

Q & A: Crisis in Darfur

What is happening in Darfur?

In early 2003, an armed conflict started between an alliance of the Sudanese government forces and ethnic Arab militia and two non-Arab African rebel groups called the Sudanese Liberation Army/Movement (SLA/SLM) and the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM). Instead of fighting the rebels, the government forces have waged a systematic campaign against unarmed civilians belonging to the same ethnic groups as the rebel groups – mainly the Fur, Masaalit and Zaghawa.

What is the ethnic and religious composition of Sudan?

Ethnically, Arabs make up 39 percent and Africans 61 percent. Religiously, Muslims make up 70 percent and the rest are Christians and traditional believers. The central government has been dominated by Arabs and Muslims since the country's independence in 1956.

What are the ethnic divisions in Darfur?

Dozens of ethnic groups inhabit Darfur, groups of Arab and African ethnicity who have lived peacefully side by side in the past. The majority is non-Arabic farmers of African origin. Among them, the largest ethnic group is the Fur.

The Arab groups have complained of political marginalization by the Fur. The Fur, Masalit and Zaghawa complain of political marginalization by the Sudanese government. Since the current government took power through a military coup in 1989, it has changed administrative systems and taken other measures that are perceived to be supporting the political and economic cause of the Arab ethnic groups.

What are the religious dimensions of the conflict in Darfur?

There is no religious conflict. Almost all Darfurians are Muslims. There have been incidents, however, of government forces and Arab militias desecrating mosques, killing imams and others seeking refuge inside mosques, and desecrating the Koran while attacking Africans.

What are the economic causes of the war?

Darfur is a very poor region almost entirely dedicated to subsistence agriculture and livestock herding for domestic and export purposes. The settled Fur and other African population have farmed the most fertile parts of central Darfur for generations, usually producing a surplus. Northern Darfur is an area impacted by desertification. For years, mostly Arab nomads from this area—who take their livestock from the dry north to better water and grazing lands in the south every dry season—have been moving into southern Darfur earlier and earlier. This has brought them into conflict with the farmers, whose crops have been trampled on and consumed by herds of camels or cattle. Some of the African communities resorted to self-defense groups in the 1990s to protect their crops, homes, and families from increasing incursions by the Arab camel- or horse-mounted raiders, many of whom have also been armed over the past decades.

Is this another African case of “ancient tribal hatreds”?

As late as two years ago, Darfurians did not identify themselves as “Africans” or “Arabs.” They referred to themselves as Sudanese and secondarily as westerners or Darfurians. Only recently, with the government waging war against the African communities, have the affected Darfurians called themselves “Africans.” While ethnic tensions have certainly increased in Darfur due to the current conflict, this is a result of the government's political and military policy of manipulating ethnicity and using ethnic militias to fight the rebels—in the south and west.

Who are the Janjaweed?

The Janjaweed are Arab militia in Darfur. They are not drawn from all Arab groups in Darfur, however. Some Arab ethnicities have deliberately stayed out of the fight against the rebels and against the Fur, Masalit, and Zaghawa civilians. The militia members are mostly from the most impoverished nomadic Arab ethnic groups in Darfur and Chad. Several of their leaders have criminal records on account of past attacks on farming communities.

The term Janjaweed has many suggested definitions; in past decades Darfurians used it to refer to bandits or highwaymen on the margins of society. Now the government has recruited and armed an estimated 20,000 Janjaweed militia.

What is the evidence for government-militia cooperation and coordination?

According to numerous witness accounts, the Janjaweed and the Sudanese armed forces have conducted coordinated attacks on groups of villages, often involving hundreds of Janjaweed troops, resulting in the systematic destruction of hundreds of villages. Often the Sudanese air force conducts surveillance and bombs a village, using Antonovs, MiGs, and/or attack helicopters, then a joint force of Janjaweed and government army attacks the village. The Janjaweed also wear green khaki uniforms similar or identical to those of the Sudanese government army, except that the patch worn on the chest or sleeve may have a horseman. The Janjaweed officers sometimes arrive at the scene of an attack in an army Land Cruiser. Usually the only way the civilians under attack can tell the Janjaweed and army apart is that the Janjaweed attack on horses or camels. They use satellite phones said to be issued by the government. The Janjaweed also have offices in the main government-controlled towns and government-provided barracks, and are paid and recruited by the government.

