

Darfur and the impact of protest fever

Mariam Bibi Jooma★

‘We want to organise a protest outside the embassy to make people aware of what’s going on in Darfur,’ stated a request to the Institute for Security Studies from a local university society keen on raising levels of awareness and activism on relevant issues affecting the African continent. Certainly this was an encouraging sign from what has often unfairly been characterised as a politically apathetic South African ‘born free generation’. But in response to the question on how they view the Darfur conflict and what the aims of a protest campaign would be, the students admitted that they were aware of their lack of understanding of the politics but added that something needed to be done in the face of ongoing genocide in Darfur.

While the intention of creating awareness is to be commended, the request highlights the extent to which media representation of the conflict has informed responses at both civil and state level.

★ Mariam Bibi Jooma is a researcher on Sudan with the Africa Security Analysis Programme at the Institute for Security Studies.

Let us be clear, the violence and ongoing conflict in Darfur are serious matters and the human rights abuses as documented by various non-government organisations and observers have highlighted the impact of a military-security approach in response to civil dissent. However, the characterisation of the conflict as simply the fanatical violence of Arabs against their African neighbours, or the reflection of a religious divide (despite the fact that Darfurians are fairly homogenous in their adherence to Islam) does a disservice to the national character of public debate on the nature of the Sudanese state. Indeed, Northern Sudan, often described as the Arab-Muslim north, is far from homogenous in identity and political aspiration, with much of the marginalised west, east and extreme northern Sudan finding common cause with the former rebel movement, the Sudan People's Liberation Movement. The promise of overall transformation of Sudan through the comprehensive peace agreement gave hope to many of these constituents, who regarded the late John Garang de Mabior as a possible leader of an inclusive Sudanese state.

The Darfur crisis is the most recent example of a long history of post-independence discontent with elitist rule in Sudan, and is a manifestation of the breakdown of governance at the centre of Sudan. At the same time it is a reflection of the desire for regime security rather than a substantial devolution of power to the regions. The crisis is complicated by tensions between communities, which stem from a tangible and ongoing scarcity of resources that has been exacerbated by the emasculation of local traditional authority in the 1970s under the Jaffer Nimeiri regime. (In the past, traditional authorities were able to mediate between various tribes regarding access to water and pasturage and other matters of 'governance' critical to the vast and arid region.) Added to this unstable mix are the global geopolitical imperatives of a United States keen to achieve some success in its 'war on terror' campaign. Against such a messy background it is not surprising that Darfur has become a 'Wild West' for activists, politicians and journalists alike.

Journalists play a particularly important role in popular awareness of 'what's going on in Sudan'. On 8 August this year the Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) of the United Kingdom upheld a complaint against the Save Darfur Coalition, the biggest US coalition of campaigners and celebrities largely responsible for putting Darfur on the civil society and media map in the US. The complainant was the European Sudanese Public Affairs Council (ESPAC), an organisation perceived to be closely affiliated to the regime in Khartoum. The ESPAC lodged a complaint with the ASA regarding a Save Darfur Coalition advert that read 'Slaughter is happening in Darfur ... 400 000 innocent men, women and children have been killed'. They argued that the figure of 400 000 was based on speculation and was false. The ASA reviewed the evidence put forward by both parties concerning the methodology of estimating fatalities and eventually agreed with the ESPAC that the figures are more likely to be around 200 000. (It is noteworthy that this number is significantly higher than the 9 000 claimed by the Sudanese government.)¹

The question is why this complaint is important. Surely, we should be concerned regardless of whether the number of deaths is 40, 400 or 400 000 and regardless of where they died? However, the irony is that use of inflated statistics has created a threshold for concern, and alarm bells sound only when 'mass atrocity' can be claimed. Rather than helping to address the complex underlying causes of conflict in countries such as Sudan, international activism may indeed drive the use of force and the protraction of conflict as belligerents draw their strength from their projection of power rather than their actual constituency on the ground. Observers to the Abuja talks which resulted in the moribund Darfur Peace Agreement argue that this was one of the main reasons for the fracturing of the rebel movements, which sought to maximise their power by remaining outside the peace process.

Recent clashes in Southern Darfur in the areas around the Kalma Internally Displaced Persons camp between Minni Minnawi's Sudan Liberation Army and the Sudanese armed forces have demonstrated how cycles of violence can be defined by the competition for relevance between various factions. The latest emphasis on the importance of Abdel Wahid Nur, the original leader of the Sudan Liberation Movement, to the Arusha talks is more than likely to have motivated new activity from the Minnawi faction whose power has been dramatically diffused since taking up position in Khartoum.

Importantly, the call for more international action on Darfur, based as it is on a narrow understanding of the deep-seated structural and tribal tensions present in the country, removes the concept of agency over the conflict-peace process. Indeed, in his discussion of Darfur and peacekeeping, Philip Cunliffe (2007) makes a powerful argument about the decentralisation of institutional accountability as a result of increasing reliance on the United Nations and international bodies to manage global crises. He writes: 'under the auspices of the UN, wars are no longer treated as political affairs, with peace founded on Africans' own efforts, but as "conflict management" activities to be administered by bureaucrats and jet-setting international diplomats ... This moralised multilateralism lends itself to passing the buck: states blame the UN, the UN blames states, and both blame Africans for their corruption and backwardness.'

It should be clear that 'saving Darfur' is not the mandate of a UN peacekeeping mission: it is a long and uncomfortable process through which Sudanese civil society should give meaning to their own aspirations for an inclusive Sudan, supported but not defined by international lobby groups.

Note

- 1 For more on the methodology used by the Save Darfur Coalition and the ESPAC, see Alex de Waal's posting to the Social Science Research Council website <http://www.ssrc.org/blog>.

References

- Cunliffe, P 2007. Darfur: colonised by 'peacekeepers' 2 August [online]. Available at <http://www.spiked-online.com/index.php?site/article/3697/> [accessed 25 August 2007].
- De Waal, A 2007. Deaths in Darfur: Keeping ourselves honest. SSRC blogs, 8 August [online]. Available at <http://www.ssrc.org/blog/2007/08/16/deaths-in-darfur-keeping-ourselves-honest> [accessed 25 August 2007].