



SEVEN MYTHS HINDERING PEACE IN DARFUR

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November 2004

WORKING FOR PEACE IN SUDAN

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Myth: “a fiction or half-truth”

The American Heritage Dictionary¹

Introduction

In February 2003 two armed groups, the ‘Justice and Equality Movement’ (JEM) and the ‘Sudan Liberation Army’ (SLA), started a war in Darfur, a region in the west of Sudan. These groups launched attacks on policemen, government garrisons and civilians in the area. Darfur is an ecologically-fragile area and had already seen growing - and often armed – conflict over natural resources between some 80 tribes and ethnic groups loosely divided between nomads and sedentary communities. Many of the rebels appear to have been identified within two or three “African” communities such as the Fur and the Zaghawa tribes. Some of their civilian targets have included tribal leaders and tribesmen from several “Arab” tribes. The systematic murder by the rebels of several hundred policemen and the destruction of over eighty police stations created a security vacuum that has led to an explosion of inter-communal violence. It is clear that a variety of armed groups have been active in Darfur over the past year or so, either as participants in the war or taking advantage of the turmoil the conflict has caused. This has clearly included heavily-armed criminal gangs from both sides of the Chad-Sudan border. The conflict has spiralled out of control and has caused a growing humanitarian crisis.² On 19 April 2004, the government and rebels signed a humanitarian ceasefire agreement as a first step towards a lasting peace. In November 2004 the Government and rebel movements extended ceasefire and aid access agreements.³ The African Union will be providing both a forum for peace talks and ceasefire supervision. It is essential that agreements are honoured, monitored and followed through as the international community attempts both to address the humanitarian aid needs of those hundreds of thousands of civilians who have been displaced by the war and to facilitate a political solution to the conflict. While the ceasefire has been violated from time to time by all parties to the conflict the bulk of events now in focus happened before the April ceasefire.

Darfur presents a very complex situation with very complex problems. As much has been admitted by noted anti-Khartoum critics such as Alex de Waal.⁴ While there can be no simple analysis of the conflict, the issue has also been caught up in the inevitable propaganda war invariably associated with all war, and particularly civil war. Simply put, this propaganda war is clouding and distorting international perspectives on Darfur. This in turn is unjustifiably pushing governments into corners and hindering international attempts to negotiate an end to the crisis. Challenging these myths does not in any way downplay the seriousness or the extent of the humanitarian crisis in Darfur or the seriousness of the human rights abuses that have taken place. It has been a human catastrophe. To the contrary, the challenging of these myths serves to provide a clearer picture of the reality of events in Darfur, something that can only make a resolution easier.

Myth 1: The Darfur Conflict is because of Marginalisation

“The conflict in Darfur has nothing to do with marginalisation or the inequitable distribution of wealth.”

Anti-Government human rights Activist Ghazi Suleiman

Virtually all mainstream media coverage of the Darfur conflict has repeated rebel claims that the rebellion in Darfur began as the result of Khartoum’s marginalisation and underdevelopment of Darfur.⁵ These claims in turn have influenced international views and what is expected of the Government of Sudan. This media short-hand has, however, been contradicted by reputable, independent observers. For example, Ghazi Suleiman, Sudan’s most prominent human rights activist (described by Reuters as “a non-partisan figure who advises senior politicians across the spectrum”⁶) has concluded: “The conflict in Darfur has nothing to do with marginalisation or the inequitable distribution of wealth. Inherently it is a struggle between the two factions of the Sudanese Islamist movement, the (opposition) Popular Congress party and the ruling National Congress (party)”⁷. Suleiman is referring to the conflict within the Sudanese Islamist movement following the government’s sidelining of the Islamist *eminence grise* Dr Hasan Turabi, a figure seen as having been an obstacle both to the normalisation of relations with the United States and a peace agreement with southern rebels. The ruling National Congress party split with hard-liners under Turabi forming the Popular Congress party opposing peace or any engagement with Washington. The Justice and Equality Movement, led by Turabi protégé Khalil Ibrahim, is widely recognised as having been created by the Popular Congress, many of whose leaders come from Darfur. JEM insurgents are now also said to be receiving assistance from al-Qaeda.⁸

