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Unsimplifying Darfur

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Much of the debate about genocide in Darfur appears woefully misinformed about the complex realities of the crisis, in particular its growing imbrication with the conflict in neighboring Chad. The parallel with Rwanda is limited, even though, in both cases, the international community has failed utterly to stop the atrocities committed against innocent civilians. No prevention strategy is likely to succeed unless cross-border raids from Chad into Darfur and vice versa are stopped, and this will not happen as long as the Sudanese and Chadian authorities are playing one faction off against another in what looks increasingly like a proxy war. Genocide should not be seen as the sole touchstone for intervention. War crimes, ethnic cleansing, and atrocity crimes, to name only some of the horrors illustrated by the Darfur tragedy, provide ample justification, moral and political, for the international community to take concerted action to protect civilian lives. The most urgent task facing the international community is not to strive for a consensus about genocide but to frame an effective prevention strategy. For this to happen, immediate attention must be paid to the crisis in Chad, which could unleash renewed cross-border violence, destabilize the Deby regime in Ndjamena, and ultimately play into the hands of Khartoum.

There is no sign of an early end to Darfur's agonies. If anything, the growing interconnection between insurgents in the Western Sudan and their allies in Chad has made a viable solution all the more remote.¹ Since February 2003, when Arab–African tensions erupted into a full-scale confrontation, anywhere from 200,000 to 400,000 have perished in the course of the violence unleashed by Khartoum-backed militias (Janjaweds) upon civilians, to which must be added 1.8 million displaced in Darfur and 200,000 inside Chad. Dozens of villages in that country, north and south of the strategic border town of Adré, have been the targets of murderous cross-border raids mounted by Arab militias. The litany of crimes committed by the “evil horsemen”—the literal meaning of “Janjaweed”—ranges from the killing and maiming of civilians to rape and abduction, and from the burning down of houses and shelters to the destruction of farmland and the theft of cattle. In the climate of insecurity spreading across the hundreds of kilometers of borderlands, the capacity of humanitarian non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to reach the growing population of refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) whose lives are at risk is becoming ever more limited.

The political risks and the costs in human lives are not limited to Darfur. In southern Sudan, the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) of 9 January 2005, intended to bring to an end the long simmering North–South civil war, is gravely imperiled. And the prospects of widening factional violence in Chad loom increasingly large on the horizon. As Nicholas Kristof has correctly observed, “Chad may collapse into civil war, chaos and banditry, like Darfur itself but on a much larger scale.”² With an ever-greater number of Chadian and Darfurian Africans seeking Khartoum's

assistance in their fight against the Chadian regime, the ethno-political equation is every day becoming more complicated.

The thoroughly inadequate response of the international community in the face of such unmitigated human disaster raises further questions. As is becoming more evident every day, the performance of the African Union (AU) in Darfur—officially designated as the African Union Mission in Sudan (AMIS)—falls short of expectations. Only under considerable international pressure and promise of financial assistance, following the collapse of the 8 April 2004 ceasefire agreement between the Sudanese government and the insurgents, did the AU agree to send in a monitoring force of some 4,000 men, consisting in large part of Nigerians (1,200) and a few hundred Rwandan troops. To this must be added 700 military observers, whose observations have done little to lower the temperature. Despite generous funding from the United States and the European Union—estimated at half a billion US dollars—the AU mission has been notoriously ineffective in preventing the raiders from committing atrocities against civilians.

Samantha Power's sobering assessment is worth bearing in mind:

The AU mission is clearly overwhelmed. Its teams, spread out across an area the size of France, manage at most three patrols per day in various sectors of the region, and African countries are hardly eager to send in more soldiers. . . . Soon this stopgap mission will fail not only those in need of protection but all the other interested parties as well. The Western powers have already spent more than a billion dollars feeding refugees in camps that feel increasingly permanent, and it is nearly inevitable that, as in the West Bank and Pakistan, some Muslims in these camps will be radicalized and take up arms locally, or, perhaps, further afield.³

The image of radicalized refugees “taking up arms locally, or, perhaps, further afield” brings to mind another crisis situation of appalling proportions: more than a million Hutu refugees sought asylum in eastern Congo in the wake of the Rwandan genocide, including hundreds, possibly thousands, of *génocidaires* who later launched deadly raids into Rwanda. But the fate of Hutu refugees in eastern Congo is by no means the only—or, indeed, the most relevant—parallel with the situation in Darfur.

