

Darfur Singer Seeks Peace, Unity in Sudan

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CAIRO, Egypt - Darfur burst into the news as a land of Arab-on-African violence, but a singer from the troubled region in Sudan says the two communities are as inextricably intertwined as the music they share, a distinctive blend of Arab tunes and African rhythms.

"We come together, all the tribes, in one word," Omar Ihsas sang in Arabic at a weekend music festival in Cairo that drew Egyptians and scores of the Sudanese who make their home here.

The lyrics were from one of his best known songs, "Darfur, our homeland," written 10 years ago, when the trouble was only beginning in the region.

"If there was attention to what I sang more than 10 years ago from the people and tribes of Darfur, and even from the government, the evil would have been stopped," Ihsas said in an interview.

Sudanese of Arab and African descent have long clashed over resources in one of Sudan's least developed regions, where drought and desert creep have shrunk grazing areas. In February 2003, two ethnic African rebel groups took up arms, saying the government, seen as controlled by Sudan's Arab elite, was marginalizing the region. Human rights groups, the U.S. Congress and U.N. officials accuse the government of responding by backing a scorched earth policy carried out by Arab militias on camel back - the feared Janjaweed.

Now, the United Nations calls the situation in Darfur the worst humanitarian crisis in the world, with over 300,000 people killed and 1 million people displaced.

Ihsas, who lives in the Sudanese capital Khartoum, has seen the devastation himself. Before traveling to Cairo to headline the music festival, he and his band "Messenger of Peace" visited a displaced persons' camp in el-Fasher, capital of North Darfur, one of the three states that make up the region.

"The women came to me saying: 'You sing of peace. How will it come while we are sitting here?'" he recalled.

"The village is their 'kingdom,' and the first thing for people to feel safe is for them to return to their villages," Ihsas said.

While in Darfur, he made a video for one of his songs, filming in the rainy season when the arid region's valleys are filled with water and its pastures green. The video will allow people to "see the bright side of Darfur," he said.

Ihsas, born 45 years ago in Nyala, the capital of South Darfur, said the tribes in Darfur would ultimately have to share the land. His government has complained that the international community is meddling in the region now, but Ihsas said the neglect of Darfur's problems led to interference from outside.

"Let's not say others made it worse," he said. "If you don't act, you give others the chance to interfere."

At the end of June, the U.N. Security Council gave the Sudanese government 30 days to disarm the Janjaweed. If the government does not comply with U.N. demands, it could face economic and diplomatic penalties.

Over the weekend, about 140 Rwandan soldiers arrived in Darfur to protect unarmed military observers monitoring a four-month cease-fire between Sudanese government forces and rebels. The Rwandans were the first contingent of a 300-member African Union protection force Sudan was pressed to allow into Darfur.

Ihsas has lived in Khartoum since 1982. There, he heads a community service association that helps Darfurians living in the capital.

He calls his music "Sudanese music from the region of Darfur," declining to refer to it as "Darfurian," and only when pressed identifies his origins in the Barnow and Tangor tribes, which he refers to as "so-called African tribes."

"I have a nationalistic perspective and I mention all the tribes. I am an artist, this is a tribe in itself," said Ihsas, who can sing in dialects from all over Sudan.

The heavy weight of war, politics and identity doesn't keep him from being an engaging and animated performer.

During rehearsals over the weekend, the six-foot, six inch (nearly 2-meter) Ihsas's head nearly touched the ceiling of a Cairo recording studio as he danced to one of his hits.

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