Even a cursory review of development issues in Darfur undermines rebel claims of underdevelopment. Before the present government came to power in 1989, there were only 16 high schools in Darfur: there are presently some 250 schools. In 1989 there were 27,000 students in schools; in 2003 there were more than 440,000. In 1989 there was not a single university in Darfur; there are now three. The number of hospitals in greater Darfur has increased under this government from 3 hospitals in 1988 to 23 hospitals by 2001. Water pump production in greater Darfur has also increased from 1,200,000 cubic meters in 1989 to 3,100,000 cubic meters in 2003. During 2000-2003, the following water projects were implemented in greater Darfur: the installation of 110 deep ground wells, the rehabilitation of 133 ground wells, the building of 43 dykes and 30 dams, the drilling of 842 hand pumps and the rehabilitation of 839 hand pump wells. The total power generation in greater Darfur has risen under this government from 2,300 kilowatts in 1989 to 4,500 kws by 2000. Before 1989 there was not a single airport in Darfur; there are now three. There has been a three-fold increase in paved roads since 1989. And, politically, Darfur is very well represented at all levels of Sudanese society. There are eight ministers from Darfur and four Darfurian state governors. Darfurians are also members of the supreme and constitutional court.

Myth 2: Genocide is Taking Place in Darfur

“Our teams have not seen evidence of the deliberate intention to kill people of a specific group.”

Médecins Sans Frontières

In September 2004, the American Secretary of State, Colin Powell, responding to domestic pressure from conservative and anti-Islamic constituencies, declared that

events in Darfur constituted “genocide”. This was despite having previously stated two months before events in Darfur did not “meet the tests of the definition of genocide”.⁹ His September comment, in the lead-up to the US elections, was widely seen as an attempt to divert media attention away from the disastrous events in Iraq. The American record for crying wolf, in the wake of the Iraqi weapons of mass destruction fiasco, is clear. The United Nations Secretary-General Mr Kofi Annan has contradicted American claims: “I cannot call the killing a genocide even though there have been massive violations of international humanitarian law.”¹⁰ The African Union has also gone on record as stating: “Even though the crisis in Darfur is grave, with unacceptable levels of death, human suffering and destruction of homes and infrastructure, the situation cannot be defined as a genocide”.¹¹ Washington’s genocide claims have additionally been criticised by well-respected humanitarian groups such as Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF).¹² MSF President Dr Jean-Hervé Bradol subsequently described American claims of genocide in Darfur as “obvious political opportunism”.¹³ Dr Bradol had previously stated that the use of the term genocide was inappropriate: “Our teams have not seen evidence of the deliberate intention to kill people of a specific group. We have received reports of massacres, but not of attempts to specifically eliminate all the members of a group”.¹⁴ Dr Mercedes Taty, MSF’s deputy emergency director, who worked with 12 expatriate doctors and 300 Sudanese nationals in field hospitals throughout Darfur at the height of the emergency has also warned: “I don’t think that we should be using the word ‘genocide’ to describe this conflict. Not at all. This can be a semantic discussion, but nevertheless, there is no systematic target - targeting one ethnic group or another one. It doesn’t mean either that the situation in Sudan isn’t extremely serious by itself.”¹⁵

Médecins Sans Frontières is an exceptionally credible observer with regard to allegations of genocide for two reasons. Firstly, MSF was amongst the first humanitarian groups to establish a presence in Darfur as the conflict unfolded. MSF is very heavily involved in the provision of medical and emergency services in all three of the states that make up Darfur, deploying two thousand staff.¹⁶ It has been actively assisting 250,000 people displaced by fighting throughout the region. Secondly, MSF’s reputation is quite simply beyond reproach. Médecins Sans Frontières was the recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize in 1999. It has also received numerous other awards recognising its outstanding humanitarian work throughout the world.