The Ghosts of Rwanda

If anyone deserves credit for drawing public attention to our inability to learn any lesson from the Rwandan carnage, it is Eric Reeves, whose eloquent wake-up calls in the media and on the Internet have yet to be heeded by policy makers. Comparing AMIS to the UN Assistance Mission for Rwanda (UNAMIR), headed by Lt. Gen. Roméo Dallaire, he notes that “we are witnessing an equivalently dishonest and cowardly failure” and that “the AU is no more capable of halting the ongoing destruction of primarily African tribal populations than Dallaire was able to halt the *interahamwe* or deter Hutu extremists of the Rwandan government and military.” “The ghosts of Rwanda,” Reeves concludes, “are stirring ominously in Darfur. Differences in geography, history, and genocidal means do less and less to obscure the ghastly similarities between international failure in 1994 and the world's current willingness to allow ethnically-targeted human destruction to proceed essentially unchecked.” And because of this appalling inertia, leading to a death toll “exceeding 400,000,” he speculates that “with human mortality poised to increase significantly in coming weeks and months, there is no clear evidence that Rwanda's unspeakable slaughter will not eventually be numerically surpassed.”⁴

Not even the most casual observer of Darfur's agony can remain insensitive to the scale of the human suffering unfolding in this forbidding dystopia. But it takes more than a superficial acquaintance with the history, geography, and politics of the region to appreciate how radically different from that of Rwanda is the context of the killings in Darfur. Unlike Rwanda (26,000 km²), Darfur covers a huge expanse of territory. In a space of some 450,000 km², approximately ten times the size of Rwanda, the population is estimated to be between 3.5 and 4 million,⁵ that is, half that of Rwanda, much of it distributed among scores of small village communities. This basic fact speaks volumes about the enormous logistical difficulties facing the now 7,000-strong AU monitoring force in its Sisyphean efforts to stop the hemorrhage.

Whether the carnage should be seen as genocide or as a case of ethnic cleansing run amok is where the Rwanda analogy begs the question, and opinions differ. While the official stance of the Bush administration is unequivocal in its use of the "G-word," the European Union and the United Nations have been notoriously reluctant to describe the killings in such terms. For all his searing criticisms of the Bush policies in Darfur, Eric Reeves is clearly on the same wavelength in detecting "genocidal intent." In his testimony before the Africa Subcommittee of the US House of Representatives on 11 March 2004, Reeves explained that while "the current phrase of choice among diplomats and UN officials is 'ethnic cleansing,' given the nature and scale of human destruction and the clear racism animating attacks systematically directed against civilians from the African tribal groups, the appropriate term is genocide."⁶ Nicholas Kristof—who, in his *New York Times* op-eds, has done more to sensitize the American public to the horrors of Darfur than most other commentators—would concur. "Darfur," he writes, "is just the latest chapter in a sorry history of repeated inaction in the face of genocide, from that of Armenians, through the Holocaust, to the slaughter of Cambodians, Bosnians and Rwandans."⁷

It is noteworthy, however, that both Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch (HRW) have carefully avoided the use of the word, opting instead for "ethnic cleansing" as a more appropriate term.⁸ Similarly, the 2004 Report of the International Commission of Inquiry on Darfur grudgingly admits that human rights violations were committed "by people who might have acted with genocidal intentions," but concludes that "there was not sufficient evidence to indicate that Khartoum had a state policy intended to exterminate a particular racial or ethnic groups."⁹

Given that there are differences of opinion among scholars as to what constitutes genocide, such divergences of opinion are not too surprising. For some, the question of establishing the evidence of genocide is irrelevant; more important is to use the "G-word" as a tool to mobilize public opinion. For others, however, the crucial issue is whether we are dealing with genocide as defined in the 1948 UN Convention on Genocide ("deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part") or something else—e.g., ethnic cleansing, or the use of force to crush a rebellion. For Gérard Prunier, much depends on how we define genocide: "if we use the 1948 UN definition it is obvious that Darfur is a genocide," but not if by genocide we mean a "total obliteration" of the victim group.¹⁰ In an article whose questions what others have taken for granted—"Is It Genocide?"¹¹—Nelson Kasfir argues that even though there is no doubt about the identity of the perpetrators, or about their determination to destroy "in whole or in part" the African population, the element of intent remains unclear. He suggests that the aim of Khartoum could just as well be seen as an attempt to crush a rebellion, not to commit genocide. This is consistent with the distinction drawn by Jacques Sémelin

between genocide, which involves “the total eradication of a collectivity, as defined by those whose self-assigned task is to annihilate it,” and ethnic cleansing or massacres aimed at enforcing submission.¹² For Sémelin—and many others—the killings in Darfur would fit into the latter category, involving a partial destruction in order to bring about global submission.¹³

Compounding the difficulty of establishing genocidal intent is the problem of discriminating between Arabs and Africans, where both share many of the same cultural traits, including religion and language, and where both victims and killers are found among members of the same community.

Africans vs. Arabs?

