

I

THE “ABODE OF THE BLACKS”

DISASTER IN DARFUR

On 5 May 2006 in Abuja, the Nigerian capital, Minni Arkoy Minawi of the Sudan Liberation Movement and Majdhub al-Khalifa, representing the government of the Sudan, signed the Darfur Peace Agreement. This set in motion a timetable of ceasefire and security arrangements designed to end what has been described as the “world’s worst humanitarian disaster.” But even as the toasts were raised in Nigeria, the death and destruction continued in Darfur. As the world dithers and looks away, Darfur is again on the brink of the abyss of what Colin Powell in 2004 famously called “genocide.”

Until the depredations of the fearsome rabble known as *janjawid* began to filter into the international consciousness in 2003, Darfur was one of the least-known places in the world. Poor, remote, landlocked, and sparsely populated, it was obscure even to the rest of the Sudan. Darfur’s western borders are as far from the Red Sea as they are from the Atlantic, and the overland journey from Khartoum, the Sudanese capital on the Nile, still takes days across the desert. Darfur has no valuable minerals (although oil drillers live in hope); no famous sons or daughters; no natural wonders or monuments to attract any but the hardiest foreign visitors. When word of the killings began to seep out in 2003, it seemed to a perplexed world to be news from a void.

But Darfur has a history. At a crossroads of Africa and the Muslim Middle East, it has traded for centuries between them, and its peoples reflect in their languages and cultures, and in their blood, a rich heritage. As part of *bilad al-Sudan* – the “land of the Blacks” – the medieval Arab geographers’ term for the Sahel, Darfur also straddles the *hajj* routes

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along which West Africans have for centuries made the pilgrimage to Mecca and left their mark. Arabic and Muslim culture slowly permeated, and coexisted with, indigenous traditions. To the outsider, all the people of Darfur are black, and it is ethnicity rather than “race” that sets them apart.

Until 1916, when it became one of the very last African territories to fall to European imperialism, Darfur was an autonomous sultanate, with a long line of noble rulers governing from El Fasher, whose very name (“the camp”) bespoke the martial history of the state. When the Sudan became independent in 1956, Darfur had therefore experienced European rule, of a kind, for only forty years; the day the Union Jack came down, there must have been many who remembered when the British had arrived and some even the day when the last sultan, Ali Dinar, had himself returned from captivity at Omdurman at the fall of the Mahdi's empire in 1898. A few old men, perhaps, might even have been boys in 1874, when al-Zubayr Pasha, the merchant prince whose personal domain stretched a thousand miles westward from the Upper Nile, had with his slave army defeated and killed the Fur sultan, only to see his conquest annexed by the Khedive of Egypt. In eight decades, remote Darfur had witnessed enormous change.

When in 1916 the British sirdar in Khartoum put aside for a moment the secret schemes that culminated in T. E. Lawrence's sideshow in Arabia, the taunts of the Fur sultan provoked his wrath. But the Anglo-Egyptian annexation of Darfur had no more ambitious motive than pacification – and denying more territory, however poor, to the equally land-grabbing French moving eastward. The colonial regime imposed in Darfur was therefore one that prized law and order, in a suitably rough-and-ready way, over what would come to be called “economic development” or preparation for independence. In the Sudan, investment was largely limited to the vicinity of the capital, the agricultural region to its south, and the towns along the colonial railway that connected these to the Red Sea. Darfur, as indeed much of the rest of the country, was neglected.

The result of neglect was that the colonial inheritance, bequeathed at independence, went to a small group who, by dint of geography, access to educational and commercial opportunities, and luck, had been in the right place at the right time. What followed has been called “internal colonialism,” by which the ruling elite, concentrated in Khartoum and a

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few other areas, controlled politics and the economy. They did a poor job of it and, by the 1980s, after a succession of parliamentary and military regimes, the Sudan was a case study in bad government, the local effects of international agencies' bad policies, and the skewed priorities of the Cold War. Darfur provided votes when elections were held and cheap migratory labor but was still the ignored wild west, an undeveloped corner of one of the world's least-developed countries.

In the 1980s, Khartoum, and the wider world, began to pay greater attention to Darfur, with results that would not benefit its people. To the west lay Chad, a former French territory even poorer and more complex than Darfur, and to the north Libya, whose mercurial leader, Colonel Muammar Gaddafi, dreamt of expanding an Islamic empire of his own into the weak postcolonial states of the Sahel. Trilateral local relations of great complexity and constant shifts resulted and were further complicated by the fitful involvement, for their own reasons, of France, the United States, and other powers. Darfur, the international border of which was not only porous but also cut across ancient ethnic and tribal *dars*, did not escape these troubles.

