

THE TRAGEDY IN DARFUR: WHO IS GOING TO STOP IT?

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Just as Sudan breathed a sigh of relief at what seemed to be an end, or at least a tangible lull, in the country's decades-long civil war in the south, another armed conflict began to ravage the western region of Darfur. This other war has increasingly dragged the state and its society into a maelstrom of havoc, causing catastrophic human losses. The humanitarian disaster in Darfur has reached such frightful proportions that international media staff, human rights and relief organizations, western governments and United Nations authorities have portrayed it as "similar in character, if not in scale, to the Rwanda genocide of 1994," as "the world's greatest humanitarian crisis," and as "the most vicious ethnic cleansing you've never heard of."

Darfur is a large (roughly the size of France) but poor region that borders Chad and is inhabited by various ethnic groups, all of them Muslims. The overwhelming majority of the population is of black African origin rather than Arab. The most prominent groups are Zaghawa cattle and camel nomads and Fur, Massalit and other farmers. In early 2003, rebels from among these non-Arab Darfurians, calling themselves the Sudan Liberation Movement/Army (SLM/A), took up arms against the Khartoum government,

demanding that it put an end to Darfur's chronic political marginalization, racial discrimination, economic deprivation and backwardness. The SLM/A also demanded that the Arab-Muslim elite in Khartoum, which has governed Sudan since independence in 1956, halt the unceasingly raids of the nomadic Arab Baqqara militias -- the Janjaweed -- on the non-Arab Darfurian farmers. Violent struggles over land and water resources have long ravaged the region but have intensified in recent years because the growing chaos in the war-plagued country has been aggravated by local circumstances, including accelerated desertification and the consequent loss of large grazing areas.

Against this backdrop, the Sudanese army, worn out by decades of fighting against rebels in the south and still preoccupied with the suppression of other insurgencies and the protection of oil installations across Sudan's 2.5 million square kilometers, delegated to the Baqqara militias the mission of crushing the SLM/A rebels, now reinforced by another Darfurian rebel group -- the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM). Throughout 2003 and the first half of 2004, escalating violence produced a fearsome toll of civilian casualties and human atrocities. As

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reported by non-Sudanese eye-witnesses, the Janjaweed, working hand-in-glove with the Sudanese army and government, have bombarded and massacred the civilian population and engaged in an orgy of rape, looting, and destruction of food stocks. The result has been ethnic cleansing of the area. More than one million non-Arab Darfurians have been driven from their homes. Many escaped to Chad while others are trapped in special camps, living on the very edge of survival, hostage to hunger, disease and Janjaweed abuses.

There is not a single domestic non-governmental factor that can potentially influence the Sudanese government to disarm the Janjaweed, stop the atrocities and enable the transfer of relief aid to Darfur. Since 'Umar Hassan Ahmad al-Bashir gained power in a military coup d'etat on 30 June 1989, he has controlled the country with an iron-fist, using the declared state of emergency to paralyze any political activity not fully in tune with the regime. Bashir relies only on the army, whose top echelon was drastically purged and then filled with devoted loyalists, and he pays no attention to any other voices in Sudan.

In stark contrast, the list of outside powers that could exert pressure on Bashir appears quite comprehensive and includes the United States, the European Union and European member states, the UN, the African Union and African member states, and Sudan's immediate neighbors -- Egypt and Libya. However, all of these powers have differing degrees of influence on Sudan and differing degrees of motivation to resort to punitive measures against it.

The US administration, for example, is preoccupied with Iraq and engaged in a hotly contested election campaign. This reduces Washington's margin of independent maneuver and limits it to internationally-coordinated measures, such the recent United Nations resolution for which the United States could secure approval only by agreeing to remove any reference to sanctions. The EU's capacity to act

is also constrained by its member states, some of which (especially France) have major political and economic interests in Sudan, particularly in Sudanese oil, which was first discovered in the early 1980s. In fact, other foreign oil firms -- including Talisman of Canada, the China National Petroleum Corporation and the Qatari Gulf Petroleum Company -- are also deeply involved in Sudan's oil industry and its related infrastructures and would be adversely affected by the imposition of sanctions on Sudan, and especially on its oil industry. And while Egypt and Libya, as neighboring states, could give real force to any possible international sanctions regime, any erosion of Bashir's political standing might pave the way for the revival of Hassan Abdallah al-Turabi's Islamist influence, which was strongly detested and feared by the leadership of both those countries. Consequently, Egypt and Libya prefer to see Bashir's regime remain in power, despite its dysfunction and extremely cruel handling of Sudan's internal disputes. Egypt is also worried about any further aggravation of Sudan's political chaos. That could strengthen separatist tendencies within the country, possibly leading to its territorial disintegration and the disruption of the long-agreed flow of Nile waters to Egypt.

Whatever the position of each of the outside actors, it is clear that only a combination of their activities could generate powerful pressure on Khartoum through international sanctions and/or some other extraordinary measures, such as a blockade on Port Sudan, which is the location of the state's oil export terminals and its sole maritime outlet and economic lifeline. But the conflicting interests and circumstances of members of the so-called "international community" make the practical implementation of such measures rather improbable. Nevertheless, even the mere threat of their adoption might make possible the desperately needed injections of humanitarian aid.