As Darfur’s name indicates, the Fur people has given its name to an area that comprises not just the Fur but a complex mix of African and Arab populations. “The population of Darfur,” Gustav Nachtigal wrote in the 1870s, “may be divided on the one hand into Negroes and Arabs, or on the other into its original inhabitants and the conquered peoples or foreigners.”¹⁴ This Arab/African polarity did not rule out a common set of regional identities, or, for that matter multiple identities. A central theme of Darfur’s precolonial history refers to the process of early state formation around the ancient seventeenth-century sultanate whose core area was the mountainous region of Jebel Marra. Territorial expansion went hand in hand with ethnic absorption, with the Fur people serving as the pivot around which a specific ethno-regional identity eventually developed.¹⁵ Anyone familiar with Nachtigal’s painstaking description of the “Organization of the Fur State”¹⁶ cannot fail to be impressed by the extraordinary complexity and highly bureaucratized character of this archaic yet inherently fragile state system, soon to collapse under the combined onslaught of the Turco-Egyptian conquest, the Mahdist revolt,¹⁷ and, ultimately, the imposition of colonial controls. The resulting political vacuum has yet to be filled.

However dated—and not always exempt of ethnic biases¹⁸—Nachtigal’s narrative makes clear to the reader the danger of reducing Darfurians to a simple racial dichotomy. Cutting across the “Negro vs. Arab” fault line, he notes, are countless other divisions, as between those who pay tribute and those who do not, those “who have equal rights” and those who do not, those who are of foreign origins (from Bornu and Baguirmi) and the autochthons, those tribes that were conquered and those that successfully resisted conquest, and so forth.¹⁹ Some groups are nomads, others semi-nomads or sedentary, among both Africans and Arabs. And there are those Africans “who appear by mixing with Arab tribes to have been transformed centuries ago, and now live in Darfur among the Rezeqat, where they can no longer be distinguished from the Arabs either physically or socially.”²⁰ By way of example, Nachtigal cites a Zaghawa sub-group, the “Zoghawa [sic] Amm Kimmelte,” which comes as a surprise when one considers the strong and unanimous identification of today’s Zaghawa with the African community.

The Arabs, likewise, are divided into numerous sub-groups, some of which are found in both Chad and Sudan. In his listing of “major non-Arab groups” and “major Arab groups,” Alex de Waal, a leading authority on Darfur, comes up with a total of seven Arab and fifteen non-Arab communities, each in turn divided into subcategories. Although Arabs form the bulk of the Janjaweed—the instrument used by Khartoum to kill, maim, or displace Africans civilians—de Waal notes that “the largest and most influential of Darfur’s Arabs are not involved, including the Baggara, Rizeigat,

the Habbaniya, the Ma'aliya, and most of the Ta'aisha."²¹ As in Rwanda, the tendency in Darfur is to identify the "bad guys" with an entire ethnic community.

The distinction between Arabs and Africans is, to a large extent, a social construct (not unlike the distinction between Hutu and Tutsi). De Waal calls the Arab vs. African dichotomy "historically bogus, but disturbingly powerful."²² The labels, after all, are by no means exclusive. There has been in the past considerable intermarriage between the two groups, and identity switches are by no means uncommon, a phenomenon again reminiscent of relations between Hutu and Tutsi. Both communities are Muslim, and Arabic is widely spoken among them. Although sporadic conflicts between Arabs and Africans were not unheard of in colonial and precolonial times, the scale of today's carnage has no precedent in history. What is unprecedented, too, is the extent to which ideology and propaganda, originating from within and outside Sudan, have contributed to the growing polarization of ethnic identities.

The Roots of Carnage

As in the case of Rwanda, no single-factor analysis will do to explain the cause of Darfur's tragedy. We are confronted with an array of forces and circumstances that goes far beyond the boundaries of Sudan. Most observers would agree that the triggering factor was the surprise attack on El Fasher, in April 2003, by the Sudan Liberation Army (SLA), the principal and earliest insurgent faction, resulting in the destruction of seven military aircraft and the death of about 100 people. But El Fasher was only the symptom of more fundamental factors.

Of these, perhaps the most consequential has to do with the steady advance of desertification through much of northern Darfur, resulting in devastating famine. According to Prunier, what is known locally as the *maja'a al-gutala* ("the famine that kills") caused the death of an estimated 95,000 people from August 1984 to November 1985.²³ With the massive population movements from north to south—and with Arab cattle herders moving in ever-increasing numbers into those areas of the south less affected by the drought—a series of local clashes over land erupted, first between Fur and Arabs in the Jebel Marra area (1987–1989), then between Massalit and Arabs (1996–1998).²⁴ Each time the parties to a conflict reached out to the Arab-dominated provincial government for a fair settlement, the government consistently sided with the Arabs.

