

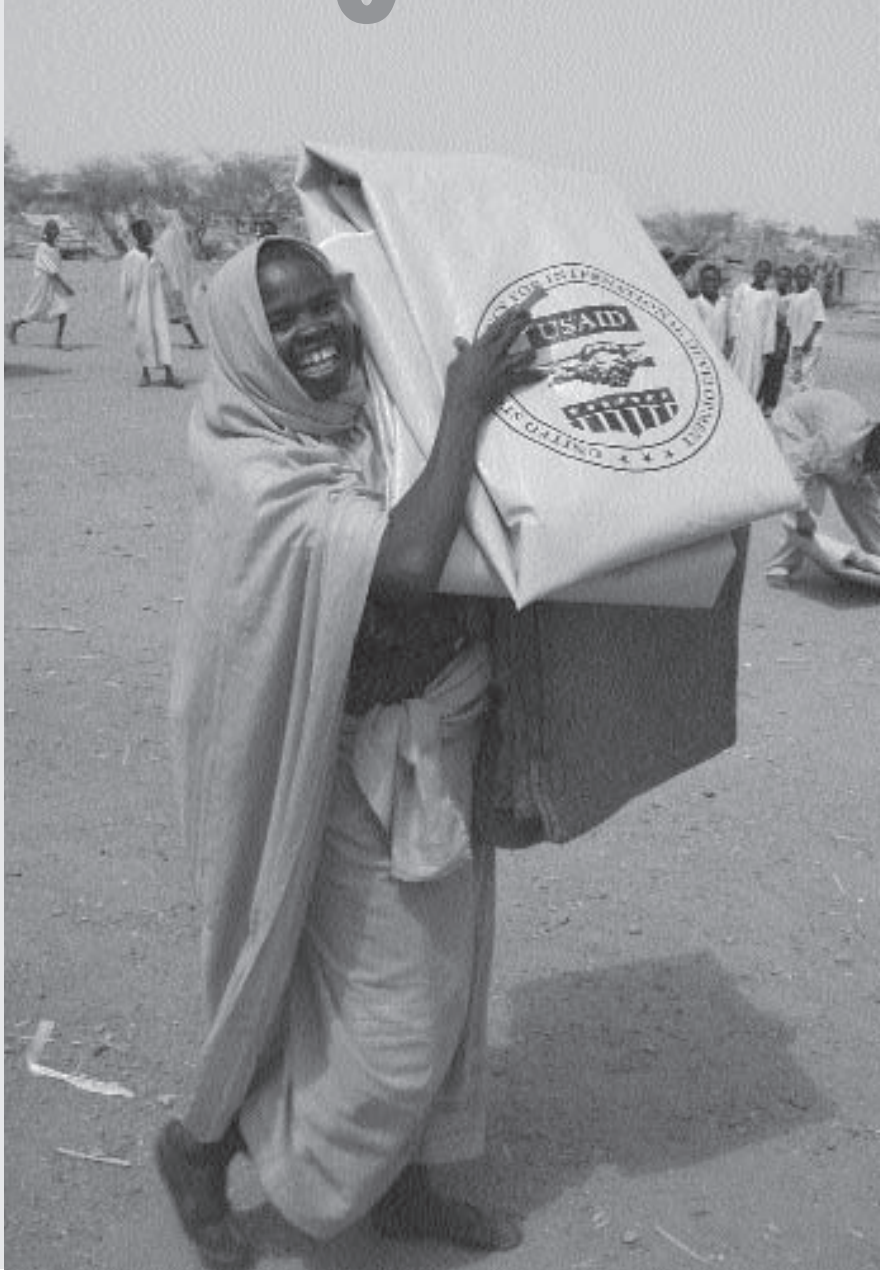
Things are not always as they seem

# Some thoughts on

It is only in recent months that the situation in Darfur, Sudan began to dominate the international media, yet the situation is not new.

**Mahmood Mamdani**

provides an interesting analysis on Darfur where he argues that a genocide has not occurred but could happen and must be prevented.



# Dar fur



INSIDE AFRICA

**W**hat can we call the Darfur crisis? The US Congress, and Secretary of State Colin Powell, claim that genocide has occurred in Darfur. The European Union says it is not genocide. And so does the African Union.

Nigerian President Obasanjo, also the current chair of the African Union, told a press conference at the United Nations Headquarters in New York on September 23: 'Before you can say that this is genocide or ethnic cleansing, we will have to have a definite decision and plan and programme of a government to wipe out a particular group of people, then we will be talking about genocide, ethnic cleansing. What we know is not that. What we know is that there was an uprising, rebellion, and the government armed another group of people to stop that rebellion.'

That's what we know. That does not amount to genocide from our own reckoning. It amounts to of course conflict. It amounts to violence.'

Is Darfur genocide that has happened and must be punished? Or, is it genocide that could happen and must be prevented? I will argue the latter.

Sudan is today the site of two contradictory processes. The first is the Naivasha peace process between the SPLA and the government of Sudan, whose promise is an end to Africa's longest festering civil war. The second is the armed confrontation in Darfur.

## UNDERSTANDING DARFUR CONFLICT POLITICALLY

The peace process in the south of Sudan has split both sides in the conflict. Tensions within the ruling circles in Khartoum and within the opposition SPLA have given rise to two anti-government militias. The Justice

and Equality Movement (JEM) has historical links to the Islamist regime, and the SLA to the southern guerrilla movement.

The JEM organised as part of the Hassan Turabi faction of the Islamists. Darfur, historically the mainstay of the Mahdist movement, was Turabi's major claim to political success in the last decade. When the Khartoum coalition - between the army officers led by Bashir and the Islamist political movement under Turabi - split, the Darfur Islamists fell out with both sides. JEM was organised in Khartoum as part of an agenda for regaining power. It has a more localised and multi-ethnic presence in Darfur and has been home to many who have advocated an 'African Islam'.

