

# The Tragedy of Sudan

Fifty thousand are dead, thousands more will die, and more than 1 million have lost their homes. **Simon Robinson** visits Darfur and witnesses what is happening while the world dithers.

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The first sound Zahara Abdulkarim heard when she woke that last morning in her village was the drone of warplanes circling overhead. Then came gunshots and screams and the sickening crash of bombs ripping through her neighbors' mud-and-thatch huts, gouging craters into the dry earth. When Abdulkarim, 25, ran outside, she was confronted by two men in military uniform, one wielding a knife, the other a whip.

They were members, she says, of the Arab militia known as the Janjaweed, which over the past 18 months has slaughtered tens of thousands of black Africans like Abdulkarim across the western Sudanese region of Darfur. Another man, rifle in hand, was standing over her husband's body while others set fire to her home. Two of the intruders, she says, grabbed her and forced her to the ground. With her husband's body a few yards away, the men took turns raping her. They called her a dog and a donkey. "This year, there's no God except us," Abdulkarim says they told her. "We are your god now." When they were finished, one of the men drew his knife and slashed deep across Abdulkarim's left thigh, a few inches above her knee. The scar would mark her as a slave, they told her, or brand her like one of their camels. By nightfall, says Abdulkarim, more than 100 women in the town of Ablieh had been raped and dozens of people killed, including two of her sons, four of her in-laws and her husband. The only survivors in her compound were Abdulkarim and her son Mohammed, 6. "They also wanted to kill me, but when they saw I was pregnant, they released me and let me live," she says. That was eight months ago. Sheltering in a refugee camp in neighboring Chad, Abdulkarim, her baby Mustafa playing in her lap, says she will never go home.

Darfur is full of stories like Abdulkarim's. Aid workers and human-rights researchers say the violence that has convulsed western Sudan since February 2003, and the ensuing hunger and disease, has killed up to 50,000 people and forced some 1.4 million from their homes. Human-rights groups estimate that thousands more are displaced every week. Hundreds of women have been raped, including 41 in a single episode of gang rape last February in the town of Tawila. The vast majority of the atrocities have been carried out by members of the Janjaweed, an ethnically Arab militia of horse-mounted bandits who receive financial and military support from the Sudanese government, which commissioned them to put down an insurgency by the region's non-Arab Muslims.

The United Nations says the pogrom has created the worst humanitarian disaster in the world today. The World Health Organization found that the death rate in Darfur was three times the emergency threshold, with hundreds dying of disease every day and tens of thousands likely to die by the end of the year. Testifying before the U.S. Congress this month, U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell declared that the horrors committed in Darfur deserve the ultimate sanction. "We concluded - I concluded - that genocide has been committed in Darfur, and that the government of Sudan and the Janjaweed bear responsibility, and that genocide may still be occurring," Powell said.

But professions of outrage have done nothing to stop the killing. Immediately after labeling the Janjaweed's slaughter genocide, Powell told lawmakers, "No new action is dictated by this determination" - despite the fact that the international Genocide Convention, signed by the U.S. and 134 other countries, obligates signatories to "prevent and to punish" genocide where it is occurring. Already stretched thin in Afghanistan and Iraq and wary of intervening in another Muslim state, the U.S. has ruled out sending troops to Africa's largest country, throwing its support instead behind a proposal to deploy several thousand African observers, not to halt the violence but to monitor it.

The rest of the world, meanwhile, seems inclined to do even less. Despite the Sudanese government's unwillingness to rein in the Janjaweed, the Bush Administration has so far failed to persuade the U.N. Security Council to impose sanctions on Khartoum. After 18 months of atrocities in Sudan, the international community has yet to take a single punitive action against the Sudanese government. Opposition to sanctions has come from Arab countries that are

sympathetic to Khartoum and from Security Council members, such as Pakistan and China, that are heavily invested in Sudan's emerging oil industry. That has forced the U.S. to scale back a resolution that would punish Khartoum should it fail to halt the killing. The new resolution -passed on Sept. 18 by a vote of 11 to 0, with China, Russia, Pakistan, and Algeria abstaining -commits the Security Council to do little more than think about penalties: if the Sudanese government does not act to stop the violence, the council will meet again to "consider" imposing sanctions.

Global paralysis in the face of large-scale ethnic cleansing in Africa is nothing new. It's how the U.S. and the U.N. responded to the Rwandan genocide a decade ago, in which 800,000 people died. Advocacy groups like the International Crisis Group are urging action "if Darfur 2004 is not to join Rwanda 1994 as shorthand for international shame." Ten years later, "Never Again" is proving a hard promise to keep.