The spread of a stridently pro-Islamic ideology did little to diminish the government's blatant favoritism toward Arabs. The roots of what de Waal calls "an Arab supremacist ideology" are to be found, in part, in ideas indigenous to the Sudan—generally associated with Hasan al-Turabi's National Islamic Front and later his Popular Congress. Just as important, however, has been the export of "Arabism" from Chad and Libya.

The Chadian side of the story, in a nutshell, involves a warlord named Acyl Ahmed, who, as head of the Armée du Volcan in the late 1970s and early 1980s, was able to mobilize a large number of Chadian Arabs against Hissène Habré's Forces Armées du Nord ("Northern Army"). Of all the Trojan horses produced by Colonel Muammar Gaddafi's stable, Acyl was by far the most faithful. Although he died in 1982, his pro-Arab ideology is still alive. For this, much of the credit goes to Gaddafi. After suffering a major defeat in northern Chad at the hands of Habré in 1987, the Libyan leader turned his attention to Darfur. To carve out for himself another sphere of influence and hold aloft the banner of the "Arab Gathering" (*Al tajammu al-arabi*)—a "militantly racist and pan-Arabist organization," Prunier informs us²⁵—some 2,000

Islamic Legion troops were sent to Darfur in 1987. The ideological seeds of the present conflict, in short, were planted long before the attack on El Fasher.²⁶

Exactly how the southern rebellion has affected its counterpart in Darfur is not entirely clear. Through the years, going back to the Federal Democratic Alliance of former Darfur governor Ibrahim Deraige, the Southern Peoples Liberation Army (SPLA) has given moral and financial support to the African resistance in Darfur, but in so doing it has unwittingly stimulated factional disputes about the distribution of arms and money. If the SPLA struggle in the south served as an example to emulate, this does not mean that it has always been to the advantage of the Darfurian rebels. Again, considerable ambiguity surrounds the fallout of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) signed by Khartoum and the SPLA in the south in January 2005. The effect, arguably, has been to encourage the insurgents to make every effort to wrest a similar agreement from Khartoum, while at the same time contributing to a hardening of the position of the central government on meeting their demands: after virtually giving up the monopoly of the ruling party, in line with the CPA, it is now dead set against any further erosion of its executive power.

A Fractured Insurgency

The fragmentation of the insurgency into rival factions, though rarely mentioned—let alone explicated—in the media, is not the least of the obstacles to peace. Only recently has Kristof—one the most insistent and articulate critics of Western policies in Darfur—grudgingly recognized that “some responsibility attaches to the rebels in Darfur,” as “they have been fighting each other instead of negotiating a peace with the government that would end the bloodbath.”²⁷ Yet there has been bitter infighting among rebels almost from the beginning. No sooner was the SLA created, in early 2003, than a violent struggle for the leadership of the movement began to surface.

Today, the bulk of the insurgents are drawn from the Zaghawa, Fur, and Massalit “tribes,” with the Zaghawa straddling the boundary between Chad and Darfur. Each is divided into sub-groups, with the Zaghawa, for example, split between Tuer, Bideyat, and Kobe, and each sub-group in turn divided into clans. The persistence of intra-Zaghawa factionalism, as we shall see, is crucial to an understanding of the complex interconnections between the Darfur-based insurgents and their kinsmen in Chad.

If the Zaghawa have been the driving force behind the insurgency, this is because many “had acquired professional military training in the Chadian or Sudanese armies, a fact that has caused them to predominate in the upper ranks of the insurgency to this day.”²⁸ This also helps explain why they came to be viewed with considerable suspicion by Fur and Massalit elements—but leaves unanswered the question of how they ended up fighting each other. Part of the answer lies in the multiplicity of sub-ethnic and clan fissures among the Zaghawa. The really critical factor, however, has to do with the impact of Chadian politics on the rebellion. Just as Darfur has had a significant backlash effect in Chad, the reverse is equally true.²⁹

The insurgents are divided into two principal rival armed factions, the SLA and the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM), the latter, the weaker of the two, drawing much of its support from Zaghawa Kobe and the former from Tuer and Bideyat as well as Fur and Massalit. The SLA, founded in February 2003, is decidedly secular in orientation, while the JEM remains highly receptive to Hasan al-Turabi’s brand of Islamic ideology.³⁰ The SLA, moreover, claims a more diversified ethnic membership, which is also why it is more vulnerable to internal dissention.

