

## 5 Truths About Darfur

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KOU KOU ANGARANA, Chad

Heard all you need to know about Darfur? Think again. Three years after a government-backed militia began fighting rebels and residents in this region of western Sudan, much of the conventional wisdom surrounding the conflict -- including the religious, ethnic and economic factors that drive it -- fails to match the realities on the ground. Tens of thousands have died and some 2.5 million have been displaced, with no end to the conflict in sight. Here are five truths to challenge the most common misconceptions about Darfur:

### *1 Nearly everyone is Muslim*

Early in the conflict, I was traveling through the desert expanses of rebel-held Darfur when, amid decapitated huts and dead livestock, our SUV roared up to an abandoned green and white mosque, riddled with bullets, its windows shattered.

In my travels, I've seen destroyed mosques all over Darfur. The few men left in the villages shared the same story: As government Antonov jets dropped bombs, Janjaweed militia members rode in on horseback and attacked the town's mosque -- usually the largest structure in town. The strange thing, they said, was that the attackers were Muslim, too. Darfur is home to some of Sudan's most devout Muslims, in a country where 65 percent of the population practices Islam, the official state religion.

A long-running but recently pacified war between Sudan's north and south did have religious undertones, with the Islamic Arab-dominated government fighting southern Christian and animist African rebels over political power, oil and, in part, religion.

"But it's totally different in Darfur," said Mathina Mydin, a Malaysian nurse who worked in a clinic on the outskirts of Nyala, the capital of South Darfur. "As a Muslim myself, I wanted to bring the sides together under Islam. But I quickly realized this war had nothing to do with religion."

### *2 Everyone is black*

Although the conflict has also been framed as a battle between Arabs and black Africans, everyone in Darfur appears dark-skinned, at least by the usual American standards. The true division in Darfur is between ethnic groups, split between herders and farmers. Each tribe gives itself the label of "African" or "Arab" based on what language its members speak and whether they work the soil or herd livestock. Also, if they attain a certain level of wealth, they call themselves Arab.

Sudan melds African and Arab identities. As Arabs began to dominate the government in the past century and gave jobs to members of Arab tribes, being Arab became a political advantage; some tribes adopted that label regardless of their ethnic affiliation. More recently, rebels have described themselves as Africans fighting an Arab government. Ethnic slurs used by both sides in recent atrocities have riven communities that once lived together and intermarried.

"Black Americans who come to Darfur always say, 'So where are the Arabs? Why do all these people look black?' " said Mahjoub Mohamed Saleh, editor of Sudan's independent Al-Ayam newspaper. "The bottom line is that tribes have intermarried forever in Darfur. Men even have one so-called Arab wife and one so-called African. Tribes started labeling themselves this way several decades ago for political reasons. Who knows what the real bloodlines are in Darfur?"

### ***3 It's all about politics***

Although analysts have emphasized the racial and ethnic aspects of the conflict in Darfur, a long-running political battle between Sudanese President Omar Hassan Bashir and radical Islamic cleric Hassan al-Turabi may be more relevant.

A charismatic college professor and former speaker of parliament, Turabi has long been one of Bashir's main political rivals and an influential figure in Sudan. He has been fingered as an extremist; before the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks Turabi often referred to Osama bin Laden as a hero. More recently, the United Nations and human rights experts have accused Turabi of backing one of Darfur's key rebel groups, the Justice and Equality Movement, in which some of his top former students are leaders.

Because of his clashes with Bashir, Turabi is usually under house arrest and holds forth in his spacious Khartoum villa for small crowds of followers and journalists. But diplomats say he still mentors rebels seeking to overthrow the government.

"Darfur is simply the battlefield for a power struggle over Khartoum," said Ghazi Suleiman, a Sudanese human rights lawyer. "That's why the government hit back so hard. They saw Turabi's hand, and they want to stay in control of Sudan at any cost."

### ***4 This conflict is international***

China and Chad have played key roles in the Darfur conflict.

In 1990, Chad's Idriss Deby came to power by launching a military blitzkrieg from Darfur and overthrowing President Hissan Habre. Deby hails from the elite Zaghawa tribe, which makes up one of the Darfur rebel groups trying to topple the government. So when the conflict broke out, Deby had to decide whether to support Sudan or his tribe. He eventually chose his tribe.

Now the Sudanese rebels have bases in Chad; I interviewed them in towns full of Darfurians who tried to escape the fighting. Meanwhile, Khartoum is accused of supporting Chad's anti-Deby rebels, who have a military camp in West Darfur. (Sudan's government denies the allegations.) Last week, bands of Chadian rebels nearly took over the capital, N'Djamena. When captured, some of the rebels were carrying Sudanese identification.

Meanwhile, Sudan is China's fourth-biggest supplier of imported oil, and that relationship carries benefits. China, which holds veto power in the U.N. Security Council, has said it will stand by Sudan against U.S. efforts to slap sanctions on the country and in the battle to force Sudan to replace the African Union peacekeepers with a larger U.N. presence. China has built highways and factories in Khartoum, even erecting the Friendship Conference Hall, the city's largest public meeting place.

### ***5 The "genocide" label made it worse***

Many of the world's governments have drawn the line at labeling Darfur as genocide. Some call the conflict a case of ethnic cleansing, and others have described it as a government going too far in trying to put down a rebellion.

But in September 2004, then-Secretary of State Colin L. Powell referred to the conflict as a "genocide." Rather than spurring greater international action, that label only seems to have strengthened Sudan's rebels; they believe they don't need to negotiate with the government and think they will have U.S. support when they commit attacks. Peace talks have broken down seven times, partly because the rebel groups have walked out of negotiations. And Sudan's government has used the genocide label to market itself in the Middle East as another victim of America's anti-Arab and anti-Islamic policies.

Perhaps most counterproductive, the United States has failed to follow up with meaningful action. "The word 'genocide' was not an action word; it was a responsibility word," Charles R. Snyder, the State Department's senior representative on Sudan, told me in late 2004. "There was an ethical and moral obligation, and saying it underscored how seriously we took this." The Bush administration's recent idea of sending several hundred NATO advisers to support African Union peacekeepers falls short of what many advocates had hoped for.

"We called it a genocide and then we wine and dine the architects of the conflict by working with them on counterterrorism and on peace in the south," said Ted Dagne, an Africa expert for the Congressional Research Service. "I wish I knew a way to improve the situation there. But it's only getting worse."

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