The killing fields of western Sudan stretch across an area almost as big as Texas. The Janjaweed roam the windswept plains and parts of the central range of jagged, extinct volcanoes on camels and horses or in pickup trucks mounted with machine guns. Bands of 10 or 12 men swoop into a village, shoot the men and boys, rape the women, loot and burn huts and mosques, rip up crops, and slaughter or steal livestock. Halima, 30, was working in her family's field in the village of Gadarra when she heard "the voice of guns" last July. "The attackers were on foot and running and shooting. They wanted to kill us," she says. Scooping up her daughter Amna, 2, she fled. "They chased us, and we had to hide and walk at night," says Halima, who declines to give her full name for fear of reprisals. "We had nothing to eat."

Halima and her daughter took three weeks to reach the Abu Shouk camp outside al-Fashir, the capital of northern Darfur. By then, Amna's weight, just 7.25 kg, was more appropriate for a child less than half her age. Over the past two months, staff members from French aid group Action Against Hunger, which feeds up to 100 malnourished children a day in the camp, have slowly nursed her back to health. "I will never return unless there is peace," says Halima, who wears a bright purple and blue veil wrapped around her head. "We used to have peace, but now we have only war."

Survivors, aid workers, the U.S. government and human-rights activists say the Janjaweed often work closely with Sudan's regular security forces, attacking alongside government troops in military vehicles or relying on air support in the form of bombers or helicopter gunships. "We were at morning prayers when the bombing began," says Kaltum Ali Ahmed, 47, whose village was attacked last March and who along with her daughter and granddaughter sought refuge in the larger town of Tawila. "Then the Janjaweed arrived and tore off our clothes and our jewelry. Anyone who refused was punished or killed. They took some girls and only let them go after three days. I do not want to say what they did to them. It is shameful."

Near the Chad border last month, Janjaweed and government troops razed nine villages, according to survivors interviewed by the Coalition for International Justice, a Washington-based group that studies war crimes and whose research the State Department has used for its genocide assertion. Survivors say that government helicopters targeted civilians inside the villages while Janjaweed rounded up cattle. Khartoum works "hand in glove" with the militias, says Stephanie Frease, special project manager with the coalition. "At this point, all the government has to do is fly an airplane to instill terror, to get people to move."

The U.N. says only half of all Darfurians have sufficient food and health care and, only 40% have adequate sanitation. Malnutrition rates in Darfur are always high, but because crops have not been planted this season, people must now rely on aid groups to feed them for at least a year. But the biggest concerns are the continuing violence

and the government's efforts to force people to return to their villages, where they may face new attacks. "[The violence] is still inside me," says Ahmed. "And they want to act as if nothing has changed."

The conflict in Darfur is literally rooted in the soil. Most of the region's 6 million people are farmers and herders, who cling to the valleys where the soil is less sandy, or nomadic graziers, who migrate between the arid north and the south, which blooms green after the rains every August. Though most of Darfur's farmers are African and its nomads Arab, the two groups have mixed easily. Centuries of intermarriage have blurred the most obvious distinctions: nearly all Darfurians are black, Muslim and speak Arabic. Disputes between the two are traditionally settled using hiballaws as complex as the spiderweb of cattle routes and rivers that crisscross Darfur's plains.

Over the past two decades, though, persistent drought has forced the Arabs to move to more arable lands, straining relations with the Africans. In the late 1980s, competition for turf began to turn violent. Light arms poured into the region from neighboring Chad and the Democratic Republic of Congo, leading to occasional massacres. Hostilities simmered for more than a decade.

But the spark for war came in April last year, when, following two months of occasional raids on villages, African rebels from a group calling itself the Sudan Liberation Army (SLA) swept into the tumbledown airport in the town of al-Fashir, killed 75 Sudanese government soldiers, shot up four military aircraft and kidnapped the air force chief, Major General Ibrahim Bushra. The rebel group claimed that the raid was a protest against both the government's neglect of Darfur and an increasing Arab militancy. In response, Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir called on local tribes to crush the rebellion. The most eager recruits came from small groups of Arab nomads who saw an opportunity to grab land and livestock under the banner of a state-sanctioned military operation. Locals dubbed the fighters Janjaweed, a name that loosely means "devils on horseback" and has long been used to describe the region's bandits. By August 2003 the Janjaweed had begun attacking not only the SLA fighters but also Darfurian civilians, who it said were aiding the insurgency. The conflict quickly descended into ethnic cleansing, say human-rights observers, with the Janjaweed attacking and driving out people on the basis of ethnicity. Darfur's largest Arab tribes refused to take part in the fighting, and many Africans did not support the rebels. But the battle lines had been drawn: Arab against African. "I think the Sudanese government thought they could sort out the problem quickly," says Cynthia Gaigals, Care International's advocacy coordinator for Sudan. "But it soon became something much bigger."