The early history of the SLA provides a dramatic illustration of the potential for disintegration inherent in its ethnic composition. At first, every effort was made to include representatives of each major ethnic group in its leadership. Thus, while the chairmanship of the movement was given to a Fur (Abdel Wahid Mohammed el-Nur), the deputy chairmanship went to a Massalit (Mansour Arbab) and the military command to a Zaghawa (Abdallah Abakar, replaced after his death by Minni Arko Minnawi). After receiving substantial support from Zaghawa elements in the Chadian military, Minnawi's Zaghawa scored a number of military successes against the Khartoum government, only to raise the anxieties of Fur elements. A bitter struggle for leadership ensued between Fur and Zaghawa. In the words of a recent International Crisis Group report,

the rapid expansion and intensification of the conflict overwhelmed the leaders and their nascent structures. Over time, the animosity between Minni and Abdel Wahid grew as they jostled for primacy. Whereas Minni assumes that Zaghawa military strength should be reflected in the leadership, Abdel Wahid and other non-Zaghawa insist on the original tribal allocations of positions, including a Fur as chairman.³¹

Although the origins of divisions within the insurgency are inseparable from Darfur's fragmented social identities, these divisions have been greatly intensified by the growing involvement of Chadian factions in the politics of the rebellion, and vice versa.

The Chadian Connection

Long before the emergence of Darfur as a flashpoint of conflict, the Sudan had been a key player in the struggle for power between Idriss Deby, Chad's incumbent president, a Zaghawa of Bideyat origins, and his immediate rival, Hissène Habré. If Deby ultimately came out on top, routing Habré and his Toubou warriors in the course of a daring raid on Ndjamena in December 1990, it was because of the massive support he received from Darfur-based Zaghawa elements, many of Kobe origin, with the blessings of Sudanese President Omar Hassan al-Beshir. His indebtedness to al-Beshir helps explain Deby's initial reluctance to get involved on the side of the insurgents. By late 2005, however, he had no other choice but to turn against his former ally. On 7 December 2005, a Sudan-backed Chadian rebel faction based in Darfur attacked Guereda, some 120 km north of Adré, killing ten Chadians and wounding five. A few days later, on 18 December, an even more brutal raid was launched on Adré. The attacks were promptly denounced by Deby as a Khartoum-instigated maneuver to destabilize his regime.

It is easy to see, in such circumstances, why Deby should be viewed with the greatest distaste by his former benefactor. Perhaps less obvious is that after consistently playing one faction off against another, and with his army on the verge of disintegration, Deby now has very little room to maneuver. For fear of antagonizing Khartoum, he first turned down demands for assistance from the SLA while secretly encouraging the rise of a breakaway faction within the Kobe-dominated JEM, the National Movement for Reform and Development (NMRD). Another split emerged in April 2005 following a trial of strength between JEM'S field commander, Mohammed Salih Harba, and its top leader, Khalil Ibrahim, leading to the creation of a Provisional Revolutionary Collective Leadership Council, causing some observers to see in this latest dissidence the evil hand of Idriss Deby.

The result of all this has been a drastic shrinkage of Deby's bases of support within the army, as shown by the recent defections suffered by his 30,000-strong Chadian National Army (CNA). Top-heavy, poorly trained, rife with internecine quarrels over

pay and promotions, the upper ranks of the military include no fewer than sixty generals and 256 colonels.³² Exactly how many have joined the insurgents is unknown. Reports indicate that on 9 December 2005, at least 349 soldiers and eighty-two officers joined the rebellion; another 400 troops followed on 16 February 2006, led by generals Seby Aguid and Issaka Diar, along with some thirty high-ranking officers. Many of the defectors are of Kobe origin and are deeply resentful of Deby's indifference to the fate of their kinsmen across the border in Darfur. But there is also growing evidence that they have been joined by a fair number of Bideyat, whose grievances stem from Deby's less than cooperative attitude in meeting the demands of the SLA. A major blow to the regime came with the defection of Tom Erdimi, a prominent Zaghawa, who once served as coordinator of the Chadian petroleum project. His "Socle pour le Changement, l'Unité et la Démocratie" ("Base for Change, Unity, and Democracy"; SCUD) has since emerged as a key anti-Deby politico-military group.³³

Further complicating the political equation, a large number of Chadian Arabs have joined hands with the Janjaweed, while a growing number of Chadian and Darfurian Africans are being supported by Khartoum in their efforts to destabilize the Deby regime. One well-informed Chadian observer told this writer, in March 2004, that the majority of the Arabs involved in human rights abuses were Chadian Arabs, many of Juhaina origins. Their expectation, presumably, is that Khartoum will return the favor and help them overthrow Deby, in a replay of the scenario that brought Deby to power in 1990. While the recruitment of Chadian Arabs has been going on since 2004, if not earlier, only now is fear of retaliation by non-Arab Chadians an important motive for crossing into Darfur. In the words of a recent Human Rights Watch (HRW) report, "Chadian Arabs from the area south of Adré have recently been crossing into Sudan in numbers significant enough to raise concern among humanitarian workers that the migration is being driven by fear of retaliatory attacks at the hands of non-Arabs."³⁴