Why would the Sudanese government organize these militias?

Many of the members of the Sudanese armed forces are from Darfur, so the government may have been reluctant to use those troops in a conflict in their own region. In addition, the government of Sudan has often used militias as proxy forces. The use of militias provides the government with “deniability;” it claims, as it has in the south, that it cannot “control” the militias. There is no evidence, however, that it has actually attempted to do so. The militias allow the Sudanese government to have a large armed force at its disposal that will serve loyally as a counterinsurgency force, as the militias stand to benefit financially (loot and land) from their participation in the fighting.

Who assists the Sudanese government?

The Sudanese government buys and receives military supplies from several countries, including China, Russia, Belarus and others. Sudan’s government revenues have increased substantially since it began exporting oil in August 1999—it is now estimated to be between one-half and one billion dollars a year. As a result, Sudan has been able to purchase additional attack helicopters, MiGs, and other materiel. These new weapons and aircraft have been shifted from the 21-year war in the south to Darfur after October 2002, when a ceasefire in the south was reached.

Do Janjaweed target civilians?

Janjaweed occasionally engaged the rebel forces. Since mid-2003, however, the majority of their attacks are directed at civilians and their villages: they loot, burn and plunder civilian villages and kill villagers they find. The militia members enjoy complete immunity from government prosecution for these criminal acts, although these crimes carry the death or other grave penalties under shari’a or Islamic law as applied in Darfur.

Why are government and janjaweed forces displacing people from their homes?

Members of the targeted ethnic groups—the Fur, Masalit, and Zaghawa—believe the government is waging a campaign to resettle the lands of the African population in Darfur with Arabs. Some observers believe the displacement is part of a military strategy to destroy any possible support base for rebel groups.

Who are the rebels in Darfur?

There are two rebel groups: the Sudan Liberation Movement/Army (SLM/A), and the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM). The rebels come mostly from the African ethnic groups -- the Fur, Masaalit, and Zaghawa. Both rebel groups were formally created in early 2003 in response to the perceived political marginalization and chronic underdevelopment of Darfur, and discrimination and mounting government and militia violence against their communities. The two groups initially clashed with each other but reached a state of cooperation.

Who assists the rebels?

The SLM/A was initially provided some support in the form of training and possibly arms by the main southern rebel group, the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A), which now has almost concluded negotiating an end to its 21-year conflict with the Sudanese government. It is unclear if the SLM/A receives this military assistance at the present, although it has political support from the SPLM/A. The Sudanese government claims that the Eritrean government provides assistance for the SLM/A. The JEM includes members or former members of Dr. Hassan Turabi's political party, the (Islamist) Popular National Congress, a splinter group of the ruling party; Dr. Turabi is in jail once again, with many other PNC members, accused of an attempted coup in connection with the Darfur conflict. There are many Chadians of the same ethnic origin as the ethnic groups involved in the Darfur conflict who provide support for their kin, most prominent among them the Zaghawa in Chad.

What's happening politically in Sudan behind the scenes?

Darfurians are in the National Assembly and other governmental institutions, but not in positions of real power. Their efforts to encourage the government to negotiate in good faith with the rebels have come to naught. The current government is headed by the National Congress party (NC) and rules as a one-party state. It has replaced many secular Sudanese in government with government, especially the military and has also jailed its Islamist opponents in the PNC. The Sudanese government apparently fears that the Darfur conflict poses more of a threat to its continuance in office than did the 21-year war fought mostly in the south.

Isn't there another war going on in Sudan? How does this war in the west relate to the other war?

The war in the south lasted from 1955 until 1972, when it was settled with an autonomy agreement for the south. It flared up again in 1983 when that autonomy agreement was revoked by the government. Peace negotiations under the auspices of the Inter Governmental Development Authority (IGAD), an East African inter-governmental group, have been going on in earnest since June 2002 in Kenya. A peace agreement may be signed within several months.

How would the attacks affect harvest in the coming months?

