

United Nations Security Council ignores ethnic cleansing in Sudan's Darfur region

Brian Smith
17 May 2004

The ongoing conflict in Sudan's Darfur region has increasingly taken the form of ethnic cleansing, with numerous reports of the direct targeting of civilian populations.

The United Nations Commission on Human Rights (UNCHR) and Human Rights Watch (HRW) have just released reports revealing the extent of the atrocities. HRW believes that there can be "no doubt about the Sudanese government's culpability in crimes against humanity in Darfur."

The UNCHR's response is more circumspect. Whilst condemning the local Arab militias and cataloguing the Sudan's military's involvement, it stops short of condemning Khartoum outright and avoids references to ethnic cleansing. As well as referring to the Sudan government's involvement, the UNCHR also criticises the rebels for human rights violations, accusing them of recruiting child soldiers.

However, reporting back to the UN Security Council meeting last weekend, Acting High Commissioner for UNCHR Bertrand Ramcharan personally attacked the Khartoum authorities. He spoke of "repeated crimes against humanity" and a "scorched earth policy". Ramcharan also raised the possibility that war crimes may have been committed.

Despite the warning from Ramcharan and other UN investigators, the Security Council merely stated that it would continue to "monitor" the situation. In an article entitled, "Big powers wary over Sudan crisis", the BBC reports that the UN will take no immediate action in Darfur.

Whilst the Security Council discussion has not been made public it is clear that Washington's policy of working through the Sudan government was accepted. The German government had previously proposed deploying a European Union-backed military force in Sudan, and Kofi Annan suggested that a UN force might be needed. However, in the week before the Security Council meeting, US Secretary of State Colin Powell made clear to German Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer that the US wanted only increased pressure on Khartoum rather than military intervention.

The US and European powers are allowing the Sudan government to maintain an operation that is resulting in the deaths of tens and possibly hundreds of thousands of civilians because their overriding concern is a desire to exploit Sudan's enormous oil wealth. For this reason they don't want to cut across ongoing peace negotiations between the government and the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) in the south. As Georgette Gagnon from Human Rights Watch explained, "Most of the international community has been very concerned with ensuring the north-south talks don't fall apart," and consequently "they have been tiptoeing around this Darfur problem to some extent."

Talks between the government and the John Garang's SPLA in the south have occurred largely because of pressure from US and European governments and their corporate backers. The 20-year-old civil war and US sanctions on Sudan have cut across oil production and the US is demanding that Khartoum reach an agreement with the SPLA as soon as possible.

There have historically been clashes in the region between black African peasant farmers and Arab herders over scarce resources, notably water and pastureland. Earlier famines and the encroaching Sahara have exacerbated the situation. However, the current conflict goes far beyond this, with the government using old disputes to push its own agenda.

Khartoum is backing an Arab militia known as Janjaweed (or Fursan or Peshmerga) for the purpose of terrorising the local settled black African population. It has also encouraged the region's nomadic Arab tribes—the Baggara—to do the same.

Africa Analysis reports that at a recent meeting of the Baggara it was resolved to "empty the province" of its majority African population, and even to erase the name of Darfur, literally "home of the Fur"—the largest African group comprising approximately four million of the region's six million people.

A delegation was also selected to tour the region's Arab tribal administration centres to drum up support for ethnic cleansing. Many Baggara tribes have become involved in driving the Africans from the land. In many cases Africans and Arabs were previously friends and neighbours united by faith and mutual poverty.

The Janjaweed is not a formal structure, but is said to number a few thousand men who roam the region in bands. They have been working closely with the Sudanese military, sometimes in the same command structures, and though their modus operandi varies slightly it follows the same basic pattern.

The Janjaweed, armed with automatic weapons, ride in to the peasant villages on horseback. They burn the huts and round up the young men who are often executed. Parents are sometimes forced to watch whilst their daughters, some as young as six, are gang raped. Many are subsequently branded or executed along with their parents. Bodies are often dumped into village wells in order to poison the water.

Mosques are often torched, with Korans desecrated and religious leaders killed. All livestock, food and possessions are taken and the village left uninhabitable.