Arabs are not the only group seeking Deby's overthrow. The rebel attack that nearly brought down the Ndjamena regime on 14 April 2006³⁵ must be credited to the "Front Uni pour le Changement Démocratique" ("United Front for Democratic Change"; FUC), led by Mahamat Nour, a Chadian African of Tama origins whose political base is the "Rassemblement pour la Démocratie et la Liberté" ("Gathering for Democracy and Freedom"; RDL), a predominantly Tama organization and one of several groups affiliated to the FUC. Significantly, Nour is said to enjoy the full backing of Khartoum in his fight against Deby. Suffice it to say that it was none other than Nour who, back in 2003, took the initiative in organizing groups of Janjaweed, with Khartoum's blessings.

How to prevent the army from unraveling is the key issue facing Deby. It lies at the heart of the stalemate between the Chadian government and the World Bank.³⁶ The bank's decision to freeze Chad's offshore oil-revenue account is understandable, given that the government is in material breach of its loan contract. Deby's immediate concern, however, is to find the financial resources needed to avoid a further disintegration of his armed forces. Although the domestic backlash of the Darfur insurgency poses a clear and present danger to his Zaghawa-dominated state, whether he can throw to the winds his obligation to set aside a substantial portion of the oil revenue for poverty alleviation and still meet the demands of the army is anybody's guess.

With the emergence of Chadian opposition factions seeking sanctuary in Darfur, new actors have entered the fray, determined to overthrow the Deby regime. Since the attack on Adré by the RDL, a Chadian faction based in Darfur, six other opposition

movements have joined the RDL to form the FUC. So far the SCUD has been unwilling to rally to the FUC. Khartoum apparently made every effort to persuade Nour to hand the leadership of the coalition to Tom Erdimi, an invitation Nour promptly declined.³⁷ The factional split between Tama and Zaghawa is only one of the many fractures undermining the Chadian opposition. Whether and how far to enter into a tactical alliance with Khartoum is another source of division. The stakes, in short, are perceived differently depending on the groups concerned, their ethno-regional profile, and their leadership patterns.

The Limits of the Genocide Template

Given the complexity of the forces on the ground, questions are bound to arise as to the pertinence of the genocide model as a point of entry for explicating the Darfur crisis. Unfortunately, there seems to be growing confusion among scholars and observers between honest disagreements and what passes for an unacceptable denial of genocide. It is one thing to posit genocide as a given, from which are derived certain logical conclusions about the state of the play on the ground, and quite another to proceed by induction to test the validity of that assumption.

From all the evidence available, there are serious reasons to question the identities of the targeted groups, the extent to which the perpetrators are manipulated by Khartoum, and their intent to exterminate. Today the struggle is not only between Arabs and Africans but among Africans. Furthermore, while there is considerable evidence to show the involvement of the Khartoum authorities in recruiting and arming Arab militias, Jérôme Tubiana, a leading French authority on Darfur, paints a more complex situation in which “the extent to which the Sudan government controls the *janjawids* remains unclear.”³⁸ He cites a Fur intellectual to the effect that “the government has in part lost control (of the *janjawids*)” and goes on to note that

control over the Arab militias operates within three circles: the first consists of local leaders, including traditional chiefs, politicians and intellectuals..., the second involves Darfur-based Arab personalities, army men and politicians, close to the seats of power in Khartoum, who act as intermediaries between Khartoum and local leaders..., [and] the third refers to the hard-liners in Khartoum, i.e. Jellaba Arabs from north Sudan, specifically Shagiya Arabs. This Shagiya circle would seem to have gained sufficient weight to challenge president al Beshir himself, also a Jellaba, but who belongs to the Jaalin group.³⁹

Control over the Chadian Arabs would seem to lie primarily with the first of these groups. As for the key element in the definition of genocide, the intent to exterminate, the record shows that such has not always been the case. In the words of the most recent HRW report on Darfur,

as markets in Darfur have been disrupted by violence and population dislocation, normal commerce is being replaced by a war economy in which livestock raiding and looting feature prominently. Hence, *janjawids* cross-border raids appear to be motivated heavily by considerations of profit, as cattle, horses, food and even household items such as straw mats and cups have been looted... Statements attributed to *janjawids* by eyewitnesses suggest that the appropriation of land may be another motivation for the violence.⁴⁰

What emerges from all this is a pattern of violence aimed at the forced removal of specific ethnic communities, a phenomenon much closer to ethnic cleansing than to genocide. This does not mean that the abominations committed against Africans by Arabs, or by other African rebel groups, are less objectionable than those described as

genocidal killings, or that ethnic cleansing or “massive violations of human rights,” to use Kofi Annan’s expression, deserve less moral attention. Scale makes little difference when human lives are at stake. What it does mean is that analysts owe it to themselves to be self-conscious in their use of language when it comes to making sense of mass violence.