These government and Janjaweed forces have decimated the agricultural base of Darfur by attacking and displacing the Fur and others who have been farming the most productive areas for generations. Unless many of the displaced immediately return to their homes and lands and receive sufficient seeds and tools, an impossibility given the continuing occupation by Janjaweed militias of most farming areas, there will be a large shortfall—if not total failure—in agricultural production. This means that at least a million people will be totally dependent on food assistance for at least the next sixteen months until the next harvest in October 2005.

What are the concerns for humanitarian aid?

As it stands, almost a million people require urgent humanitarian assistance—health care, nutritional support, shelter, clean water and above all protection from continuing attacks. A few international humanitarian agencies are working in Darfur, but the amount of aid so far is far from sufficient.

How long would it take for food aid to reach Darfurians?

It takes approximately four months from the date of payment for the relief food to reach the intended beneficiaries, barring logistical problems of transport during the rainy season and diversion of food by armed groups.

How has the Sudanese government cooperated with food aid?

During the 21-year conflict in the south, the Sudanese government continually frustrated the international relief community by erecting an elaborate scheme of regulations that choked off relief. In 1988 its delays and deliberate neglect to deliver relief during a famine cost the lives of approximately 250,000 people. In 1998, another famine, provoked in part by such obstructions, cost the lives of approximately 100,000 people. So far, the Sudanese government has erected similar obstacles to full humanitarian access in Darfur.

How would the upcoming rainy season affect food delivery?

The roads in Darfur will be impassible or extremely difficult to traverse once the rains start in late June, and food deliveries on these roads will be erratic. Rains have already started in the southern part of the region and are advancing north to fill the dry wadis or river beds with swift waters. The rail lines to Darfur are in poor condition and only reach as far as Nyala, South Darfur. There is no pre-existing relief infrastructure in Darfur such as in the south, where pilots are familiar with landmarks and there are many delivery points, airstrips, and now roads.

How many people are affected by this crisis?

Darfur's population is estimated at five or six million; a census has not been taken for many years. The majority of the population is African. Estimates of the affected range from one to two million, about 12 percent to 33 percent of the population of Darfur.

How many people are still in Darfur?

About a million people have been forced from their homes. About 158,000 are believed to be in Chad as refugees. There may be another one million people in Darfur who have not been hit directly by the crisis, but are affected because displaced kinsmen staying with them have stretched and depleted their resources. The U.N. estimates that by September 2004 there were 2.2 million people at risk and in need of emergency assistance in Darfur.

How can the violence in Darfur be stopped?

The government and the two rebel groups agreed to a humanitarian ceasefire on April 8, 2004. This has not stopped the violence however, as government air force continues to bomb on occasion and the Janjaweed militias continue to attack the few remaining undisturbed villages of the Fur, Masalit, and Zaghawa. In addition the Janjaweed terrorize the displaced civilians even after they have fled into government-controlled areas. The government of Sudan must be forced to disarm and dismantle these groups, arrest those responsible for abuses, and return the others to their places of origin, removing them from the land they have recently occupied by military force.

In the long term, ethnic reconciliation, compensation, and justice will be essential, and possibly agreement on access to land. There must be impartial administration of justice. When the abusers are investigated and punished for their attacks on civilians and civilian property, the violence will be stopped.

What is the likelihood of an international peacekeeping force?

A role in ceasefire monitoring is envisioned for the United Nations after a peace agreement is signed settling the southern conflict, anticipated for sometime in 2004. The Security Council has authorized an advance mission to set up this monitoring body, which will have an estimated 6,500 troops. But these will not be deployed in Darfur only, but are for use throughout Sudan, at one million square miles the largest country by territory in Africa. And they will not be deployed for many months, after a final peace agreement is signed.

In the ceasefire agreement of April 8, the Sudanese government and the two Darfurian rebel forces agreed that the African Union would create a ceasefire commission to monitor the ceasefire. The A.U. has negotiated a force of 120 unarmed monitors (military personnel under A.U. command but drawn from many countries inside and outside Africa); those monitors are in the process of deployment. A protective force of 270 for the benefit of the 120 monitors has been authorized by the A.U. as well. The protective force would also be drawn from inside and outside Africa and would be armed. It will not be deployed until the A.U. requests.