The SLA is linked to SPLA, which first tried to expand the southern-based armed movement to Darfur in 1990, but failed. The radical leadership of that thrust was decapitated in a government assault. Not surprisingly, the new leadership of SLA has little political experience.

The present conflict began when the SLA mounted an ambitious and successful assault on El Fashar airport on 25 April 2003, on a scale larger than most encounters in the southern civil war.

The government in Khartoum is also divided, between those who pushed the peace process, and those who believe too much was conceded in the Naivasha talks. This opposition, the security cabal in Khartoum, responded by arming and unleashing several militia, known as the Janjawid. The result is a spiral of state-sponsored violence and indiscriminate spread of weaponry.

In sum, all those opposed to the peace process in the south have moved to fight in Darfur, even if on opposing sides. The Darfur conflict has many layers; the most recent

but the most explosive is that it is the continuation of the southern conflict in the west.

## DE-DEMONISE ADVERSARIES

For anyone reading the press today, the atrocities in Sudan are synonymous with a demonic presence, the Janjawid, the spearhead of an 'Arab' assault on 'Africans'. The problem with the public discussion of Darfur and Sudan is not simply that we know little; it is also the representation of what we do know. To understand the problem with how known facts are being represented, I suggest we face three facts.

First, as a proxy of those in power in Khartoum, the Janjawid are not exceptional. They reflect a broad African trend. Proxy war spread within the continent with the formation of Renamo by the Rhodesian and the South African security cabal in the early 1980s. Other examples in the East African region include the Lord's Redemption Army in northern Uganda, the Hema and Lendu militias in Ituri in eastern Congo and, of course, the Hutu militia in post-genocide Rwanda. Like the Janjawid, all these combine different degrees of autonomy on the ground with proxy connections above ground.

Second, all parties involved in the Darfur conflict - whether they are referred to as 'Arab' or as 'African' - are equally indigenous and equally black. All are Muslims and all are local. To see how the corporate media and some of the charity-dependent international NGOs consistently racialise representations, we need to distinguish between different kinds of identities.

Let us begin by distinguishing between three different meanings of Arab: ethnic, cultural and political. In the ethnic sense, there are few Arabs worth speaking of in Darfur, and a very tiny percent in Sudan. In



***Those who start and feed fires should be held responsible for doing so; but let us not forget that it may be easier to start a fire than to put it out.***



the cultural sense, Arab refers to those who have come to speak Arabic as a home language and, sometimes, to those who are nomadic in lifestyle. In this sense, many have become Arabs. From the cultural point of view, one can be both African and Arab, in other words, an African who speaks Arabic, which is what the 'Arabs' of Darfur are. For those given to thinking of identity in racial terms, it may be better to think of this population as 'Arabized' rather than 'Arab.'

Then there is Arab in the political sense. This refers to a political identity called 'Arab' that the ruling group in Khartoum has promoted at different points as the identity of power and of the Sudanese nation. As a political identity, Arab is relatively new to Darfur.

Darfur was home to the Mahdist movement whose troops defeated the British and slew General Gordon a century ago. Darfur then became the base of the party organised around the Sufi order, the Ansar. This party, called the Umma Party, is currently led by the grandson of the Mahdi, Sadiq al-Mahdi. The major change in the political map of Darfur over the past decade was the growth of the Islamist movement, led by Hassan Turabi. Politically, Darfur became 'Islamist' rather than 'Arab'.

Like Arab, Islam too needs to be understood not just as a cultural (and

religious) identity but also as a political one, thus distinguishing the broad category of believers called Muslims from political activists called Islamists. Historically, Islam as a political identity in the Sudan has been associated with political parties based on Sufi orders, mainly the Umma Party based on the Ansar and the DUP based on the Khatamiyya. In sharp contrast to the strongly Sudanese identity of these 'sectarian' and 'traditional' parties is the militant, modernist and internationalist orientation of the type of political Islam championed by Hassan Turabi and organised as the National Islamic Front (NIF). Not only in its predominantly urban social base but also in its methods of organisation, the NIF was poles apart from 'traditional' political Islam, and in fact consciously emulated the Communist Party.

Unlike the 'traditional' parties, which were mass-based and hoped to come to power through elections, the NIF - like the CP - was a cadre-based vanguard party, which hoped to take power in alliance with a faction in the army. The fulfilment of this agenda was the 1989 coup which brought Turabi's NIF into power in alliance with the Bashir faction in the army.

As a political identity, 'African' is even more recent than 'Arab' in Darfur. I have referred to an attempt by SPLA in 1990 to confront the power in Khartoum as 'Arab'

and to rally the opposition under the banner of 'African.' Both the insurgency that began 18 months ago and the government's response to it are evidence of the crisis of the Islamist regime and the government's retreat to a narrower political identity, 'Arab.'

Third, both the anti- and the pro-government militia have outside sponsors, but they cannot just be dismissed as external creations. The Sudan government organised local militias in Darfur in 1990, using them both to fight the SPLA in the south and to contain the expansion of the southern rebellion to the west. The militias are not monolithic and they are not centrally controlled. When the Islamists split in 1999 between the Turabi and the Bashir groups, many of the Darfur militia were purged. Those who were not, like the Berti, retained a measure of local support. This is why it is wrong to think of the Janjawid as a single organisation under a unified command.

Does that mean that we cannot hold the Sudan government responsible for the atrocities committed by Janjawid militias that it continues to supply? No, it does not. We must hold the patron responsible for the actions of the proxy. At the same time, we need to realise that it may be easier to supply than to disband local militias. Those who start and feed fires should be held responsible for doing so; but let us not