There are practical implications as well. One is compelled to wonder whether accusations of genocide, given the ambiguity of the evidence, are the best way to induce a change of attitude on the part of the Khartoum authorities. Which is not to say that a different language would produce miracles. At first grudgingly amenable to a UN intervention, the al-Beshir government is now adamantly opposed to a transfer of responsibility for peacekeeping to the UN, and there is no indication that the African Union is prepared to challenge that decision, even though it has agreed “in principle to a transition from AMIS to a UN operation.”⁴¹ While the dialogue between Khartoum and the international community appears to have reached an impasse, the AU is unwilling to take a firm stand on the atrocities committed by the Sudan government. If anything, the AU’s decision to block an EU-sponsored resolution in the UN General Assembly’s social and humanitarian committee to end the culture of impunity and disarm the militias responsible for the massacres—while reminding donors that “an average of US\$22,857,719 is required in cash each month” for AMIS to continue its operations⁴²—smacks of humbug. So, too, the explanation proffered by Nigeria, representing the AU, to the effect that “any condemnatory action would endanger the peace talks.”⁴³ When one considers the AU’s apparent determination to stymie all attempts at blowing the whistle on Khartoum, the ongoing debate about genocide sounds distressingly hollow.

There are ample reasons to agree with Scott Straus that the debate about genocide misses the central point about Darfur:

Darfur has shown that the energy spent fighting over whether to call the events there “genocide” was misplaced, overshadowing difficult but more important questions about how to craft an effective response to mass violence against civilians in Sudan. The task ahead is to do precisely that: to find a way to stop the killing, lest tens of thousands more die.⁴⁴

Those lines were written in late 2004. Since then thousands have died.

Notes

1. See Lydia Polgreen, “20,000 in Chad Are Uprooted by Attacks,” *New York Times*, 28 February 2006.
2. Nicholas D. Kristof, “The Slaughter Spreads,” *New York Times*, 16 April 2006, section 4.
3. Samantha Power, “Missions,” *New Yorker*, 28 November 2005, 61.
4. Eric Reeves, “The Ghosts of Rwanda: The Failure of the African Union in Darfur,” 13 November 2005, <http://www.sudanreeves.org/modules.php?op=modload&name=Sections&file=index&req=viewarticle&artid=535&page=1> (accessed 21 April 2006).
5. Douglas H. Johnson, *The Root Causes of Sudan’s Civil Wars* (Oxford: James Currey, 2003), 139.
6. Quoted in Gérard Prunier, *Darfur: The Ambiguous Genocide* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005), 156.
7. Nicholas D. Kristof, “Never Again, Again?” *New York Times*, 20 November 2005, 13.
8. See Amnesty International, *The State of the World’s Human Rights*, Report 2005 (London: Amnesty International Publications, 2005), 235–38; Human Rights Watch, *Darfur Bleeds: Recent Cross-Border Violence in Chad* (HRW Report No. 2, February 2006). In response to