The Sudanese military follows afterwards to mop up. Alternatively it carries out bombing raids beforehand. Sometimes the Janjaweed and the military arrive together and set up a command post at the local police station prior to instigating a reign of terror.

The HRW heard testimony on the "extensive use of attack aircraft—mainly Antonov supply planes dropping crude but lethal 'barrel bombs' filled with metal shards, but also helicopter gunships and MiG jet fighters."

It found that not only the Darfur villages, but also the towns where refugees subsequently congregated, were bombed. Marketplaces and mosques were often targeted.

The Sudanese government has denied that it is deliberately attacking civilians, and purports to be targeting rebel hideouts. It has also denied that it is working with the Janjaweed or arming it. But the UNCHR report heard from Janjaweed members who "said they were all Arabs and that

they had been armed and paid by the government. They said they acted upon government instructions.”

President Omar Hassan Ahmed al-Bashir was quoted on Sudanese television as saying that the government “will use the army, the police, the mujahidin, the horsemen to get rid of the rebellion.”

The Sudanese government is ostensibly responding to a rebellion by the region’s two rebel groupings—the Sudan Liberation Army (SLA) and the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM).

The SLA is the successor to the Darfur Liberation Front (DLF), founded by lawyer Abdel Wahid Muhammed Nur in early 2002 due to attacks from local Arab militia and increasing marginalisation by Khartoum. A year later it took up arms and sparked a successful rebellion that united nearly all the African tribes in Darfur—notably the Fur, Masalit, and Zaghawa. The DLF changed its name to the SLA to reflect its broader base.

The SLA had significant early successes in a well organised campaign, until the government transferred troops freed up from duties in the south of Sudan to Darfur. Over 50 percent of the government’s military forces come from the African Muslim population in Darfur, making many reluctant to fight and leading to huge desertions.

The SLA’s military chief was Abdallah Abakkar, who, according to *Le Monde Diplomatique*, was “one of the commanders of the successful raid which set out from Darfur and installed Idriss Deby as president of Chad.” Deby is from a Zaghawa background.

The JEM has primarily a Zaghawa base and is led by Khalil Ibrahim, a relative of the Tine sultan who used to belong to the Islamist party of Hassan el-Turabi until 1999. Turabi is locked in a power struggle with the ruling National Congress Party, and the government sees the JEM as a front for Turabi’s political ambitions.

The JEM published a “Black Book” inspired by Turabi, which preached that Africans were being overlooked by the Arab central government and should fight back. Both the JEM and the SLA are seen potentially as a greater threat to Khartoum than the Sudan People’s Liberation Army (SPLA) were in the south of Sudan prior to the recent peace negotiations.

The military has been ruthless in its dealings with the SLA and even more so with the JEM. The UN report found that the use of air strikes was greater in North Darfur, where government forces were at the forefront of operations, than in South Darfur where the Janjaweed were. North Darfur’s settled population is primarily of the Zaghawa tribe.

Khartoum has employed similar tactics before. In the late 1980s it used local militias to help clear the Dinka population from the Bahr al-Ghazal region of southwest Sudan. This included allowing raiding for slaves.

In the early 1990s government-backed militias used executions and hut-burning tactics to clear prime agricultural land in the oil-rich Nuba Mountains region of south central Sudan. In the late 1990s the population in the Upper Nile oil fields were removed, allowing the government to exploit the oil resources more fully.

In each case the population cleared by the Arab Muslim central government were black Africans. In the south Khartoum faced Christian/Animist groups, whereas in Darfur the population is also Muslim.

The conflict has created a vast humanitarian problem, with tens of thousands of people killed and well over a million made homeless. USAID estimates that 100,000 to 350,000 will be dead by the end of the year through gunfire or disease. Most of the homeless have taken refuge in towns in Darfur, which are unable to sustain the influx. Upwards of 120,000 people have trekked for two or three days across the desert in searing temperatures to the border with Chad, which has ethnic and cultural links with Darfur.

HRW reports that in West Darfur, “With rare exceptions, the countryside has now been emptied of its original Fur and Masalit inhabitants.”

The refugees are spread along a remote and arid border region some 600 kilometres long. The local Chadian population’s hospitality has been stretched to the limit, especially as regards scarce resources such as water. In the existing makeshift camps there is very little cover from the sun. A few thin trees and flimsy shelters of twigs and cloth provide the only shade from the 48-degree Centigrade heat.

