Conflict in Darfur Region of Sudan - a briefing note

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Introduction

Conflicts in Darfur between settled farmers and nomads moving south in search of water and pastures have been commonplace for centuries. During the 1980s and 1990s these conflicts intensified, aggravated by drought, the influx of arms from wars in neighbouring countries and the policy pursued by government of arming Arab tribesmen. Earlier in 2003 a number of interacting factors, ethnic conflict, an increase in armed robberies and a perception of Darfur marginalisation led to the formation of a political and military resistance movement known as the Sudanese Liberation Movement/Army (SLM/A). The SLM/A has formulated and articulated political demands and has indicated its willingness to negotiate. The government response, however, has been to call the rebels a gang of bandits, ignore their political agenda and to reject efforts to find a peaceful solution to the crisis. Unless serious negotiations are initiated, the most likely scenario is an escalation of the Darfur crisis resulting in further displacement of people and serious hampering of humanitarian interventions. This paper describes and analyses current events in the region.

Description of the region

Approximately one fifth of Sudan's 35 million inhabitants live in Darfur Region. The region has three distinct ecological zones. The central belt includes the fertile Jebel Marra massif, which is inhabited by African sedentary farmers, including the Fur, Berti, Bargu, Bergid, Tama and Tunjur. Camel nomads roam the northern zone of Darfur, which is part of the Sahara. The main tribes in this part of the region are the Zayadia, Zaghawa and Bedeyat, all non- Arab, and the Arab Mahariya, Irayqat, Mahamid and Beni Hussein. The northern zone, the most ecologically fragile, is often affected by drought. The eastern and southern zones are home to nomadic Arab cattle herders, mainly from the Rezeigat, Misseriya, Habbaniya, Beni Halba, Taaisha and Maaliyya tribes. These zones are less subject to drought, although still prone to fluctuations in rainfall and less ecologically stable than the central part of Darfur.

Historical background

Darfur did not formally become part of the Sudan until 1916 when the British conquered the Darfur sultanate and incorporated it into the Anglo Egyptian Condominium which they had established eighteen years earlier. Darfur did not integrate easily into the larger political entity which had absorbed it. In both the colonial and post-independence period, under-development generated strong feelings of regional discrimination amongst all the peoples of Darfur. Popular resentment against regional marginalization was articulated politically in the 1960s by a secret underground organisation, Soony. A second regional movement, the Darfur Development Front, led by prominent politicians including Ahmed Ibrahim Direige¹, Dr Ali al Haj² and Abu Gassim Saif al Din³ campaigned openly around the issue of marginalisation. Both groups criticised central government policy but neither resorted to violence as a means of political expression.

The early 1980s witnessed the first outbreak of disputes and conflicts along ethnic lines. In 1981 a popular uprising led to the ousting of the Governor, not a native of Darfur, and his replacement by a prominent Fur businessman. He was in turn accused of favouring the Fur and of side-lining Arab tribes who created the Arab Alliance (Tujammo al-Arabi), to prevent the "Zurga" (Blacks or Africans) from taking control of Darfur.

The first armed confrontation between Fur and Arab tribes was reported in 1982, such incidents increasing dramatically through the 1980s and 1990s. Conflicts initially occurred between Fur cultivators and nomads moving south in search of pastures. Arab tribes then launched attacks on Fur, Massalit, Zaghawa and other African tribes and conflict spread out from Jebel Marra to other parts of Darfur. In 1989, a peace conference was convened in an attempt to contain the situation. The conference produced a truce agreement under which compensation was promised to the Fur. When no compensation materialized, the Fur accused the government of taking sides with the Arabs and the conflict intensified. Subsequent peace conferences in later years all failed to bring an end to the fighting.

Successive governments, starting with Saddiq al-Mahdi in the 1980s, had armed the cattle herding nomads, including the Habbaniya, Beni Halba and a number of smaller tribes, as a means of containing the SPLA. The nomads formed militias, which then deployed their weaponry systematically against the African tribes of Darfur, attacking and destroying villages and looting herds and crops⁴. In response, the Fur formed their own militias calling upon retired army officers to train villagers in armed self-defence. In the early 1990s the Fur joined forces with the Zaghawa creating an emerging Darfurian movement directed not only against the Arab tribes of Darfur, but increasingly also against the central government.

