Blood, Water & Oil

Fallacies of the Darfur War

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The Darfur War has been described as the worst conflict in the world today — and yet despite intensive media coverage, many aspects of the conflict are misunderstood because of the propaganda battle that runs in tandem with the war on the ground. The view from the ground offers different perspectives.

Much has been written on the crisis in Darfur, the three arid westernmost provinces of Sudan, so I will not repeat it here.

Suffice to say that the USA alleges genocide against the Fur, Masaalit and Zaghawa tribes by Khartoum-backed Janjaweed militia – an interest spurred no doubt by Washington's desire for access to Sudan's oil reserves which are currently being exploited exclusively by China and to a lesser extent, Malaysia and India.

On the other hand, Nafi Ali Nafi, the deputy leader of the ruling National Congress Party admitted that Khartoum armed and trained a "popular defence force" from among civilians to be used to support the Sudanese Defence Force in its battle against rebels in Darfur, while denying any genocidal campaign.

Sudan remains, in World Bank terms, a highly indebted poor country. But oil is changing all that: by 2006, oil accounted for over 25% of Sudan's gross domestic product. However little of the wealth from that 120,000 barrels of crude a year finds its way into an economy propped up by Bangladeshi guest workers lured to Sudan on false promises (winding up sweeping floors for about US$100/month), or into neglected extremities like Darfur.

The International Monetary Fund has been pushing the fatal policy of privatisation in Sudan, which has on the one hand adopted unpopular austerity measures at home, while joining the initiative for a Free Trade Area for east and southern Africa abroad.

Also, by last year, it was estimated that up to 200,000 people had died in Darfur either directly or indirectly as a result of the war and 2,2-million people have been displaced. There is no known oil in Darfur, but the China National Petroleum Corporation is keen on laying a pipeline through it to connect Port Sudan on the Red Sea via Sudan's oil-rich Abeyi region to new reserves in Equatorial Guinea. But there is also a giant aquifer, which runs from the Libyan border under Darfur to the Nile, and groundwater will soon, I predict run a close second to oil as a valued commodity, as sustainable use of the Nile reaches capacity.

After spending time in el-Fasher and Nyala, the capitals of North and South Darfur respectively, last month, I offer these brief thoughts on the situation in Darfur that I hope will shed a different light on the war:

1. The conflict in Darfur is not between "Arabs" and "Africans". In Darfur it is patently obvious that such distinctions, while embraced by a minority of the people, do not hold up in fact because those so defined all speak Arabic, dress identically and have the same culture. Within the same family, facial features express the mixed heritage of Darfurians. The differences that do exist are rather tribal than ethnic, which begs the question of why the Darfur question has been racialised in the Western media? The conflict in south Sudan could easily be used emotively for geo-political ends by the West by suggesting it was a battle between an oppressed southern Christian culture and a dominant northern Islamic culture. The same argument cannot be applied in Darfur which has a largely homogenous population – and yet a subtle, dishonest version of it (of Arabs versus Africans) continues to be peddled in the West. This can only be about the demonisation of Arab and Islamic culture by America's Christian fundamentalist lords of the New Crusades.

2. Sudan is not an Islamic fundamentalist state. Despite the introduction starting in 1983 under a previous regime of certain aspects of shari⊠a law and of a policy of Islamisation that technically only applied to northerners, Sudan's Islamic tradition is overwhelmingly Sufi with its emphasis on personal, ecstatic communion with Allah. The austere Salafist Islam that has produced groups like al-Qaeda remains a minority tradition within Sudan and of very little social and political effect (even though Osama bin Laden lived in Khartoum in the early 1990s). In politics, the long-lived Umma Party may recall the anti-colonial mania of the Mahdist Revolt of 1881–1885, but in reality, it remains merely the hobby-horse of the Mahdi's grandson, Sadiq al-Mahdi. Meanwile, the Muslim Brotherhood was not consulted (as it should have been according to the shura principle of shari⊠a) on the Islamisation policy of the government, and some aspects of the legal code were in direct conflict with shari⊠a so the legal code remains unacceptable to many Sudanese – Muslims included.

3. The cause of the conflict is not only political. It is clear that many rebels took up arms because they saw that route as the only way (based on the apparent success of the southern struggle) to convince Khartoum to devolve power and resources to the Darfurian backwaters. But of greater general concern is the implacable eastward march of the sands of the Sahara, at a rate approaching 10km a year. For example, as recently as 1992, the edge of the desert stood a good 120km west of Nyala. Today, the desert is only 5km from the city limits. So desertification and environmental degradation – exacerbated by the decimation of Darfur's trees by wood-sellers – has compressed the tribes into ever-smaller areas where they bicker and battle over shrinking water resources and grazing land. Modernisation since the Nimeri era (see below) also eroded traditional methods of dispute-resolution, and as in Somalia, the addition of automatic weapons has spiralled tribal bloodletting beyond its normal bounds.