At the same time, the whole trans-African region was experiencing decades-long drought that, with ensuing desertification and, ironically, the effects of improved human and animal health, was creating an epic demographic problem. Periodic famines, long the price of life in the Sahel, lasted longer; nomads who would once have returned to their deserts of seasonal grasses no longer did so; the breakdown of security and the irresponsible agendas of politicians made matters worse. In 1984–85, a great famine enveloped Darfur, whose people were left to die by their government. In the unsettled times that followed, with automatic weapons selling at a discount in the maelstrom of Libya's campaigns in Chad, local difficulties that had in the past been settled through traditional tribal mechanisms now took on aspects of warlordism. The Sudanese government, preoccupied with its long civil war in the south, armed the Arab tribal "militias" of Southern Darfur and set them loose.

By the 1990s, an increasingly chaotic situation in Darfur was imbued with a particularly dangerous variant of Arab supremacism. This monstrous child of the northern Sudanese metropolitan elite and Gaddafi's Arab Islamism was adopted by some Darfur and Chadian Arab chiefs to inspire, and cloak, the activities of what we know now as the *janjawid*.

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Whereas gradual assimilation of both Arabs and non-Arabs into the “Sudanese” culture as defined in the Nile valley had been progressing for years, suddenly Darfur – “the abode of the Fur” – was proclaimed an “Arab” land, whose non-Arab usurpers could rightfully be dispossessed. The result, in the early 1990s, was race war. When Khartoum failed to protect them, the non-Arab population formed self-defense forces in Darfur – forerunners of the Sudan Liberation Movement whose leader sat at the table in Abuja in 2006. But that movement (and others) was no match for the combined strength – and scorched-earth strategy – of the Sudanese army and *janjawid*, who acted in tandem to subject Northern and Western Darfur to ethnic cleansing.

We can only speculate about where the Darfur Peace Agreement of May 2006 will lead. History advises pessimism or, at the very least, the greatest possible vigilance. That the Abuja Agreement was signed at all owes much to the attention of the outside world. In the absence of such pressure, easily released elsewhere in an era of frequent and instantly publicized terror attacks, tsunamis, and wars, the millions today immured in Darfur's refugee camps are at risk. When Darfur was the transit route for the slave trade in the 1860s, Europe demanded action; when in the 1890s British imperialists needed popular support at home to conquer the Sudan, they created it through propaganda about the horrors of the Mahdist state; after Europeans and Americans in the 1980s started buying slaves to rescue them and witnessed the plight of the “Lost Boys” from the southern Sudan, they demanded action, and Europe and the United States intervened to help bring about the end of the civil war.

Whether the necessary pressure will be brought to bear now to ensure the survival of Darfur remains an open question. With U.S. military forces spread thin and those of Europe seemingly in demand in a growing list of global conflicts, the leading role in Darfur has fallen to the African Union. The Sudanese government has vehemently opposed the transfer of that role to the United Nations and threatened jihad should an attempt be made to impose UN forces in Darfur. The insecurity of the refugee camps is increasing, rations have been cut, convoys attacked, and relief workers killed. As many as 3.5 million people are at risk. Complete breakdown of the peace agreement is at hand. How things got to this point – how a region once so obscure that it was compared to the dark side of the moon must now become the cynosure

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of world attention – is the subject of this book, a history of Darfur besieged.

THE LAND AND THE PEOPLE

The word "Darfur" combines the Arabic *dar* (home, abode) and the name of the principal ethnic group, the Fur, which has inhabited the region since premodern times. At every stage of the period with which this book is concerned, however, from the sixteenth century until the present day, the territory has been ethnically mixed; the majority of the population of the Fur state, at times of expansion, may have been non-Fur. But the term Darfur early came to denote the Fur homeland and the territories and peoples over which the Fur state held sway.

The extent of those territories has ebbed and flowed considerably. At its greatest extent, in the eighteenth century, the Fur empire extended from the Nile into what is today Chad, and as far south as the Bahr al-Arab, an area of some 340,000 square miles; but at other times even the nucleus of the Fur state has been all but extinguished as, for example, after its conquest by al-Zubayr in 1874, again during the Mahdiyya of the 1880s and 1890s, and after the Anglo-Egyptian annexation in 1916. Thus, what concerns us here are the territories under Fur political control at any given time and, during periods of foreign control, what had by the mid-nineteenth century been generally considered "Darfur."

