

# Sudan: government troops and militia out of Darfur!

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Currently there is much human suffering in Darfur in western Sudan, including what is, in effect, ethnic cleansing. Well over 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. Upwards of 10,000 villagers died as a result and reports of wholesale rape and kidnapping have been made by aid agencies. Present projections are that 350,000 more people will die in the next four months unless there is a massive increase in aid.

Darfuri people include both subsistence farmers growing sorghum, millet, groundnuts and tomatoes 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.

The expansion of the Sahara desert has put pressure on the nomadic northerners to move southward, leading to conflicts over land and water. 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 that have been declared 'anti-Islamic' by the Islamist regime.

The natural response to such persecution and to the prolonged economic neglect of the region by the central government was to demand autonomy. This response the Dafuris share with the population in the south and the north-east. Indeed most commentators have remarked that the problems within Sudan are not so much a matter of north/south or east/west, let alone of race or religion but of the huge underprivileged periphery against the relatively privileged centre around Khartoum.

The government of the National Islamic Front, which seized power in a 1989 military coup, used nomad militias as the low-cost way to fight not only the Darfuris but more importantly the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) in the oil-rich South, and also a number of 'African' Sudanese outside the south, such as the Nuba in southern Kordofan.

An estimated \$200bn in revenues will flow into African government treasuries over the next 10 years as new oilfields open up just from the Gulf of Guinea. Oil will bring more than 10 times the amount western donors give each year in aid. But on all past experience most of the money will end up in the bank accounts of corrupt ruling élites or squandered on western military technology for their praetorian guards. The Khartoum government aims to get its share even if it means killing and displacing hundreds of thousands.

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 late 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 but independent sources all report that there can be no doubt that government forces supply arms and transport, and Sudanese army officers direct their activities.

Several ceasefires have been announced by the government but none really carried out, and peace negotiations – both 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.

The Darfuris demand for the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of the central government troops and the infamous janjaweed from their country is totally justified. Indeed all the peoples of the Sudan have the right to self-determination up to and including secession.

Sudan as a state is the creation of the British colonialists and their Egyptian puppets in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. However it would not be in the interests of any of the peoples of the country to fight to divide it up, involving as it would a struggle to seize and monopolise its mineral riches. Tiny statelets would in any case fall under the control of the oil corporations and the US and EU governments which protect their plunder.

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