The few refugee camps which have been set up by international agencies are overwhelmed and there is a constant search for new camps 50 kilometres or so from the border. The main problem is always water supply. The UN High Commission for Refugees has so far moved 60,000 refugees to five new camps.

As well as being overwhelmed, the border camps are unsafe since the Janjaweed have been blocking roads around them and mounting raids. In Ardmata camp near Jeneina town the Janjaweed is reportedly entering at will and choosing women to rape. The Sudanese military has also carried out bombing raids across the border.

The rainy season, and consequently also the planting season, is approaching and by June many areas will be cut off from food and medical supplies. People are unable or too scared to return to their villages to plant and aid agencies fear that famine will necessarily follow. Sudan has already experienced several years of famine that have been deeper than the terrible famine of the mid 1980s.

Peace talks between the government and the Darfur rebels have recently resumed in neighbouring Chad, and a ceasefire agreement between Khartoum, and the SLA and JEM began on April 11. It is due to run for 45 days, renewable for an additional 45 days. The agreement appears to have had little effect, and a senior military source was quoted as saying, “The fighting is continuing. We have to destroy them. These are our orders.”

December talks had collapsed, with the rebels wanting negotiations to be attended by international mediators and to be held in a neutral venue—i.e., not in Khartoum, or in Chad, which they accused of being too close to Sudan’s government. Khartoum meanwhile blamed the rebels for upping their demands in the light of peace negotiations in the south of Sudan that give rebels there a degree of autonomy and half of their region’s oil revenues.

The southern negotiations are on the verge of being finalised. The remaining issue has been resolved through compromise—Khartoum will remain under shari’ah law but non-Muslims rights are guaranteed. A secret rider had been thought to exist between Washington and Khartoum which undertook to remove the shari’ah from the constitutional basis of government in Sudan. This was to be a potential vote winner for the religious right in the US elections—to be trumpeted as the first time that a radical Muslim country has converted into a secular democracy.

Darfur is approximately the size of France, and whilst its oil reserves do not compare to those in the south of Sudan it is rich in minerals. The north of the region is known to contain large deposits of uranium and heavy metals, and the south has copper and oil. This mineral potential is clearly a major factor in Khartoum’s refusal to allow any prospect of secession. It also sheds light on Western governments’ interest in Darfur. The West, however, is much more interested in the north-south peace deal.

The US administration has historically backed the southern Christian rebels of the SPLA against the Muslim fundamentalist government in Khartoum. It has recently encouraged the SLA in Darfur by suggesting that the southern peace agreement is “transferable onto this western problem.” Meanwhile Garang has reportedly been giving military support to the SLA.

Sudanese Foreign Minister Abdel Wahab has hit back, dismissing US suggestions and blaming the US and European Union for aggravating the humanitarian crisis by imposing economic sanctions and blocking development aid for Sudan’s underdeveloped regions. He also pointed to US human rights abuses in Iraq.

In April the UNCHR adopted a resolution put forward by the EU referring to concern about “the scale of reported human rights abuses and the humanitarian situation in Darfur”. The resolution was won by fifty votes to one with two abstentions.

The opposing vote was from the US, which had put forward a late motion criticising Khartoum for “ethnic cleansing” but had failed to win acceptance from the 53-member commission. In protest, the US announced that it would call for a special session of the UN Human Rights Commission on Sudan.

The US has also feigned outrage at the re-election of Sudan to the UN’s Human Rights Commission. Taking the opportunity to attack the UN itself, US diplomats staged a walkout in protest. Ed Royce, chair of a US Congressional subcommittee on Africa, warned that this “is yet more evidence that the Commission is a very troubled institution... Moving ahead, our assumptions on Sudan—that the international community [UN] will provide material support and be an honest broker if a peace agreement is signed—should be rethought.”

Domestically this grandstanding is designed to appease the Christian right—traditionally supporters of the SPLA against the Islamic regime in Khartoum—cynically maintaining the appearance of being the most vocal critics of the Sudan government whilst working with it behind the scenes in order to block any more involvement of the European powers through the UN.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact