

Who can fill the Protection Gaps? The Situation on the Dafur Ground — Report and Photographs

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Darfur, a region to the west of the country Sudan is witnessing the tragic results of a Government sponsored campaign of ethnic violence, which has left thousands dead and hundreds of thousands homeless. Neighbouring Chad is home to over 100,000 Western Sudanese refugees, while the Internally Displaced Persons (IDP's) in Darfur number around 600,000. Playing the numbers game in this remote, inaccessible area roughly the size of France is dangerous, but the latest UN estimates, constantly being revised upwards, suggest that around 1.2 million people are now directly affected by the violence.

This conflict has its roots in the long-standing hostility between African pastoralists and tribes of nomadic Arabic horsemen. The Africans have long blamed the Government for turning a blind eye to abusive Arab behaviour over the years. This has involved looting villages, stealing cattle, seizing land as well as rape, murder and the occasional kidnapping of children. Unlike the situation in the south, this is not a Christian versus Muslim schism as all parties here are Islamic, and it has led many black Africans to believe that the Khartoum Government treats them, at best, as second class citizens. The Sudanese Liberation Army (SLM) and the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM) grew out of this sense of discrimination and have waged guerrilla campaigns against Government installations, usually originating from their mountain bases.

Stoics by nature, most of the African farmers simply want to get on with their lives and are disinclined towards this kind of militancy. The on-going abuses they had traditionally suffered were shocking but relatively contained; the flashpoints usually seasonal and focusing on established nomadic migratory routes. Additionally there were mechanisms, however flimsy, for the resolution of such disputes at local level. In some cases African farmer and Arab herdsman were friends and neighbours, not united by lifestyle for sure, but by a common faith and by their relative poverty.

The universal Government line is spouted unceasingly from Khartoum to the most remote military and administrative outposts in Darfur: they are the honest brokers, trying to maintain order amongst the local population in face of terrorist attacks from militant rebels. Yet out of a total population of around 6 million, at least 700,000 Darfur residents are now living in camps or have fled to villages to stay with families or friends. Skirmishes between the Government troops and the SLA/JEM cannot begin to explain this level of displacement. Only an understanding of the changing relationship between Khartoum and the Arab militia, who have come to be known as the Janjaweed, can do this.

MY IMPRESSIONS ON THE GROUND

After a couple of days in Khartoum I board the aircraft to Al Fashir, the capital of North Darfur. I am working for an international aid organisation as the Protection Coordinator for

Dafur. My task is to meet people, talk with them, investigate incidents, write reports and develop reports into action plans for effective protection of internally displaced persons (IDPs) and other conflict-affected persons.

The flying weather is good as the aircraft crosses the desert plains stopping briefly at El Obeid, a sprawling town in the North Kordofan state dominated by a monstrous oil refinery. I can see the symmetrical plots of land on which the houses of clay and straw brick stand. My colleague Mayen and our driver James wait for me at the airport. Mayen was born in South Sudan, but moved to Dafur 15 years ago to work as a teacher and youth worker in the village Kerumba in the North. James is originally from Nyala and has been driving trucks and taxis since he obtained his driving licence.

Departing the airport, we are winding down the dusty roads into Tawilla town and pass several military checkpoints. On February 26th 2004, the school in Tawilla was raided by the Janjaweed. Forty two girls and women, students and teachers, were systematically beaten and gang-raped. This incident was the catalyst in setting up the Maska IPD camp at Al Fashir. There are now 46,000 people here and conditions are primitive, the only cover from the heat which reaches upwards of 120 degrees being flimsy shelters made out of old boxes, twigs and cloth and the thin trees and shrubs which grow wild. The inhabitants are in the process of being relocated to a new camp at Abushok, which could grow in size to up to 79,000.

Maska is the most unbearably hot place I have ever been. I smell the air burning my nostrils and feel the front of my eyeballs drying out, a strange sensation and one that necessitates constant blinking. The aid agencies are working wonders in the face of this on-going crisis, but it's evident that resources are painfully stretched. Malnourished hordes of people descend on us, begging for food. Their stories are uniform, all telling of atrocities perpetuated on them by the Janjaweed, encouraged or in some cases assisted by Government troops.

I hear constant talk about donkeys, and given the plight of the people it's difficult to take this seriously until I realise how important these animals are. They help cultivate the land and are the main means of transport. They were used by families to flee from the burning villages and without them hundreds of thousands of people might be dead by now, through trying to cross the desert on foot. Many donkeys have perished due to lack of food and grazing space. Crucially, until they are replaced people will simply not be able to return to their homelands.

But the most ominous problem is the rainy season that started at the end of May. Camps have become stagnant pools of disease. Moreover, the opportunity for the displaced farmers to plant crops has passed, thus precipitating an on-going food shortage situation that has developed into full famine.

I enter the tent that houses the maternity unit in Maska camp which saw over four hundred and fifty women in August and September 2004. Inside it is equipped with a table on which sit two bottles of medicine, two flimsy cots and an old set of bathroom scales with a football going into a net emblazoned on them. The female staff is working here in a voluntary capacity, like Kaltom Joseph Abraham, the midwife who lives locally. On her way home a few days ago she was attacked and beaten by two Janjaweed and her midwifery kit was taken.

In the new camp at Abushok, where IDP's are providing more latrines, water pumps and crucially, plastic tented sheeting, we talk to Muhammad Adam Sulena and his family. His wife, obviously sick, lies half-asleep, groaning, shivering and feverish in the shade. His two children Osina (4) and baby Mabella (1) are also ill. The former has a chest infection and the later has suffered from diarrhoea for four days. Muhammad tells me that he worked as a driver in his home village of Derjelo. He liked his life there and would return immediately if security and resources permitted. However, he regards the Janjaweed and the Government as conspirators, although he says the local police protecting the camp make him feel safer.

Tales of rape and sexual abuse are legion at Abushok. The women are confused as there is no precedent for what they have suffered. Understandably few of them are willing to talk directly about such humiliations, even more so because as Muslims they feel burdened with a terrible sense of displaced shame.

Khadija Osman Abdullah is an articulate nineteen year old student. She seems as bewildered as everyone else by recent events. When her village was attacked in June 2004, she and her sisters fled without their parents, who elected to stay on the farm. The house was ransacked then burned to the ground and the cattle were stolen. Almost miraculously, news came through a few days ago, that her parents are unharmed and still in the village but urge them not to return.

She explains the circumstances of her own departure: 'When they came at first, it was with machine guns. They shot a few of our men dead. Then they realized that we had no weapons and so they came back the second time with whips, which they used on us.'

The perversity in this bizarre world is that young women like Khadija are seen as the lucky ones; fortunate to have avoided the sexual abuse meted out to many of their peers.

The long drive out to Kutum, north of Al Fashir, provides respite as I try to come to terms with what we have witnessed. Going over the desert in the Land Cruiser is an amazing experience, with no roads and any tracks established in the sand likely to soon be blown away by the winds. The orange sands appear as if you could scoop them up and just add water to make a fizzy drink. You see the occasional Oshar plant, a lime green creation, incongruously succulent looking. Apart from the harsh desert shrub, it's the only vegetation growing out here.

As beautiful as it looks from my vantage point, I see how harsh life has been for the IDP's who have made the trek into the camps. Corpses of donkeys litter the desert routes, and with land animals thin on the ground it's left to the vultures, aided by the remorseless sun, to make an impression on their remains.

Heading into Kutuk town we pass an army checkpoint where a kid who should be in school swaggers up to us, John Wayne style. He is touting an AK 47 Assault rifle. I catch his eye and for a brief second I think that I see in them the shamed child who knows that he's been caught showing off in front of adults. Then the arrogance kicks back in and his face sets in surly pout as I show him my documents, which he cannot understand.

We pass the hospital, which has had its tower roof blown off by a bomb from a Government plane. It seems to confirm what many people in the IDP camps have told us about the pattern of violence against them: first the Government planes bombed their villages

from the sky, then a mixture of Army troops and trigger-happy Janjaweed came in Land Cruisers. The third wave, exclusively Janjaweed on horseback and camel then plundered the villages; shooting, raping and then burning everything behind them.

We stop at the local Army commander's Headquarters where there are an array of photographs on the wall, although I can see that a number that have been removed. I learn that the missing ones feature a former minister of State for Education who is now a leader in the SLA.

The Commissioner, Abdul Bagi Mustafa Mohammed proves to be an avuncular host and local aid staff attest that he is both positive and well liked. A mischievous little bear of a man, his response to this overwhelming situation is levity.

The same spiel, portraying the Government forces as essentially benign and neutral is trotted out, but without much conviction. The Commissioner becomes somewhat coy when explaining the hospital roof, conceding that it was an error but an inevitable consequence of the war against the rebels. It's a visit which proves a curious but enlightening diversion.

When we get to the IPD camp at Kassab we speak to a group of children. Awadia (10) is clad in a purple dress with a white shawl. She has a serene but slightly shy air. Her cousin El Sadiq (13) looking very much like a young Mohammed Ali, wears a ragged white shirt and long torn trousers. His pal Mubarak (9) looks a wee fly boy, the sort of kid who would tell you that he'd look after your camel for fifty pence. They all have come from the Boa area north of Kutum.

