

# An Overview of the Darfur Crisis in Sudan

## Sudan's Modern History as a State

Covering an area of one million square miles, Sudan is the largest country in Africa, located in the northeast just south of Egypt. Around 200 different languages and dialects are used by the 33 million Sudanese people. The country has been in conflict even before it became a nation state in 1956.

Darfur was annexed in 1916 to the Anglo-Egyptian territory by the British during World War I. Since the territory was not strategic to them, it remained largely ignored, albeit with a local populace that was increasingly frustrated, until the 1950s.

In 1955, a conflict between the north and south of the country evolved into an ongoing civil war between the government in the North and the Anyanaya Forces in the South who were seeking independence.

The war ended in 1972 with an agreement that granted the South qualified autonomy. But conflict resumed in the 1980s among charges of discrimination by the Arab government in Khartoum against the Christian and Animist south.

In 1983, the government dominated by northern Arabs tried to impose Islamic Sharia law across Sudan, even in areas where the majority is not Muslim. This exacerbated a rebellion that had begun in the south, which is inhabited by black African Christians and those who practiced traditional religions.

In 2005, after long negotiations, a peace agreement was signed between the government in Khartoum and the rebels in the South. Key provisions of the agreement are that both sides will unify into 39,000-strong force if the south does not secede after six years. The South will have autonomy for six years followed by a referendum for secession. Sudan's vast oil wealth will be shared 50:50. However, the peace agreement between the North and South does not solve the ongoing crisis in the Darfur region.



## Key Players in the Current Crisis

- Khartoum Government
  - Omar al Bashir: Takes power in a coup in 1989
- Darfur Rebel Groups
  - Sudanese Liberation Movement/Army (SLM/A)
    - Formerly Darfur Liberation Front (DLF)
  - Justice and Equality Movement (JEM)
- Janjaweed
  - Popular Defense Force (PDF)

## The 2003 Rebellion

Darfur, which means land of the Fur, has also faced many years of tension over land and grazing rights between nomadic peoples, and farmers from the Fur, Massaleet and Zagawa communities. In early 2003, two loosely allied rebel groups began a rebellion in Darfur, Sudan calling for the redress of social and economic grievances and demanding greater political power.

## **Key Rebel Movements...**

The Justice for Equality Movement (Jem) and the larger Sudan Liberation Army (SLA) - have very different ideological backgrounds although they have the same agenda: "an end to the region's chronic economic and political marginalization; and protection for their communities against attacks by armed nomadic groups."

The SLA has its roots in unrest that began in Darfur 17 years ago, when in 1987 after a devastating famine, an Arab alliance was established, with official support, to oppose the African farming communities of the Fur, Zagawa and Masalit. The government quietly armed groups who self-identified as Arab, while at the same time disarming those who self-identified as African. The SLA drew their first recruits from Fur self-defense militia that arose as the conflict of 1987 - 1989 spread.

The JEM group has a more convoluted history. The 1989 coup was backed by the National Islamic Front of Islamist leader Hassan al-Turabi. Mr. Turabi became a leading figure of the new government and was seen as the power behind the throne. In 1991 he organized an Arab Popular and Islamic Conference and became its secretary-general. What was significant however, was that with this platform Mr. Turabi went out of his way to offer African Muslims (that is, persons who are Muslim but self-identify as being of African rather than Arab ancestry) from peripheral regions of Sudan, like Darfur, a means of obtaining a share of power.

In 1999 Mr. Turabi was involved in a showdown with President al-Bashir, when he introduced a bill into the national assembly reducing the powers of the presidency. Mr. Bashir reacted by dissolving the assembly and declaring a state of emergency. He also purged Mr. Turabi's supporters from the machinery of government. It was the African Muslims from Darfur who were removed at this time who went on to found JEM.

## **The Sudanese Government Reacts—The Janjaweed Connection**

The Sudanese authorities saw the rebellion in Darfur as a threat to the viability of the entire country, fearing other neglected regions would similarly rise up and demand larger degrees of autonomy. In retaliation, the government launched a military and police campaign in Darfur and more than 2 million people had to flee their homes. [Human Rights Watch \(HRW\)](#) has reported that "instead of fighting the rebels, the government forces have waged a systematic campaign against unarmed civilians belonging to the same ethnic groups as the rebel groups — mainly the Fur, Masaalit and Zaghawa." An Arab militia known as the Janjaweed ("devils on horseback" have joined forces with the Sudanese government as a counterinsurgency force.

Many Darfurians reported of government aircraft bombing villages, after which the Arab Janjaweed militia would ride in to slaughter, rape and steal. The government admits mobilizing "self-defense militias," but denies links to the Janjaweed.

## **Calling for World Action to End the Darfur Crisis**

Many groups are focusing on the crisis in Darfur in an attempt to attract international attention and action. Many of these groups have compiled statistics and background information on the situation in Sudan to help those new to this complicated issue better understand the forces at play. The links provided below will lead you to more information on Darfur.

### **Human Rights Watch: Sudan**

A collection of the group's studies and position papers on the crisis in Darfur.

<http://hrw.org/doc?t=africa&c=darfur>

### **UN Sudan Information Gateway**

The official UN Web site on Sudan contains report and information on Sudan's north/south peace process and the crisis in Darfur.

<http://www.unsudanig.org/>