

Darfur: The Hourglass of Blood

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The Darfur crisis in Sudan is perhaps the most politically convoluted conflict in the world today. Its underpinnings involve local, regional and international players, all selfishly vying for power and economic interests. Alliances shift like quicksand, reminiscent of Lebanon. Neither the interest of the people of Darfur, nor the sovereignty of Sudan seem to be a major concern to any of those involved: a regime fighting for survival, rebel groups readily playing into the hands of foreign powers, a superpower eager to create distraction from its blunders elsewhere, European players coveting the region's oil wealth with growing keenness, and so forth. Meanwhile, the refugees continue to perish, dying at so alarming a speed, often in the most inhumane ways imaginable. What is to be done?

A crowd of a few thousand gathered at Downing Street for Global Day for Darfur, on April 29. They were largely Sudanese, mostly from Darfur. They gathered in London's hotspot for protests with a seemingly decisive and uncompromising demand: intervention. They called on Britain – as tens of thousands rallying simultaneously in 36 cities called on their respective governments and the international community – to intervene to end the effective 'genocide' in Sudan's Eastern province. Though a UN investigative team denied that the killings there were being carried out with genocidal intent, the fact is, an uncountable number of people are unnecessarily dying, mostly due to starvation and disease, but also murdered with impunity. Two million live in refugee camps, still targeted mostly by Janjaweed militias but also rebel fighters. Even those who cross into Chad – 200,000 refugees are now living along the 600 kilometre stretch that separates Sudan from its neighbour to the West – are not safe. The ethnic profile that makes Darfur a testing place for social and national cohesion, also exists in eastern Chad, thus similar feuds are carried out across the border.

The Darfur crisis is not that of black and white, Arabs and Africans. This is nonsense. They are all Africans. They are all Muslims, almost to the last one. Reductions and oversimplification might be useful to the media and short-sighted or self-serving politicians and governments, but deceptive and simply inaccurate. Even the two main rebel groups – The Sudan Liberation Army (SLA) and the Justice and Equality Movement (Jem) – are now fighting one another following the mid 2006 Abuja agreement. Chad is arming Sudan's rebels and Sudan is doing the same.

But considering that the victims and the aggressors are all Muslim, what have Muslim countries and organizations done to bring the crisis to a halt? As the United States is keenly interested in hyping the tragedy and exploiting it for its own purposes, Muslim institutions in the West appear disinterested in the whole affair, merely paying lip service to fend off accusations. At least this is how I felt when I caught up with Dr. Daud Abdullah, the Deputy Secretary General of the Muslim Council of Britain (MCB), the largest umbrella Muslim group

- representing over 400 Muslim organizations in the country.

Abdullah spoke at the Darfur rally with unequalled passion, a quality known of this man, a Jamaican-British Muslim who has obtained his Ph.D. in modern Sudanese history from the University of Khartoum. He lived in the war torn country for seven years. He seemed neither apologetic nor bashful to lay the blame where it deserves to be laid; but he was clearly fearful of misguided military adventures like those of the United States in the Middle East.

"Muslims learned bitter lessons from the Kuwait episode when foreigners invaded Muslim lands," he told me, proposing "an internal political settlement within Sudan using African and Muslim resources." When I suggested to Abdullah that such a proposal is useless considering its repeated failures, and considering the urgency of the situation in Sudan, he responded: "failure of the part of Muslims on more than one occasion shouldn't negate the notion that Muslims must not to try to resolve the situation internally and present their own alternatives."

Dr. Abdullah knows more than anyone else I know how Sudan "is prone to fragmentation." He said the country "was put together in the 19th century (in a political concoction) that has left it in constant struggle and civil war. The country is hardly in need for further fragmentation."

"This conflict will be resolved at the negotiation table," according to Abdullah, who is also one of the most well known Muslim rights advocates in the country, if not in all of Europe. "There can be no military solution. Muslim countries, civil societies and other parties must strive to bring conflicting parties to talk on the basis of sharing wealth and creating equality and ending the marginalization that has defined Darfur for generations."

Rights groups however, suggest that the intensity of the violence has increased since the peace agreement signed last year between the government and the rebels. The rebels' split lead to an internal clash and the killings are no longer defined according to the simplified media line: Janjaweds vs. Africans.

Dr. Abdullah defended the MCB against my suggestion that some Muslim groups seem little interested in direct involvement, and that Darfur has been dropped out of their political sphere for it simply involves no other party other than Muslims. "The MCB has been involved in efforts to support political settlement in Sudan. We are in direct contact with Khartoum and are exploring ways to ensure that the central government honours its responsibilities toward the people of that region." He spoke of "some progress" on that front, and insisted that the powerful Muslim organization fully supports the Abuja Agreement. According to Abdullah, MCB continues to exert all efforts to help bring an end to the conflict.

In such conflicts, when regional control, political interests and economic booty are all at stake, human lives, especially those of these least importance - peasants, nomads and defenceless innocents with little clout - become a pawn in the hands of those who wish for conflict to perpetuate, so long as there is a good reason for its continuation. As I left the Darfur rally, the echo of an angry speaker, demanding intervention and justice and all the rest followed me a long distance from the crowd. My mind was totally consumed with the most expressive hourglass of blood. It was still streaming as people continue to die.

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Intifada: A Chronicle of a People's Struggle (Pluto Press, London) is available from Amazon and other book venues

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