Sadiq was having a normal day, walking home from school (which takes him one and a half hours) when he heard the gun shots and saw people fleeing the village. He turned on his heels and ran. A man taking flight just in front of him was shot in the back and fell dead on the spot.

At this point we are interrupted by some indignant adults who have gathered round; a woman shows us a bullet wound on her arm, a man rolls up his robes to reveal gunshot entrance and exit wounds just below the knee. In a distressing cacophony, people start talking of murdered family members, many sobbing at the memory.

Almost chillingly composed, Sadiq continues his story, telling us that the fleeing Africans reassembled when they were sure that their pursuers had given up the chase and gone back to loot the village. They headed for some caves they knew which were near wells, where they holed up with water for three days. Hoping that horsemen had by then moved on, they moved into the desert where they walked in the blinding sun for a further two days until they found the IDP camp. Mubarak then produces a big wad of burned cash he has collected from some of the destroyed villages.

The Janjaweed refer to themselves as Fursan (heroes), but my western romanticised notion of nomadic horsemen as swashbuckling Arabian Knights figures is by now well and truly inverted. The militarised wing of these nomads are at best thieves, bullies and cowards, entering unarmed villages with automatic weapons after their inhabitants have been bombed into terror by Government planes on the pretence of flushing out rebels. At worse they are murderers, rapists, kidnappers, and paedophiles and a shared religion seems to be no barrier to their brutal racist violence.

The plane to take us to El Geneina, the capital of the West Darfur region, and only forty-five minutes from the Chad border is late after experiencing technical difficulties. When we arrive my immediate impression is that this is a frontier town, and inherently far more lawless than Al Fashir. There are many soldiers garrisoned here who appear to be undisciplined, and sure enough, stories of Army drunkenness on homebrew and imported beer from Chad abound locally. Sharia law evidently does not extend to the military here.

Whereas in North Darfur I saw little sign of the Janajweed, in El Geneina they are present everywhere; openly cheek-by-jowl with the soldiers and often appearing to be part of the same command structure. As darkness falls and aid agencies and IDP camps observe the curfew, the night rings with the sound of gunfire: the drunken horseplay of the soldiers and Arab militiamen.

As nomads, the Janjaweed have no inclination to settle and farm the land they have stolen. Their *modus operandi* is simple; loot the villages, burn them down and move on. But the cruel irony for all Darfur is that with no one left to do the farming, now there is no food available in the markets. The main source is the aid deliveries to the camps and population centres, thus rendering them even more vulnerable to attack.

In terms of freedom of movement for the aid workers, things have improved. The Government's Humanitarian Affairs Commission has issued ID Travel Cards which enable aid workers to travel whenever, and basically wherever, they wish. However, there is a lack of security for international and national aid agency staff.

In June 2004, a female aid worker travelling in her car stopped at 10:00 in the full market of Nyala, the capital of South Darfur. She opened her car window and a man approached and hit her in her face. This happened at full day light and in the market. Weeks later, another female expatriate was walking along the street from her office to her guesthouse. It was in the evening and she was using a highly frequented street. According to her account, three young Sudanese men approached her, pushed her into a corner, assaulted her sexually and said to her: "This is Sudan, Americans leave!"

Cases in which expatriate and national agency staff has been arrested, held in a police station for investigation are relatively frequent. Reasons for these arrests and investigations appear to be minor, such as taking photos of "sensitive" buildings or being physically present in a location in which a crime has happened.

Security police in civilian clothing, easily recognizable through their sunglasses, fancy shirts and new motorcycles, are literally everywhere and relief agencies have national staff working for the Sudanese military intelligence. Adding to this is the Nyala's Police Chief's statement in July 2004: "NGOs and their aid workers are all spies against us."

Our Land Cruiser bounces through the desert track across the rocky and scrub-laden terrain towards the town of Sissi. The work of the Janjaweed is evident as we pass through village after village, all burned out and deserted; first Majmara, where unwanted goods lay strewn around. It's the same story in the larger settlement of Mornei, once busy, now a charred, eerie ghost town.

At the Sissi camp we meet Chief Khamis Abbaker Mursal, an ex-weightlifting champion who competed in the Montreal Olympics. Though still an imposing figure, months of

subsistence living have reduced his frame. He introduces us to two mothers who sit with coughing, vomiting infants. They are Aysha, who cradles daughter Anima (3) and Fatuma, who tends to baby Marwa (13 months). They are the first and second wives of Abbas Adam Ahmed, a farmer from the Nora area.