In 1991, Dawood Yahya Bolad, a prominent Fur NIF activist who had defected to the SPLM/A after falling out with the Islamists, took part in an SPLM/A incursion aimed at opening a western front in Darfur. Arab militiamen, armed by the government repulsed the SPLM/A troops. Bolad was subsequently executed, aggravating local tensions even

¹ Ahmed Ibrahim Direige, Governor of Darfur, 1981-1983. In exile since 1983. President of the Federal Alliance, a regional interest group established by Darfurians in exile.

² Dr Ali al Haj, Deputy Secretary-General of the Popular National Congress Party. In exile in Germany.

³ Abu Gassim Saif al Din, Speaker of the Darfur Regional Assembly 1981-1983. Currently an independent

⁴ These militias are currently called *Ganjawid* in Darfur. They reportedly receive military training from the Sudanese army. The Ganjawid consist of Northern Rizeigat, Beni Halba and tribesmen from Chad.

further. Also in the early 1990s greater numbers of displaced Chadians moved into Darfur, leading to an increase in armed banditry of which the Fur and Massalit were the main targets.

Sudan Liberation Movement/Army (SLM/A)

At the initiative of the then Governor of North Darfur, a consultative forum of Darfur leaders was convened in el Fashir on 25-26 February 2003. Just prior to this meeting, the Darfur Liberation Front (DLF) had surfaced for the first time by capturing Gulu, capital of Jebel Marra Province. Shortly afterwards the DLF changed its name to Sudan Liberation Movement/Army (SLM/A). On 13 March 2003 the SLM/A issued its political declaration. Using language and ideology reminiscent of that of the SPLM/A, it announced the launch of an armed rebellion to "create a united democratic Sudan on a new basis of equality, complete restructuring and devolution of power, even development and cultural and political pluralism". A commitment to armed struggle as a means of achieving its political objectives was also stated. Accusing the Khartoum government of fuelling ethnic strife in the region, the SLM/A called on tribes of "Arab background" to join its struggle against the government.

According to sources close to SLM/A, the backbone of the movement consists of Fur and Zaghawa intellectuals and officers compelled to retire from the Sudan armed forces in 2002. The movement is thus well supplied with both political ideologues and military strategists. The movement's political leader is Abdel Wahid Mohamed Nur,⁵ a Fur lawyer. His deputy, who is also the movement's military commander, is Abdulla Abakr⁶, a Zaghawa originally from Chad. The SLM/A spokesman is Mini Arkou Minnawi, also a Zaghawa. Fur mediators who met with the leadership of the SLM/A in their stronghold in Jebel Marra in March commented both on the movement's degree of organisation and its impressive arms supplies. The movement's armed forces were reported to number 8000 troops and SLM/A agents were said to operate in Nyala, Khartoum, el Obeid, Port Sudan, Wad Medani, Kosti, Gedaref and New Halfa recruiting new members and mobilizing funds.

It is often argued that SLM/A membership consists of followers of Hassan al-Turabi, the Secretary-General of the Popular National Congress (PNC). Since the bulk of the supporters of the PNC originate from Darfur, linkage between the SLM/A and Turabi's group is more than possible, but the nature and scale of any links remain a matter of speculation.

Failed negotiations. March 2003

⁵ Abdel Wahid Mohammed Nur, Fur from Torra village in Jebel Marra. Graduated in 1995 form the Law Faculty of the University of Khartoum.

⁶ At the time of writing there were reports that Abdullah Abakr had been killed.

During the February 2003 consultative forum of Darfur leaders, committees representing Fur, Arab, Zaghawa and smaller tribes⁷ were formed with a view to finding a peaceful solution to the crisis. The Fur committee headed by Abdel Gassim Seif al Din⁸, met with the SLM/A leadership in Jebel Marra in early March and was informed that SLM/A was willing to enter negotiations. The demands presented by SLM/A included socioeconomic development for the region, an end to the tribal militias and a share for Darfurians in the central government.