That territory, as defined by Turco-Egyptian provincial boundaries dating to the 1870s and subsequently by Mahdist and Anglo-Egyptian provincial boundaries, has remained, after the independence of the Sudan in 1956, "Darfur," despite its most recent division into the "states" known today as Northern, Western, and Eastern Darfur. Whereas the borders of the Sudan, for reasons owing much to foreigners' desire to control and exploit the Nile, today extend into the forests of equatorial Africa, Darfur itself lies entirely in the vast sahelian belt of desert and semidesert, savanna and oasis. Climate has been the decisive factor in its history. The relative isolation of the territory has been both a boon and a bane, contributing to undoubted lack of development but also to one of the longest histories of independence from colonial rule.

Much of present-day Darfur is a plateau of about 650 to 1,000 meters above sea level.¹ The dominant geological feature of the region is the volcanic range of Jabal Marra, which runs north-south for about

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Figure 1. View of Jabal Marra. (Photograph by J.F.E. Bloss. Durham University Library, 888/10/20.)

70 miles near parallel 24 degrees east, reaching a height of some 3,000 meters and giving rise to a number of seasonal watercourses and many springs; to its northeast is Jabal Meidob, another volcanic formation that reaches a height of about 1,700 meters. Most of Darfur lies outside the Nile watershed. North of the Bahr al-Arab, Darfur's traditional southern border, there are no perennial streams. Agriculture has been mainly rain fed or practiced along and in the beds of seasonal watercourses, and grazing has been mainly migratory.

Climate has largely determined the patterns of settlement in Darfur. The climate is entirely tropical. Rainfall is heaviest in the southernmost parts of the territory (more than 700 mm per year), least in the north (75 mm or less); the rainy season is between May and September. In the otherwise waterless far northern desert, which accounts for about a third of Darfur's territory, the jizzu region of late rain-fed vegetation has been an important grazing area for the camels and sheep of migratory tribes across provincial (and international) borders; the declining frequency of the rains in modern times, and consequent failure of the jizzu, has had immense economic and political consequences. Exploitation of jizzu vegetation has been the seasonal resort of Zaghawa nomads who wintered in the well-fed scrublands to the south. Theirs has been called a "consumers' economy" because they herd and gather but do not produce; hardly almost beyond imagination, the Zaghawa are ultimately at the mercy of the annual rains: they accumulate wealth in the form of animals, to barter, as bride wealth, and for status.²

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To the south of the desert are dry acacia lands and savanna supporting agriculture near and in watercourses as well as seasonal grazing; the density of acacia increases southward as thorn-land flora merge with savanna grasses. The vast sandy *quz* region of stabilized dunes extending across central and southern Darfur and neighboring Kordofan supports a wide variety of vegetation, from grass to trees, and many food crops, both rain-fed and irrigated, from citrus trees to *dukhn* (bulrush millet, the staple grain), tobacco, and cotton, and even tomatoes and melons. The *quz*, with its greater rainfall and seasonal watercourses, thus provides ample scope for both permanent settlement and nomadic herding. Jabal Marra itself, while enjoying relatively abundant rainfall, has concomitantly suffered from the erosion of its soil and the terraced farming practiced there both exploited and defended against the action of seasonal rains. The richer agricultural lands to the south and west of Jabal Marra have a long history of human settlement, whereas the even wetter savannas farther south have for centuries supported large numbers of nomadic and seminomadic cattle-herding tribes.

The southern regions of western Darfur, including the area around Jabal Marra and in Dar Masalit, between the highlands and the border with Chad, are some of the richest agricultural lands. Although the streams are periodic, their beds supply water year-round, through wells and in areas cultivated after the floods. Major watercourses, notably the great Wadi Azum, leave in their floods' wake terraced banks with rich alluvial soil that is ideal for agriculture. Both *dukhn* and *dura* (*Sorghum vulgare* or the "great millet," the staple of much of the northern Sudan) are grown, and a wide variety of other crops, including notably maize, *bamia* (okra), onions, cotton, and tobacco, and some fruit trees, citrus, mangoes, and guavas. These lands, with the highest population density in Darfur outside the towns, have witnessed much of the early twenty-first-century devastation.

Because of its remoteness and the failure of the Anglo-Egyptian colonial regime to extend railway communications to Darfur, the region's agricultural products have never enjoyed a large export market: railhead in Kordofan was an arduous journey of four days or more by truck. Long-distance trade in animal products (skins and hides) and live animals, especially camels, however, predates colonial times, notably along the famous Darb al-Arba'in, the "Forty-Days Road" between Darfur and the Nile in upper Egypt. In its heyday, before the Turco-Egyptian

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Figure 2. The high interior of the mountain watershed, Jabal Marra, c. 1954. The difficult terrain has made Jabal Marra a refuge throughout Darfur history. (Photograph by J.F.E. Bloss. Durham University Library, 888/11/4.)