Abbas lost his brother, who along with his son, was murdered in the attack on their village. ‘That’s why we immediately decided to take the children away and seek refuge. We cannot stay in the camp all the time but when we leave we are abused and threatened by the Arabs who are armed. The military say there’s nothing they can do but report it to a higher authority. We want to go back but we cannot now say that we ever will.’

Back in Sissi town we visit a café in the market place. IDP’s from the Riad camp Fadul (22) and his pals Mohammed Adam Yahya (19) Arif Asi Mohammed (20) and Asam Adam Aboolah (21) all work in the café, receiving the wages of one person from the proprietor. They fled from the Sirba area, which is around sixty miles away and they now stay in the camp with their families. “We get harassed on a daily basis by people in uniform. They used to be herders, we know who they are, but the Government have given them guns and uniforms and told them to hurt the blacks.”

Mohammed tells us that the day before last another friend who works with them was on his way home when they were stopped by Janjaweed. The friend was hit in the mouth with a rifle butt and had several teeth knocked out and is still too ill to go into work. These boys are bright and brave, trying every day to help support their families, but they are obviously scared and look furtively outside to ensure that no Janjaweed approach as they recount their tales. “We cannot go back to Sirba until the Janjaweed are disarmed.”

Believing that fewer people in the camps can improve the international community’s view of the situation in Darfur, the Sudanese Government has adopted a policy of promoting the return of displaced peoples to their communities. It has been attempting to persuade the displaced peoples of Darfur to return home by telling that the security situation has changed and that their villages are now safe.

Reports appeared that bribes are being offered to village chiefs in exchange for telling their people to go back home. In some instances, Sudanese officials have lured home displaced people — many of whom have received little or no assistance in the camps — with promises of a generous return package. One reason why the displaced have been unwilling to accept the Government’s assurances is that the security situation is weak and dangerous around the camps where they have sought sanctuary.

While there has been little violence in the camps themselves, camp residents have been the subject of frequent attacks when they have dared to venture out into the surrounding areas. In particular, an alarming number of women have been assaulted and raped by Janjaweed fighters when they have left the camps to plant crops or gather firewood.

Women continue to feel reluctant to report attacks and rape to the police. Under Sudanese law, a woman who has been raped needs two men or four women to witness the rape in order to have a case in court. Women and their families do not see much sense in reporting attacks and sexual assault on them, particularly as often medical and psycho-social services are either not being provided for free to them as IDPs or because there are no such services available. In addition to this, in some camps, the police have been instructed not to take reports of alleged

rape and therewith stopped giving victims a referral document so they can receive immediate medical attention.

This is one of many protection needs, which international organisations and aid agencies try to meet, but undenied access to the people and the lack of security is the biggest obstacle for the humanitarians in providing adequate response and help save thousands of lives. One example, which I and my colleagues have personally been affected by, was in late August 2004. A murder of a local staff member of a well-known US-NGO as happened in Kalma camp, just ten minutes drive away from Nyala town. The result was that the local authorities, i.e. the Government's Humanitarian Affairs Commission (HAC) and Police Forces, have restricted access for relief agencies working in Kalma Camp for several days.

The denied access led to a terrible gap in the protection of people's needs and rights, such as the right to medical treatment, food, water and the free and informed choice to return or relocate.

Since my arrival to Sudan in July 2004, my work as Protection Coordinator has developed into the most frustrating work I have ever done. I meet people, I talk with them, I try to investigate incidents, I write reports and together with other Protection Officers I develop action plans for the effective protection of the internally displaced persons. But international aid agencies operating in Sudan are in a position of having to accept the "little pieces" they are being allowed by the government and authorities. They do not have a sufficiently strong ground to categorically reject any denied access to camps and press for the full scale of their humanitarian mission.

Examples of failed protection such as in Kalma Camp continue to repeat themselves all over in Dafur and I cannot see the end of it.

PHOTOGRAPHS FROM DARFUR, SUDAN



Figure 1: Kalma Camp flooding.



Figure 2: Kaloma Camp in Flood.



Figure 3: Belongings, Kalma Camp.



Figure 4: A midwife.



Figure 5: Children in Sissi Camp.



Figure 6: Mother with babies in S # 621.



Figure 7: Mother with Children, Ka # 259.



Figure 8: An old man in Abushok Camp.



Figure 9: Ayaisha with children.



Figure 11: Market in Sissi Town.



Figure 12: Andjela with two women and a child.



Figure 13: Andjela with an infant.



Figure 14: Andjela with Office Coordinator.



Figure 15: Waiting for Water.