Myth 3: The Government is Denying Aid Access to Darfur

“It is strange to see that there is still the notion...that...we’re completely blocked from accessing Darfur”

UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs Mr Jan Egeland

There have been attempts to claim that the Government has been systematically denying humanitarian access to Darfur. The facts speak for themselves. In less than twelve months the Sudanese government has agreed and facilitated an increase in aid workers present in Darfur, from two foreigners and a few dozen nationals in September 2003 to just under six thousand aid workers – over seven hundred of them expatriates – by August 2004.¹⁷ On 6 July 2004 the government issued fifteen decrees which addressed, amongst other things, the easing of aid and relief access to Darfur. In total, there are now 155 locations assisting with internally displaced people in the three Darfur states, and the World Food Programme is present in 136 of these centres.¹⁸ There are now

dozens of international and national non-governmental organisations working in Darfur. Speaking in June 2004, the outgoing UN Humanitarian Coordinator for Sudan, Mr Kevin Kennedy, confirmed that visas were generally being granted within 48 hours - as promised by the Government of Sudan - and that “people are experiencing very few visa difficulties”.¹⁹ The United Nations Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs, Mr Jan Egeland, speaking in July 2004, noted: “It is strange to see that there is still the notion in the world that nothing is happening and we’re completely blocked from accessing Darfur. We are reaching some 800,000 people at the moment with some sort of assistance and food.”²⁰ By September 2004, the World Food Programme was feeding some 940,000 conflict-affected people in Darfur.²¹ The presence of several thousand aid workers in Darfur provides clear evidence of the Khartoum government’s commitment to the provision of food and medical relief to Darfur’s war-affected communities.

Myth 4: The Darfur Conflict is Racial

“Darfur’s Arabs are black, indigenous, African Muslims – just like Darfur’s non-Arabs.”

Anti-Government human rights activist Alex de Waal

One of the other sensationalist themes is that the conflict in Darfur has been a racial one in which light-skinned “Arab” tribes have been engaged in the “ethnic cleansing” of black “African” tribes.²² These sorts of claims are particularly inflammatory and very questionable. The simple fact is that there is very little, if any, racial difference between the many tribes of Darfur, “Arab” or “African”. Both communities are black. The London **Observer** newspaper has reported, for example, that “[c]enturies of intermarriage has rendered the two groups physically indistinguishable”.²³ The UN media service noted: “In Darfur, where the vast majority of people are Muslim and Arabic-speaking, the distinction between ‘Arab’ and ‘African’ is more cultural than racial.”²⁴ This reality has been confirmed by prominent anti-government critics such as John Ryle and Alex de Waal.²⁵ Ryle has noted that Arabs and non-Arabs “are generally physically indistinguishable”.²⁶ Alex de Waal has stated that “Characterizing the Darfur war as ‘Arabs’ versus ‘Africans’ obscures the reality. Darfur’s Arabs are black, indigenous, African Muslims – just like Darfur’s non-Arabs.”²⁷ **The New York Times** has exemplified contradictory reporting on this issue, with articles on one hand by their columnist Nicholas Kristof alleging, for example, that “black Africans have been driven from their homes by lighter-skinned Arabs in the Janjaweed”²⁸ while also publishing subsequent articles such as “In Sudan, No Clear Difference Between Arab and African”.²⁹ Even “African” Darfurian anti-government figures such as Dr Eltigani Ateem Seisi contradict the dangerously lazy shorthand of the **New York Times**. Speaking at a conference in Brussels he stated with reference to “Arabs” and “Africans” in Darfur that “we all look alike” and that one “can’t tell from the features if he is Arab or African”. He added that he, an “African”, had a lighter skin than many “Arabs”.³⁰

Myth 5: There is a Policy of Ethnic Cleansing in Darfur

“there is no systematic target - targeting one ethnic group or another one.”

Médecins Sans Frontières

There has obviously been a vast displacement of civilians within Darfur. A sensationalist media and human rights industry has claimed that the government has