Abu Gassim Seif al Din advised officials of the National Congress Party not to pursue military action, but to open negotiations on the political demands of the SLM/A. The government, however, continued to dismiss the SLM/A as a group of bandits and refused to acknowledge any political objectives in the movement. On 13 April President al-Bashir met with the Chadian President Idris Debby in el Fashir. Al-Beshir reiterated that the conflict in Darfur could only be solved using military means, to which effort Deby pledged his support.

The conflict escalates. April 2003

The surprise attack launched by the SLM/A on al-Fashir, capital of North Darfur State, in late April was apparently meant to demonstrate the movement's claim to be taken seriously both politically and militarily. In the course of the attack, SLM/A disabled the runway of el Fashir airport, destroyed government aircraft and torched fuel and arms depots after looting them. The fighting killed dozens of government soldiers. SLM/A rebels abducted others, including two senior officers. Shortly after the attack on el Fashir, unrest spread to El Obeid in Kordofan. On 29 April police made an arrest at the airport, accusing the suspect of collecting information on the airport for the SLM/A. One day later, authorities in El Obeid imposed tight security on the airport and on the gas depot.

In early May the Government secured the support of the National Assembly for military action in Darfur. During the session, the Governor of North Darfur, Ibrahim Suleiman sharply criticised the Government for failing to address the development needs of Darfur. Some days later he was dismissed from his post along with the Governor of West Darfur, the local military commander and the head of police in el Fashir. Several days later, the SLM attacked Mellit, an important customs post and the second largest town in North Darfur. SLM/A again looted government stocks for arms, fuel and food. They also burgled the local bank and commandeered government and private vehicles.

Throughout March, April and May the government had carried out a series of arrests of Darfurians, both in Khartoum and in Darfur. Those who were arrested included Abdel Rahman Bishara (Zaghawa), a veterinary doctor, Abdel Shaffie Eissa Mustaffa, an electrical engineer working for the Ministry of Industry in Nyala, Abdel Nebbi Ali Ahmed Secretary General of the Umma Party and Dr. Abdel Rahman Dousa, a lecturer at Ahfad University. Scores of university students were also arrested.

⁷ The Zaghawa committee was lead by Ahmed Adam, an ex-teacher based in el Fasher, who met with the Zaghawa in their stronghold in Kornoi

⁸ Secretary of the Fur Committee was Gaafar Mohammed Adam, a Fur member of the National Assembly.

Role of exiled Darfurian parties

Darfurian exile parties, including the Federal Alliance, led by Ahmed Ibrahim Direige and Dr. Sharif Harir and the Sudanese Movement for Equality and Justice led by Dr. Khalil Ibrahim have claimed credit for actions undertaken by SLM/A on behalf of the military wings of their respective parties. SLM/A for its part has strongly denied links to any political party, claiming to be an indigenous movement. Though willing to accept contributions and moral support from other groups, it asserts that it pursues its own independent agenda.

Conclusion

All the main opposition parties, including the Umma, DUP, Communist Pary, the Justice Party and the Popular National Congress have appealed to the government to resolve the conflict with the SLM/A through dialogue. The parties have also called on the government to address the root causes of the conflict by increasing development assistance to Darfur. The government however has rejected all calls for dialogue and is instead once more preparing for military action. Nor is SLM/A prepared to give up its armed struggle. Reports indicate that that the movement is rapidly growing in numbers and now controls most of Jebel Marra, as well as areas to the north and northwest.

Several UN agencies have a presence in Darfur or are implementing programmes in the region. The present stand off between the government and a well-armed and motivated insurrection movement on Sudan's western border has the potential to further destabilize Sudan, whether or not a peace agreement is implemented over Southern Sudan. The similarities between the origins of the conflict in Darfur and that in Southern Sudan cannot be over-looked. Both conflicts arise from economic and political marginalisation by the centre, historic under-development and ethnic conflict over diminishing resources between tribal coalitions which define themselves antagonistically as either 'Arabs' or 'Africans'.

The military solution currently being pursued will inevitably increase the level and intensity of armed ethnic conflict in Darfur, displace civilians, imperil food security, and create access and security constraints for international assistance organisations.