one reason being that one did not want to interrupt the peace negotiations between northern and southern Sudan.

3) The natural and economic potential of the war-hit area

It is often said that the cause of the war in Darfur is the conflict between pastoralists and farmers over the limited natural resources: water, agricultural land, and pasture. No doubt, conflicts have always existed about these. But they are not the true cause of the current brutal war. In fact, the natural resources of Darfur are not meagre at all, as the following overview may show:

Water resources:

Surface water:

The greater part of Darfur receives an annual precipitation between 200 mm and 900 mm. Rainfall feeds a great number of seasonal wadis, which flow several times during the rainy season between June and September. In the south and in Jebel Marra, they flow during the whole season, and the water remains in large ponds for 1-3 months after the rainy season has come to an end. Darfurians use this water for domestic purposes, their animals drink of it and the small fields are irrigated with it. By building small dams and digging *hafirs* (dammed water reservoirs), the people are able to store the seasonally flowing water to bridge the dry season. At present, most of these *hafirs*, which were built about 40 years ago, need desilting. External assistance is necessary, since the hard clay sediments require digging machines, which are not locally available.

Groundwater:

There is plenty of good ground water in the Nubian System and the Um Ruwaba geological formation in eastern and southeastern Darfur. However, here, too, assistance is needed to repair and upgrade the old water pumping-stations. Besides, there is a great groundwater potential both in the wadis and in the sandy *goz*, suitable for installing hand-waterpumps for tapping safe drinking-water. Many of the handpumps installed in the aftermath of the famine disaster of the 1980s require either repair or replacement today.

Farming potential:

The whole zone between the 300 mm and the 900 mm isohyets is suitable for rain-fed cultivation. The Darfurians cultivate either millet or sorghum as a staple crop. However, their production in dry years does not meet the food requirements of the population. Food crises are common in such years (*cf. Fig. 3 and 4*). Agricultural extension is almost absent in Darfur for the reasons mentioned above. It must be considered the responsibility of the Sudanese government to do the following:

- make improved seeds available at reasonable prices at the time of sowing
- combat plant diseases and crop pests
- provide fertilizers, especially phosphorous, which is easily depleted in the soil due to monoculture.
- introduce animal-drawn ploughs in areas of heavy soils
- apply water-harvesting techniques for irrigated cultivation in wadis and depressions
- improve the grain storage system to decrease after-harvest losses
- improve the grain transport and marketing systems.

Grazing potential:

Except for the desert zone north of the 100 mm isohyet, all areas of Darfur are suitable for grazing, provided that drinking-water is available at a reasonable distance from the grazing herds. It is to be noted that mobile pastoralism, which is largely practised in Darfur (*cf. Fig. 5*), is the system most adapted to the given natural conditions there, which are characterized by the seasonality and high variability of rainfall. Sedentary grazing is almost impossible and moreover ecologically destructive.

The animal wealth of Darfur is conspicuous. *Table 1* shows the livestock numbers of Northern Darfur in the late 1990s.

Table 1: Livestock in Northern Darfur (1998)

Cattle	Sheep	Goats	Camels
657,000	5,100,000	2,700,00	1,566,000

Source: Unpublished records from Wilayet North Darfur, 1999

One can estimate the value of this livestock at US\$ 2 billion. Its annual production is estimated at US\$ 500 million. This means a per-capita production value

of US\$ 330 for North Darfur’s population. The livestock taxes collected annually by the state from the owners of these animals could cover the salaries of the school teachers of North Darfur for 18 years. In 1998 however, the teachers in Darfur had been waiting for 13 months without receiving their salaries from the government.

Despite this huge animal wealth, veterinary services are almost completely absent in Darfur, and no attempt is made by the government to rehabilitate water points or to improve animal production. -

This brief account of some aspects of the natural potential of Darfur may make it clear that this region has sufficient resources to feed its 5 million inhabitants – if it were only left in peace, far from the intrigues of the central government.

The following statistics may throw some light on how deplorable the situation concerning the development of the region actually is for the people concerned:

Table 2: Facts and figures - comparison of human development:
Sudan – Darfur (2000)

Population:

Sudan	31.2 million
Darfur	6.0 million
N. Darfur	1.46 million
W. Darfur	1.78 million
S. Darfur	2.76 million

Schooling Rate (primary school level):

Sudan	47 %
Darfur	31 %
N. Sudan*	88 %
S. Sudan	21 %

* Al-Wilaya Ash-Shamaliya and Wilayet An-Nil.

Medical doctors/100,000 inhabitants:

Sudan	16
Khartoum	46
Darfur	1.9
S. Sudan	2.8

Hospital beds/100,000 inhabitants:

Sudan	74
Khartoum	111
Darfur	25
S. Sudan	68

Source: The Black Book, Part II (in Arabic), August 2003

4) Prospects for Darfur

The prospects of resolving the present conflict, or rather disaster, do not look promising. If the government granted the revolting Darfurians what they demand, it would create a precedence for other regions in the country, especially the Nuba Mountains, Blue Nile and Eastern Sudan. Thus it is most unlikely that the conflict in Darfur would come to an end soon.

- Would self-determination be the right solution for Darfur at all?
- Would Darfur be able to form a functioning state today, as it was for over seven centuries in the past? –

Many are convinced that it would. For the central government of Khartoum has so far systematically neglected that region that its people had to depend on themselves anyway, so that apart from southern Sudan, Darfur occupies the last place in human development (HDI) within Sudan, which includes education, health, economy and standard of living (*cf. Table 2*).

An intervention of the European Union and the USA is urgently needed to stop the genocide in Darfur. If it is true that the European Union is waiting to transfer 430 million € to the Government of Sudan once it has signed a peace agreement with Southern Sudan, this would mean that it utterly disregards what is going on in Darfur and pardons and even rewards the perpetrators there.

In May 2004 even the UN “rewarded” the Sudan by allowing it to keep its seat in the UN Human Rights Commission, disregarding its support to Arab militias which are burning down villages, killing countless civilians, raping women, and displacing millions of inhabitants in Southern Sudan and Darfur.

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