4. The deployment of United Nations peacekeepers will not help. It is clear that the very establishment of camps for "internal displaces" all over Darfur works in favour of Khartoum. The camps, like the one at Abu Shouk north of el-Fasher where 50,000 displacees

> live, are run by the regional governments, aided by a plethora of United Nations and other aid agencies, and policed to a degree by the African Union. But though life in the camps is relatively good, with everything from cellphones to cosmetics on sale and health rates that appear better than the towns (at least in my comparison of Abu Shouk and el-Fasher), they remain concentration camps in the original sense of the term. That is, they forcibly concentrate formerly nomadic tribal peoples in an artificial "town" for years, urbanising them and exposing them to the seductions of the market – and of course, removing on-the-ground support from the rebels. The deployment of UN blue-helmets will most likely merely reinforce this pattern, which heavily favours Khartoum at the expense of Darfur.

That said, Darfur is clearly occupied territory, with Sudanese Army "technicals" (Toyota trucks with heavy machine-guns mounted on the back) much in evidence, with Chinese helicopter gunships at el-Fasher and MiGs on the runway at Nyala – and with a strong plain-clothes National Intelligence and Security service presence.

We anarchist-communists naturally need to condemn Khartoum's brutal use of proxy forces – and its cynical use of displacee camps – to control the civilian political process in Darfur.

But we also need to reject both the racialisation of the debate by the Western media and the false solution that an armed UN presence would bring. We should also appreciate the environmental and tribal roots of this complex war and see that, as the Darfurian rebels appreciate all too well, the only guarantor of a modicum of democracy in Darfur is the devolution of power to the people armed (though this is not to be read as an endorsement of any rebel platform).

The obvious question then becomes, what is the alternative? For that I will turn to a brief overview of the Sudanese left. The Sudanese Communist Party (HSS) was founded in 1946 during the global postwar upsurge of anti-colonial sentiment, and got its first brief taste of power in 1964 when a transitional government embraced all factions including the Muslim Brotherhood. But after elections in 1965 were followed by serious fighting by southern secessionists, the government swung rightwards and the HSS was outlawed.

The party was reinstated in 1969 thanks to the coup by Colonel Gafaar Mohammed Nimeri, who struck a military-HSS alliance and laid the groundwork for a one-party Soviet-aligned state. But in 1970, Nimeri, Libya's Muammar Gadaffi and Egypt's Anwar Sadat announced they were to unite the three countries in a federation. This was unacceptable to the HSS and it staged a coup under Major Hashim al-Ata which ousted Nimeri – but he was restored to power within three days and the HSS was driven underground again.

Nimeri's political orientation meanwhile swung towards the USA in the wake of the 1981 assassination of Sadat, who had displeased him by reaching a separate peace with Israel. In 1985, a general strike brought Khartoum to a standstill and precipitated the fall of Nimeri who was on a visit to the USA, in a bloodless coup. Dr Gizuli Dafallah, a trade unionist prominent in the strike action, was appointed prime minister by the transitional military council, an indication of the growing power of the Sudanese trade union movement.

But the government proved unstable in the context of the emergence of a new secessionist force in the south, the Sudan People's Liberation Movement / Army (SPLM/A) and with deepening divisions over Nimeri-era Islamicisation of the legal code and in 1989, Brigadier Omar el-Bashir staged a coup in the name of the Revolutionary Command Council for National Salvation.

The left nationalist SPLM/A enjoyed the support of the Stalinist regime of Mengistu Haile Mariam in neighbouring Ethiopia, but he himself was overthrown in 1991, echoing the general collapse of the East Bloc and the liberation movements it backed.

In 2001, the Bikisha Media Collective in South Africa – which went on to form the core of today's Zabalaza Anarchist Communist Federation – had contact with a major who was a rebel commander within the National Democratic Alliance (TWD). Formed in 1989, the TWD was based in exile in Eritrea, embraced 11 northern and southern opposition groups including the HSS, SPLM/A and various trade unions, and aimed at replacing the el-Bashir regime with a parliamentary democracy.

The TWD major asked: "With great respect as comrades at arms, I would like more information regarding the revolution for it is the right of everyone to fight for freedom which we have been denied as peace-loving Africans since we have remained prisoners mentally…"

He went on to request information on the "best formation" and "defined techniques" necessary for victory and we directed him to the Organisational Platform of the Libertarian Communists. Although contact was later lost, this demonstrates there was a hunger for the sort of practical politics that anarchist-communism can deliver.

This is not to overstate the potential for an anarchist-communist project in Sudan today. For one thing, the drawing of the SPLM into government through the comprehensive peace agreement struck in 2005 has undercut the potential of its more radical tendencies (and dissidents within the movement tend to be ethnically-based).

Legalisation has seen the old Stalinist edifice of the HSS fracture, however, with several "ultra-left" tendencies breaking away, primarily among students at the University of Khartoum. Although these mostly have a Maoist flavour, influenced as they are by conditions of rural warfare, the potential remains for anarchist-communism to make inroads here with fresh ideas. And the trade union movement, though heavily urban, remains strong, which is a good sign for any who wish to see an empowered Sudanese working class.

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