

EDITORIAL

Wars in the ‘borderlands’

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The conflict in Darfur has occupied a considerable amount of attention over the last two years and, for all the wrong reasons, bids fair to continue doing so. On 9 February 2006, the Canadian government sponsored an ISS experts’ workshop entitled ‘Sudan: Developments in Darfur and Implications for the Region’. The meeting brought together members of the diplomatic, legal, military and academic communities to discuss certain aspects of the Darfur conflict that seemed to warrant fresh attention. Some of the contributions to that workshop are included in this edition of the *African Security Review*, either as articles or as commentaries.

We were indeed fortunate to be able to call upon the practical experience of Commander Seth-Appiah of the Ghanaian Navy, who served as military adviser to the African Union Mission (AMIS) in Darfur. He was able to illuminate several aspects of the mission’s achievements and problems that are generally omitted from the public debate, and the allocation of blame for what many have, mistakenly, seen as an operational failure on the part of the African Union (AU). That

the militarily more powerful states of the international community still have not been able to shape a more effective response, even as preparations begin for re-hatting AMIS as a UN operation, bears witness to the diplomatic and political difficulties of intervention in such a vast and unfriendly environment while being obstructed and even attacked by well-armed belligerents. Whether even a peace agreement in Darfur will actually lead to a monitoring mission strong enough to provide adequate protection to the region's civilian population and the aid workers upon whom they have to depend at present, remains a moot point.

The article by Cécile Aptel Williamson provides expert analysis of the potential role of the International Criminal Court (ICC) in investigating the commission of serious crimes against humanity in Darfur. She examines the mandate of the ICC, the practical problems it confronts and the political environment in which it is forced to operate. She also suggests good reasons why the authorities in Khartoum would be reluctant to allow the deployment of a UN force, which might facilitate the collection of vital evidence.

At the time of going to print, the outcomes of the seventh round of Darfur peace talks in Abuja were still uncertain. The Khartoum government has indicated a willingness to accept the principles of the agreement suggested by the AU's mediators; the rebels have signalled their misgivings and requested a measure of renegotiation, which seems unlikely to materialise currently. For its part, the Sudanese government has assumed a cooperative role in public, even as it continues its military operations in Darfur. It is eager to avoid censure for its alleged role in attempts to unseat Chad's President Déby, and will also use any rebel intransigence to delay or prevent the deployment of a UN mission in Darfur. It will then be up to the international community to decide what to do: whether to attempt to muster support for some form of intervention over the objections of Khartoum and its diplomatic allies, or to provide support to shore up the AMIS force, which has been helpless to address the most serious violations by all parties to the Darfur ceasefire.

Of course, even were the Abuja accords on Darfur to be initialled by all parties, the issue of monitoring compliance would remain a serious problem. And as has been suggested by so many case studies in Africa and elsewhere, delays between reaching an agreement and implementing it may prove fatal, even when all parties are genuine in their undertakings, which itself is rare enough. One aspect of the problem is that the relative political and military strengths of the parties involved, and the positions of power enjoyed by the individual signatories, change over the intervening period, so that the longer implementation is delayed, the greater the number of demands for revision or reinterpretation of the original deal.

Two of the contributions to this issue deal with the case of Somalia, where the outcome of some fourteen attempts at resolution and the establishment of the foundations of a reconstructed Somali state still remains uncertain. These two contributions go some way towards explaining why this

should be, and also illustrate why returns to a *status quo ante bellum* are virtually impossible to achieve. Civil wars, in particular, change the entire economic and political fabric of the societies they afflict, altering the power relations within them in ways that are, in the strictest sense, irreversible.

The Darfur and Somali cases also raise some interesting and vital questions about the nature of state power in what could be designated 'borderlands' in the broadest sense of the term. To what extent has a 'modern' state ever played a role in providing for the welfare and security of the inhabitants of these regions? Siad Barre's Somalia was a creation of Cold War donor politics dedicated to the realisation of an irredentist agenda. When these props failed, the state collapsed.

Darfur has always had a marginal role in the politics of independent Sudan, its peoples most frequently regarded by Khartoum's political elite either as soldiers for its wars against the secessionist south or, in times of peace, as voters capable of providing electoral support from which they would reap little benefit. As for eastern Chad and the other territories bordering Darfur to west and south, for decades these had been areas of warlord contestation, in which nominal control of a largely fictitious state represented the greatest prize, but not final peace.

Left pretty much to their own devices, the communities occupying these troubled territories might have found ways to resolve their mutual differences short of causing the deaths of hundreds of thousands of people, almost all of them civilians. The dynamics have worked out differently, as politicians aspiring to retain or acquire power at the centre of the state have instrumentalised identity in lethal ways to promote their agendas. The legacy of these tactics will be difficult to neutralise, let alone eradicate.