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invasion of the Sudan in 1820–1, Darfur's principal export along the Forty-Days Road was human: slaves taken from among the non-Muslim peoples of today's southern Sudan, Central African Republic, and Chad; the leading historian estimates that between 2,000 and 3,000 were on average sent to Egypt annually between 1750 and 1830. Other exports included ivory and rhinoceros horn, gum, and ostrich feathers.³ Manufactures and luxury goods were the main imports exchanged in this lucrative trade, organization and control of which was an important factor in the rise of the Fur state.

The climate of what is now Darfur underwent important changes long before the problem of desertification was understood. Copious archeological evidence supports the view that the desert regions supported permanent populations in ancient times, and the natural ranges of various large mammals have only recently contracted far southward, a process owing at least as much to extermination through hunting, however, as to climate change.⁴ The extent to which those changes were episodic or gradual and continuous is debated, but not the fact that they accelerated during the twentieth century and were exacerbated at least in part by human pressure on the ecosystem.

Estimates of Darfur's population, either now or for almost any time in the past, are subject to dispute. The vast area; transient patterns of some of its peoples, both within and across local and international boundaries; suspicion of census takers and the use to which their findings might be put – these common problems have been both admitted and exploited by successive regimes to misrepresent the population or one or another of its components. A British estimate in 1898 was 1.5 million; another, in 1906, was 270,000; a third, in 1922, purported to recall a population in 1918 (two years after the Anglo-Egyptian annexation) of 274,000 but in 1921 of 524,000. Reports for both 1930 and 1936 list the total as 715,000. A survey published in 1948 lists 734,000, the Annual Report for 1948 "over 900,000," and a medical report of the same year lists 950,000. A document issued by the Sudan Agency in Cairo in 1950 estimated 875,000. The first scientific census of the Sudan gave an official figure in December 1955, on the eve of independence, of 1,329,000. There has been no national census since then. But the Sudanese government's *Almanac* for 1963 gives, without explanation, a figure of 1.62 million, some 18 percent higher than its official figure of two years earlier. A much-criticized

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census of 1973 enumerated 2.18 million. The Bank of Sudan counted 3,094,000 in 1983, and a leading expert estimated 3.2 million in 1989.⁵ Estimates today hover around six million, which, if accurate, would mean that the population increased four-fold during the half century of independence.

Other than the Sahara, there are no geographical barriers to migration into and out of Darfur. The effect has been constant movement of people impelled by events elsewhere to move into the territory or reacting to local changes by moving within or out of it. Even before the upheavals of the past twenty years, this resulted in an ethnographic map of great complexity, with overlays and dispossessions, mass movements and gradual infiltrations, over a long period of time. Several general trends have been identified: from east to west, that is from the Nile valley westward into Kordofan and Darfur; from the northwest; and from West Africa, especially in more recent times.⁶

Although the same caveats that apply to estimates of Darfur's population as a whole must be recalled when assessing its ethnic makeup, some broad outlines are clear. Jabal Marra marks a rough divide between the predominantly Arab (to the east) and non-Arab populations. The eponymous Fur are an African people looking to Jabal Marra as an ancestral home but whose remoter origins are uncertain. Their language, unrelated to Arabic, is unique in the Sudan, and their separate ethnic identity has withstood the assimilative effects of Nilotic Sudanese culture. The Fur are today divided into three main sections, the Tamurkwa, Kunjara, and Karakirit, which in turn are divided into many other groups, the origins and significance of whose titles are not entirely clear.⁷ The Fur royal family came from the Keira, a clan of the Kunjara.

The westernmost lands of Dar Masalit and Dar Qimr take their names from other non-Arab peoples with their own languages, of whom others still, of greater or lesser antiquity in Darfur, are the Berti, near Umm Kadada on the road to Kordofan, the Tunjur, the Daju, and the now Arabicized Birgid. In the far northern desert, the principal tribes are the Zayyadiyya and Zaghawa; the region has also been regularly traversed by jizzu-seeking Kababish Arabs, whose homeland is in northern Kordofan, and by the Meidob, whose Nubian language attests to origins in the Nile valley. Although it is reasonable to assume that these peoples predate the Arabs in Darfur, in at least some cases, evidence