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Q&A: Sudan's Darfur conflict

The world's worst humanitarian crisis is unfolding in Sudan's western region of Darfur, the United Nations says. More than two million people are estimated to have fled their homes and at least 100,000 are thought to have died during the crisis. Sudan's government and the pro-government Arab militias are accused of war crimes against the region's black African population, although the United Nations has stopped short of terming it a genocide.

How did the conflict start?

The conflict began in the arid and impoverished region early in 2003 after a rebel group began attacking government targets, claiming that the region was being neglected by Khartoum.

The rebels say the government is oppressing black Africans in favour of Arabs.

There has been tension in Darfur, which means land of the Fur, for many years over land and grazing rights between the mostly nomadic Arabs and farmers from the Fur, Massaleet and Zagawa communities.

There are two main rebel groups, the Sudan Liberation Army (SLA) and the Justice and Equality Movement (Jem), which have been linked to senior Sudanese opposition politician Hassan al-Turabi.

What is the government doing?

It admits mobilising "self-defence militias" following rebel attacks but denies any links to the Janjaweed, accused of trying to "cleanse" large swathes of territory of black Africans.

Refugees from Darfur say that following air raids by government aircraft, the Janjaweed ride into villages on horses and camels, slaughtering men, raping women and stealing whatever they can find.

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Many women report being abducted by the Janjaweed and held as sex slaves for more than a week before being released.

Human rights groups, the US Congress and US Secretary of State Colin Powell say that genocide is taking place.

If the UN had agreed that a genocide was occurring, then it would have been legally obliged to take action to stop it, but a UN team sent to Sudan to find out instead said that war crimes had been committed, but there was no intent to commit genocide.

Sudan's government denies being in control of the Janjaweed and President Omar al-Bashir has called them "thieves and gangsters".

After strong international pressure and the threat of sanctions, the government promised to disarm the Janjaweed. But there is little evidence of this so far.

Thousands of extra policemen have been deployed but the refugees have little faith in the Sudanese security forces.

After much prompting by the US and its allies, the United Nations has threatened to impose sanctions on Sudan's oil sector if the violence is not quelled.

But this has been resisted by China and some other nations, which argue that Sudan should be able to find its own solution.

There is no deadline for Sudan to take action but the UN is compiling monthly reports on the situation in Darfur.

What has happened to the civilians?

Some two million people have left their homes and many thousands are estimated to have been killed. Most have fled their destroyed villages for camps in Darfur's main towns but there is not enough food, water or medicine.

The Janjaweed patrol outside the camps and Darfurians say the men are killed and the women raped if they venture too far in search of firewood or water.

Aid workers say that many thousands are at risk of starvation and disease in the camps. Some children have already died from malnutrition.

Attempts by security forces to persuade the refugees to leave the camps and return home have led to violence and brought condemnation from the international community.

As many as 200,000 have also sought safety in neighbouring Chad, but many are camped along a 600km stretch of the border and remain vulnerable to attacks from Sudan.

Chad is worried that the conflict could spill over the border.

Its eastern areas have a similar ethnic make-up to Darfur.

Lots of aid agencies are working in Darfur but they are unable to get access to vast areas.

They accuse the government of blocking their access to Darfur by demanding visas and using other bureaucratic obstacles.

Sudan says these have been removed.

Is anyone trying to stop the fighting?

The government and the two rebel groups signed a ceasefire last April but this has not held.

Two further agreements have been reached in Nigeria, brokered by the African Union, on banning military flights in Darfur and on humanitarian aid.

Some 1,400 African Union troops are now in Darfur on a very limited mandate.

The Sudan government has agreed in principle to a force of at least 3,000 and they should have been on the ground months ago, but Khartoum is resisting allowing them to beef up their powers to disarm combatants.

The government has hinted that it may let Darfur run its own affairs more if this would help solve the crisis.

It has agreed to let southern Sudan have its own government as part of a deal to end 20 years of conflict in that region.

The government negotiator, Vice President Ali Osman Taha, is now turning his attention to Darfur and talks are due to resume in Nigeria in February.

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