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The Sudanese government says it has armed some 10,000 local tribesmen as part of the paramilitary Popular Defense Force but that these troops, who include Arabs and Africans, have not participated in any massacres. Khartoum says the charge of genocide is U.S. hype in an election year and accuses the rebels, who control mountainous central Darfur, of committing raids and kidnappings of their own. Aid agencies agree that the rebels are guilty of attacks, including, last week, the first outside Darfur. Khartoum says the rebels are funded by Hassan al-Thrabi, who supported the 1989 coup that installed al-Bashir as President but has since fallen out with the government. The war in Darfur, say government insiders and opposition figures, is a proxy battle for power in Khartoum. "This is a war that the rebels want to fight inside villages," says El Tijani Fedail, Sudan's Minister of State for Foreign Affairs. "In very rare situations we may bomb and kill civilians. If the Americans do it, they call it collateral damage, don't they?"

For more than a year, as the violence in Darfur has escalated, the world has stood by. Since the start of the Bush Administration, U.S. policy toward Sudan has been focused on ending the country's long-running war in the south, which has killed more than 2 million people. Prodded to take action by an unlikely alliance of the religious right and the Congressional Black Caucus, Bush appointed former Missouri Senator John Danforth as a special peace envoy to Sudan and pressured Khartoum and the southern rebels to put down their weapons. But just as a peace deal looked imminent, Darfur exploded. Rather than risk a collapse of the deal in the south, the Administration - and much of the international community - chose to avoid the issue. "They didn't want to know about Darfur," charges Ghazi Salahuddin Atabani, a friend and adviser to President al-Bashir and then Khartoum's lead negotiator in the talks. "They kept saying, 'Please get rid of this problem.'"

Congressional leaders and some members of the Administration have tried recently to make up for lost time by denouncing the killing in Darfur. Despite Powell's statement, however, there are disagreements within the Administration and between the U.S. and its allies over whether the violence against Darfur's Africans amounts to genocide - and about what to do to stop it. In August a mission from the European Union to Sudan concluded that the killings fell short of genocide, which is defined by the convention as a deliberate attempt to kill or seriously hurt a group of people "to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part." The U.N.'s representative to Sudan, Jan Pronk, has also stopped short of calling it genocide. "Atrocities, very bad things, killings, rape, burning of villages have taken place," Pronk told a press conference in Khartoum last week. Some human-rights advocates are concerned that is the U.S. fails to intervene after Powell characterized the conflict as genocide, the significance of the convention will be undermined. That and Sudan's clampdown on aid provision in retaliation for the declaration could make it a major diplomatic mistake on Powell's part, the advocates fear. "If that's the case, then we come out of this with the worst of all worlds," says a U.S. Agency for International Development official. "We put the aid at risk, and you undermine the convention."

What can be done to save Darfur? Susan Rice, Assistant Secretary of State for Africa during the Clinton years and an adviser to John Kerry, criticizes the Bush Administration for not "taking action consonant with the magnitude of the catastrophe;" At the same time, Rice acknowledges, "I don't think there's a huge difference" between Kerry and Bush on how to handle Sudan. Neither candidate advocates sending U.S. troops to Africa to end the fighting. The Administration's current strategy is to "calibrate" the pressure on Sudan's government, until it fully disarms the Janjaweed. But human-rights observers who have visited the region say that unless the world moves rapidly to impose economic and military sanctions against Sudan, tens of thousands more could die in a matter of months, either at the hands of the Janjaweed or from starvation and disease. Sudan has agreed to allow the African Union to increase the number of its soldiers and observers in Darfur from 300 to 2000. But the soldiers' mandate stops them from intervening in the violence, and it would require 50 times as many troops to keep the peace in an area so big.

For Darfurians like Melkha Musa Haroun, the horrors they have witnessed will never fade. After an attack last year she fled with her four children and spent eight months hiding from the Janjaweed, walking from village to village until she found refuge in a camp. Now, one year later, she recalls watching Janjaweed fighters on a rampage deciding whom to kill. A fighter unwrapped swaddling cloth and rolled a newborn baby onto the dirt. The baby was a girl, so they left her. Then the Janjaweed spotted a 1-year-old boy and decided he was a future enemy. In front of the group of onlookers, a man tossed the boy into the air as another took aim and shot him dead. "It was the worse thing I ever saw," Haroun says softly, casting her eyes downward as she hugs her baby tightly to her breast.

