



No to UN intervention in Sudan

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Rekha Khurana examines the origins of the conflict in Darfur and the international response

Most people would have heard the recent news reports coming out of Africa about the conflict in Sudan. Suddenly the international community is shocked by what's happening, but this conflict has been going on for a long time without even a mention in the Western press. Once again the suffering in Africa hits the news only when it becomes so atrocious that it cannot be hidden any more.

What has happened in Darfur in Western Sudan can be described as ethnic cleansing. More than a million people have been turned into desperate refugees by the Islamist regime in Khartoum, the country's capital. The government has used bombers, helicopter gunships, paramilitaries from the regular armed forces and an estimated 20,000 Janjaweed militia to terrorise the people of the region.

The government's campaign has produced an exodus of more than 200,000 refugees into neighbouring Chad and around 50,000 villagers died as a result. Reports of wholesale rape and kidnapping have been made by aid agencies. It has been predicted that many more people will die of starvation and disease in the coming months unless there is a massive increase in aid.

Darfuri people include both subsistence farmers and nomadic pastoralists, raising camels in the north and cattle further south. The widespread media designation of the former as 'black Africans' and the latter as 'Arabs' is misleading at best. True the nomadic population largely regard themselves as Arabs but they are black. The farming population are closer to their African cultural origins but they too are Muslims.

Conflicts between farmers and nomads migrating in search of water and pasture for their animals have occurred in Darfur for centuries, but without anything like the present crisis occurring.

Starting in the 1980s the Islamist government in Khartoum set out to arm the pastoralists whilst disarming the farming peoples, the majority Fur - after whom the region is named - as well as the Masalit and Zaghawa.

Ethnic identities have hardened as the Islamist regime promotes its favoured groups, 'Arabises' them and even encouraged a 'war on the Africans'. All of Darfur's peoples are Muslim, but the farming communities have cultural practices such as beer-brewing, and less patriarchal relations between men and women, these have been declared 'anti-Islamic' by the Islamist regime.

In Darfur two resistance movements grew up against government oppression, the Sudanese Liberation Movement/Army (SLM/A) and the smaller Justice and Equality Movement (JEM). The former, born out of an earlier Darfur Liberation Front, is secular, while the latter is led by Darfuri Islamists alienated from the Islamist regime in Khartoum.

In the winter of 2003, the two movements took up arms. The regime responded by unleashing the Janjaweed militia on a ferocious killing spree. To western governments who complained, they replied that the militias were outside its control. Independent sources all report that there can be no doubt that government forces supply arms and transport, and Sudanese army officers direct their activities.

The government has announced several ceasefires but none are really carried out. Peace negotiations in Chad and

Ethiopia in July reached no conclusion. In July, Colin Powell, US secretary of state, and UN secretary-general Kofi Annan visited Sudan. The regime promised once more to disarm the Janjaweed, protect the refugees and allow foreign relief workers and human rights organisations into Darfur, so far with no results.

On 30 July the United Nations Security Council passed a resolution drafted by the United States threatening sanctions against Sudan if it does not disarm the Janjaweed in the western Darfur region within 30 days. The resolution includes a provision permitting the "interruption" of economic, transport, communications or diplomatic measures? ? sanctions by any other name. UK foreign secretary Jack Straw visited Sudan less than a week before the UN's 30 August deadline. He said that there appeared to be some evidence of improving security within the refugee camps, and the priority now was to improve security outside those camps. He also added that it would be up to Kofi Annan to decide whether the Sudanese authorities had done enough before a decision was taken on international action.

Meanwhile, peace talks between rebel groups in Darfur and the Sudanese Government are due to re-start in Abuja, Nigeria next week. The JEM and the SLM/A have both made it clear they will not disarm without a political deal. The African Union intends to broker some sort of interim agreement between the rebels and the Sudanese government. It is hoping such a deal could include the disarmament of both the rebels and their enemies, the Arab militias, including the Janjaweed.

The government's aim is to maintain "Sudanese unity" - and to tighten its grip on Darfur's valuable mineral wealth, principally uranium. This fight is related to the struggle in the South, a potential source of huge oil wealth. Sudan has 2bn barrels of recoverable oil and currently produces 250,000 barrels a day despite the war.

West Africa supplies 15 per cent of US oil and the figure is growing. Since 9/11 the US ruling class has become disillusioned with the unstable and unreliable Saudi royal family. Hence, oil companies and the US military have developed a powerful interest in the petrochemical riches of sub-Saharan Africa. The continent appears to be on the verge of a new oil rush - what the Guardian has called a "new scramble for Africa". Only this time there is one big grabber. Vice President Cheney's recent National Energy Policy Report states that West Africa is "one of the fastest-growing sources of oil and gas for the American market."

The only way for the oppressed nationalities, for the peasants and workers of Sub-Saharan Africa to prevent a economic and environmental catastrophe is to oppose any "humanitarian" invasion or occupation of Sudan by US, British or French imperialism. They will only intervene to get their snouts in the trough of the vast mineral wealth.

Africans need only to look at what the hundred years of plunder of the Arab world has done for the ordinary working people of the region. If Blair and Bush want to stop ethnic cleansing, let them stop Ariel Sharon from grabbing the land of the Palestinians. Of course, they can and should supply ALL the food, shelter and medical aid the refugees need at once. But even this would be only a drop in the ocean, a tiny fragment of the reparation they owe for the plunder of Africa

The people of Darfur should not look to or have any illusions in the UN providing a solution to this crisis, let alone the Sudanese army which works hand in hand with the Janjaweed. The UN will only act in the interests of the imperialists and the multinationals to continue the exploitation of resources from Sudan.

Instead the people of Darfur need to form armed militias in order to defend their villages against any future attacks. African workers, peasants and youth across the whole region should help the Darfuri people, not only to survive but also to drive out their oppressors.

But beyond this a struggle needs to be launched across all these states against the imperialist plunderers and their local stooges. Only thus will the sickening cycle of corrupt dictatorships, repressive religious obscurantist regimes and genocidal outbursts be ended in Africa.