pursued a policy of ethnic cleansing in Darfur.³¹ We have already seen the Médecins Sans Frontières observation that “there is no systematic target – targeting one ethnic group or another one”. The UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs, Mr Egeland, has also stated that the term “ethnic cleansing” did not fit events in Darfur: “I think we have more reports actually of a kind of scorched earth [policy] – and that nobody has taken over....It’s complex, because some have said that it doesn’t fit the legal definition of ethnic cleansing. The same tribes are represented both among those who are cleansed and those who are cleansing.”³² Mr Egeland’s views have been echoed by key human rights experts. Asma Jehangir, the UN rapporteur on extra-judicial summary and arbitrary executions, for example, has said: “I wouldn’t categorise as ethnic cleansing at the moment because that is not the impression that I am getting. It could be an unintended purpose but the numbers are staggering, the situation is terrible.”³³ Allegations of ethnic cleansing have also been clearly contradicted by Sudanese government actions. Far from wishing to see the displacement of “African” Darfurian communities, the government has self-evidently been very eager to see these communities returned to their homes. In October 2004, Khartoum reported to the UN that 70,000 displaced people had been returned to their places of origin.³⁴ Jan Pronk, the UN Special Envoy to Sudan, was said to be concerned because the United Nations had not been consulted prior to the repatriation. While there may well be some concern as to whether all the returns were voluntary Khartoum’s eagerness to return refugees to their place of origin is manifest.

Myth 6: The Government Controls the “Janjaweed”

“[the Janjaweed are] a monster that nobody seems to be able to control.”

UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs Mr Jan Egeland

The myth that the government controls the “Janjaweed”, the gunmen and bandits that have been associated with much of the violence in Darfur, and can turn their activities off and on like a tap has also distorted the reality of events. Part of the problem has been defining the term “Janjaweed”. A sensationalist media has lumped together as “Janjaweed” regular army forces, popular defence forces, police units, tribal militias, armed robbers through to any armed “Arab” tribesman. Virtually all of Darfur’s 80 tribes will have members who are armed, some with members on both sides of the conflict. Some tribal militias will not disarm unless rival tribes also do so. A western diplomat in Khartoum has noted: “There are many gangs or groups that (the Sudanese government) doesn’t control or who may be partly under their control or controlled by the local authorities. So this is not a clear-cut picture. That makes you understand how difficult (disarmament) is logistically.”³⁵ According to the United Nations Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs Mr Jan Egeland “There are many armed groups and many armed criminal gangs in Darfur.” He referred to the Janjaweed as “a monster that nobody seems to be able to control”.³⁶

Myth 7: All Militias in Darfur can be Disarmed in 30 Days

“This is going to take, in my view, 18 months to two years to conclude the first phase”

US State Department official Charles Snyder

Unrealistic expectations based upon naïve and often propagandistic claims have blighted a resolution of the problem. One issue has been the problem of disarming the many

armed groups and individuals in Darfur. In July 2004, for example, the UN Security Council adopted a resolution threatening action against Sudan if it did not disarm gunmen in Darfur within 30 days.³⁷ Charles Snyder, a former acting assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs, and the State Department's senior representative on Sudan, has stated, however, that there are no "30-day, 90-day quick fixes" to the problem. He also admitted: "This is going to take, in my view, 18 months to two years to conclude the first phase" of making the region safe for people to return to their homes.³⁸ Clearly, every effort must be made to both remove weapons and the motivation or need to carry weapons from the Darfur situation. Increasingly shrill demands for an immediate disarmament of armed forces within Darfur in the face of the reality outlined by Mr Snyder serve no purpose other than enflaming an already fraught situation.

Conclusion

Why do these myths hinder peace in Darfur? The sorts of disinformation, misinformation and sensationalism outlined above only further complicate an already complicated situation. It is very difficult, for example, to end a conflict said to be about marginalisation and underdevelopment when at least one of major participants would appear to have a hidden agenda of overthrowing the Government of Sudan and replacing it with a more hard-line Islamist regime. Building schools and roads and drilling more water wells in Darfur, while doubtlessly useful, is not going to satisfy hard-line Islamist rebels in Darfur any more than reconstruction projects in Iraq have satisfied Islamist insurgents in that country. International perceptions of the dynamics of the Darfur conflict, if based on ideas of marginalisation, will jar at least in part with reality. It should also be self-evident that claims of genocide and ethnic cleansing are very serious allegations which can have equally serious consequences. They must be taken seriously and carefully evaluated. Given that respected and credible observers such as Médecins Sans Frontières have gone out of their way to challenge allegations of genocide and ethnic cleansing in Darfur, the claims must therefore be treated with considerable caution. These sorts of claims merely serve to confuse issues and push western governments into short-term measures – actions that are ill-thought-out and which will only escalate the crisis.

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