- HRW's choice of words, Eric Reeves had this to say: "What HRW calls 'ethnic cleansing' reflects an unfortunate unwillingness by this distinguished human rights organization to consider the implications of its own findings, which make clear that there is abundant evidence of 'genocidal intent' in the very command structure of Khartoum's military, intelligence and political hierarchy." Eric Reeves, "Darfur Held Hostage: Khartoum Adamantly Rejects UN Peacekeeping Force," 1 March 2006, <http://www.sudanreeves.org/index.php?name=Sections&req=viewarticle&artid=551> (accessed 27 April 2006).
9. Quoted in Prunier, *Darfur*, 143, 157.
 10. *Ibid.*, 156.
 11. Nelson Kasfir, "Sudan's Darfur: Is it Genocide?" *Current History* 104 (2005): 195–202.
 12. Jacques Sémelin, *Purifier et détruire : usages politiques des massacres et génocides* (Paris: Le Seuil, 2005), 406.
 13. To quote, "le processus de destruction est donc partiel, mais son effet se veut global. Car les responsables de l'action comptent sur l'effet de terreur pour imposer ainsi leur domination politique sur les survivants [the process of destruction is partial, but its effect is meant to be global. For those responsible for the act (of destruction) rely on the effect of terror to impose their political domination on survivors]." *Ibid.*, 389.
 14. Gustav Nachtigal, *Sahara and Sudan*, vol. 4, *Wadai and Darfur*. Trans. and ed. Allan G.B. Fisher and Humphrey J. Fisher (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1971), 346.
 15. For an outstanding discussion of regional identity formation in Darfur, see Alex de Waal, "Who Are the Darfurians? Arab and African Identities, Violence and External Engagement," *African Affairs* 104: (2005): 181–205. By far the best introduction to the issue of Janjaweed identity, and to the historical backdrop of the current crisis, is Julie Flint and Alex De Waal, *Darfur: A Short History of a Long War* (New York: Zed Books, 2005).
 16. See chapter 5 of his monumental work on *Wadai and Darfur*, 324–45.
 17. Led by a self-appointed Mahdi (divine leader) committed to restoring the purity of Islam and expelling the Turkish rulers, the Mahdist rebellion of 1881 led to the defeat of the Turks and the capture of Khartoum in 1885. The Mahdist state ruled over two-thirds of today's Sudan and lasted until the British conquest in 1898.
 18. Consider his description of the Fur: "The Fur or Forawa have a fairly dark skin, grey-black or black, are of middle height and with undistinguished features. Their character is arrogant, hot-tempered and revengeful, and they are much given to quarrelling and outbreaks of violence. They can scarcely lay claim to any reputation of real bravery. They have little talent for industry, almost as little indeed as their western neighbors, the people of Wadai, and like all mountain dwellers, hold tenaciously to their ancient manners and customs, so that Islam itself, of which in the larger villages they are fanatical adherents, has not been able in the more distant regions to suppress Paganism completely." Nachtigal, *Wadai and Sudan*, 349.
 19. *Ibid.*, 346 ff.
 20. *Ibid.*, 349.
 21. De Waal, "Who Are the Darfurians?", 199.
 22. *Ibid.*, 197.
 23. Prunier, *Darfur*, 56.
 24. The parallel with the situation in southern Chad is striking: as in Darfur, Arab and Gorane cattle herders are moving in ever-growing numbers into Saraland, causing countless confrontations, some extremely bloody; the situation is made all the more explosive by the fact that the Sara are overwhelmingly Christian.
 25. Prunier, *Darfur*, 45.
 26. From a pro-Arab praise singer, Gaddafi has recently morphed into an apostle of peace: thus, in July 2005, Libya took the initiative in organizing reconciliation talks in Tripoli—the so-called Darfur Forum, which includes prominent Darfurians drawn from the interior and exile rebels, Khartoum-based politicians, and tribal chiefs opposed to the policies of the

- central government. Although Gaddafi's initiative did lead to a cease-fire agreement in July 2005, countless violations have occurred since then.
27. Kristof, "Never Again," 13.
 28. International Crisis Group, *Unifying Darfur's Rebels: A Prerequisite for Peace* (Africa Briefing No. 32, Nairobi/Brussels, 6 October 2005), 2.
 29. For a more sustained discussion, see René Lemarchand, "Où va le Tchad?" *Afrique Contemporaine* 3 (2005): 117–28.
 30. Hasan al-Turabi's party, the National Islamic Front (NIF), ideologically close to the Muslim Brotherhood, is widely regarded as a force for the promotion of *shariah*-based radical Islamic fundamentalism in the Sudan and throughout North Africa. See Hasan al-Turabi, "The Islamic State," in *Voices of Resurgent Islam*, ed. John Esposito, 241–51 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983).
 31. ICG, *Unifying Darfur's Rebels*, 3.
 32. See Lemarchand, "Où va le Tchad?" 121.
 33. For further information, see Bello Bakary and Makaila Nguebla, "Scoop: le secret de Tom Erdimi et les tractations à l'Est," *Focus-Akhbar*, <http://www.ialtchad.com/focustomsecret.htm> (accessed 24 April 2006).
 34. HRW, *Darfur Bleeds*, 10.
 35. See Marc Lacey, "After Battle in Capital, Chad Threatens to Expel Sudanese," *New York Times*, 15 April 2006.
 36. See Lydia Polgreen and Celia W. Dugger, "Chad Oil Funds, Earmarked for Poor, Go Astray," *International Herald Tribune*, 20 February 2006.
 37. For further information on the Chadian side of the equation, consult www.ialtchad.com, especially Bakary and Nguebla, "Scoop : le secret de Tom Erdimi."
 38. Jérôme Tubiana, "Le Darfour : un conflit identitaire?" *Afrique Contemporaine* 214 (2005): 165–206, 175.
 39. *Ibid.*, 176.
 40. HRW, *Darfur Bleeds*, 7.
 41. African Union, Peace and Security Council, *Report of the Chairperson on the Situation in Darfur* (10 March 2006), 1.
 42. *Ibid.*, 12.
 43. Warren Hoge, "Sudan: UN Darfur Resolution Blocked," *New York Times*, 24 November 2005.
 44. Scott Straus, "Darfur and the Genocide Debate," *Foreign Affairs* 84 (2005): 123–33, 124.