A distant genocide in Darfur

We are beginning to be inundated with media reports on the genocidal war in Darfur, the Sudan's westernmost province, an area approximately the size of France. Much is being written on what is happening on the ground (see NYT 4 and 8 May), much less about the causes. I write here as an historian of Darfur.

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THE CONFLICT IS BEING presented in the media as a war between Arabs and Africans. This simplifies and misrepresents a very complex reality. Darfur comprises three ethnic "zones"; the northern zone includes Arab and non-Arab (mainly Zaghawa and Bideyat) camel nomads. The central zone on both sides of the Jabal Marra mountain range is inhabited largely by non-Arab sedentary farmers such as the Fur, Masalit and others, cultivating millet and speaking their own languages, while in the south there are series of Arabic-speaking cattle nomads – the Baqqara. All are Muslim and no part of Darfur was ever ethnically homogenous. For example, a successful Fur farmer would invest in cattle; once the cattle reached a certain number, it would be more profitable to cross the ethnic frontier and "become" Baqqara and in a few generations his descendants would have an "authentically" Arab genealogy. Historically, Darfur as a state was both a

Muslim sultanate and an African sacral kingship, established in around 1650 and heir to a very old tradition of state formation, going back to probably the twelfth century, dominated by the Fur people from whom the ruling dynasty came, but ruled by a title-holding elite recruited from all the major ethnic groups.¹

Under the sultanate the settled peoples, essentially non-Arab, were able to more or less control (or keep out) the nomads by having a state on their side; the sultanate's ultimate sanction was heavy cavalry, riding imported horses (much larger than the local breeds) and wearing chain-mail. The nomads could not stand up against them. As an historian I am struck by the parallels between the present situation, although today the conflict is much bloodier, and the position in the 1880s after the destruction of the sultanate in 1874. When the sultanate was restored in 1898 by Ali Dinar he spent most of his reign driving the

nomads, north and south of the settled area, back, until he was killed by the British in 1916. The British then discovered that they had no alternative but to continue his policy. They also kept the old ruling elite intact; many of the educated Darfurians of today descend from that elite.

In the colonial period (1916-56) Darfur was a backwater ruled by a handful of British officials; its only resource were young men who migrated eastward to find work in the cotton schemes between the Blue and White Niles. It was only in the mid-1960s that Darfurians, both Arab and non-Arab, began to enter the national political arena and assert their own identity. When I first went to Darfur in 1968 members of the ruling elite made a conscious decision to help me with my fieldwork, providing me with informants and documents – a fact that I did not discover until many years later. They wanted their history told.

Conflicts over wells

One of the root causes of the present crisis goes back to the 1980s when prolonged droughts speeded up the desertification process in northern and central Darfur, which in turn led to much pressure on water and grazing resources, as the camel nomads were forced to move southwards. Conflicts over wells that in earlier times were settled with spears or, hopefully, mediation by elders or religious figures become much more intractable when the area is awash with guns.

The militarization of the crisis has grown ever since Sadiq al-Mahdi while Prime Minister in the mid-1980s took the disastrous decision to give arms to the Arabic-speaking cattle nomads – the Baqqara – of southern Darfur ostensibly to defend

themselves against the Sudan Peoples Liberation Army (SPLA). No one was very surprised when they started to turn the guns on their northern neighbours, the Fur, Masalit, et cetera. The SPLA exacerbated the situation by trying to open a “front” in southern Darfur under Daoud Bolad, an Islamist turned Darfurian nationalist. It was at this time that the Arab tribal militias, first called murahilin, now janjaweed, began to go out of control.

The ethnicization of the conflict has grown ever more rapidly since the coming to power by military coup in 1989 of the Islamist regime of President Umar al-Bashir. The present regime is not only Islamist but also Arabo-centric. This has led to the injection of an ideological/racist dimension with each side defining themselves as “Arab” and “Zurq”, i.e. “Black”. My impression is that many of the racist attitudes traditionally directed towards slaves have been redirected to the sedentary non-Arab communities.

The racist dimension comes to the fore in reports of rape and mass killings, cynically supported by the Khartoum Government who are determined to retain control over the area in the face of increasing Darfurian non-Arab nationalism. The reason is simple, oil, or more accurately a possible oil pipeline through Darfur.

Ethnic cleansing

Ironically, the present peace process going on in Kenya between the Khartoum Government and the (SPLA/M) is undoubtedly fueling this ethnic cleansing, in the sense that the non-Arab Darfurians feel that they are being side-lined, while the Khartoum Government is trying to use the Arab nomads to keep control of the region. My

impression is that the two sides, with the implicit blessing of the observer group monitoring the peace negotiations, comprising the US, U.K. and Norway, do not want to know what is going on Darfur. Evidence for this comes out clearly in the determination of the Khartoum Government to keep the NGOs and the media out of the region.

What to do? A few observers, military or otherwise, in a place the size of Darfur, with virtually no roads, a very fragile ecology, where the old order has broken down but has not been replaced by any viable system, will not be enough. And what country or countries are going to send the kind of military manpower needed? The janjaweed will prove to be very tough to stop; they have a fully-developed racist ideology, a warrior culture, a plethora of weapons, the open support of the Khartoum Government, and enough horses and camels – still the easiest way to get around Darfur. The distant genocide in Darfur will very hard to bring to an end even if there is the will among the international community to do so.

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1 See my "State and Society in Darfur", London 1980.