# PEACE IN SUDAN
## *Who will pay the price of principle?*

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When, in Naivasha, Kenya, on 26 May 2004, representatives of the Government of Sudan (GoS) and the Sudan Peoples Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A) signed the final piece of a framework agreement on a settlement to a civil conflict that had cost the country more than 2 million lives since it began in 1983, there was a distinct wariness in the public response. To some extent this was because this outcome had been so long in coming, and so often delayed, that there were fewer illusions about the work still to be done in filling in the framework's details. At best there would be a pre-interim period of six months, to be followed by an interim period of six years before the essence of the Accord was put to the test, and southerners allowed to choose between continued inclusion in a federal Sudan or secession as an independent state.

There was another reason, too. It was beginning to dawn on most observers that the Naivasha achievement, however hard-won, had ignored several pertinent issues which remained unresolved and either actually or potentially deadly to the Sudanese people. The most prominent reminder of this could be summed up in the name of a region of the country: Darfur.

Two years ago there were few people not intimately concerned with Sudanese affairs who could have pointed out France-sized Darfur on the map. That is no longer the case, now that media attention has been focussed on events there, encapsulated in the description "the greatest humanitarian crisis in the world today." Other terms have also been used to awaken the interest and anger of a susceptible public, sometimes in the hope that this might provoke intervention from national governments or international bodies. Such words as "scorched earth", "genocide" and its modern euphemism "ethnic cleansing" were commonly invoked, often to paradoxical effect as the diplomatic community deflected its energies into debates about whether the particular instances of mass murder, rape and arson in Darfur were accurately, or even legally, defined by such expressions. Not surprisingly, the resulting arguments generated rather more heat than light, and did little to succour the victims of the atrocities they reflected.

The latest, and worst, "Darfurian Troubles" began in February 2003, when the Darfur Liberation Front, which soon renamed itself the Sudan Liberation Army (SLA), launched a series of attacks against government positions, announcing that it was fighting to end the region's marginalisation and neglect by the authorities in Khartoum. In so doing the SLA claimed to be following the example of other regional insurrections, most notably that of the SPLN/A, whose efforts over the past twenty years finally had attracted sufficient international attention and support to induce the Sudanese government to the negotiating table in Kenya, where a peace deal was still being crafted, section by section. The SLA was concerned that the international community

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would consider an eventual deal between the GoS and the SPLA sufficient solution to the country's internal conflicts, and determined to remedy any such misperception.

The SLA was soon joined by another group, calling itself the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM), some of whose leaders had previously been associated with Hassan el-Turabi, sometime intellectual guide to the Muslim Brotherhood and the National Islamic Front (NIF) regime that had seized power in 1989. He had fallen from grace with Khartoum in 1999, following an unsuccessful power struggle with President Omar el-Bashir, but retained a popular following, especially among the student body. His influence was much feared by a Khartoum political elite whose material interests were suspected by some to have superseded their spiritual ones. The emergence of the JEM was further cause for concern that a provincial conflict might prove difficult to isolate from rivalries at the centre.

Khartoum attempted briefly to dismiss the SLA and JEM as mere bandits – another manifestation of one of Darfur's perennial problems. This interpretation was soon discredited by rebel military victories severely embarrassing to the military authorities. Uncertain of the reliability of its Darfur garrisons, Khartoum took recourse to the mobilisation of mounted militias, drawn principally from the nomadic peoples of the region. Tensions between nomads and sedentary farmers and pastoralists had been a recurring feature in the modern history of Darfur, but had been kept under control by traditional methods of conflict resolution until the 1970s. By then administrative changes with implications for land and pasturage rights, the encroachment of the desert, and a number of years of severe drought had undermined the fragile ecological and political balance of the region, precipitating outbursts of conflict made bloodier by the easy availability of automatic weapons.

The word *janjaweed* now entered the international vocabulary, denoting a mounted militiaman who was far more likely to target the families, crops and livestock of sedentary farmers than to engage in fighting armed rebels. Khartoum denied involvement in mobilising or arming these militia, but the evidence gave the lie to this attempted subterfuge, especially as aerial bombardment frequently preceded the devastation of the *janjaweed* cavalry. Hundreds of thousands of Darfurians sought refuge from the onslaught, some as internally displaced persons, others as refugees in neighbouring Chad.

Internationally there was great reluctance to add Darfur to the list of issues delaying the pending peace agreement between "North" and "South". This offered relief to the GoS, which faced potential rebellion from other disaffected areas of the North. The concessions required to conclude an accord with the SPLA were onerous enough to have caused severe internal disputes within Khartoum. To have opened the door to a debate about the relationship between the central authority and the marginalised peoples throughout the country would have been tantamount to political suicide for the narrowly based NIF regime.

Though the GoS had generally resisted any foreign interference in what it insisted were its sovereign affairs, it initially welcomed the efforts of the Chadian government to mediate the Darfur crisis. Khartoum had enjoyed good relations with Chad's President Déby since 1990, when he had launched his own successful insurrection against Hissene Habre from Darfur in 1990. Déby's somewhat clumsy diplomatic interventions were useful to the GoS not only in providing an ambiguous basis for a ceasefire agreement which compromised the rebel position and caused a split among its leadership, but in affording some cover to those international players eager to see a completion of the North-South peace process that could be passed off as a success. As events developed, of course, Chad's role in Darfur became more compromised, in that forces hostile to Déby began to feature among the pro-government militias, raids to occur across the countries' common border, and the Chadian military became restive, with some elements offering material assistance to the Darfurian rebels. There were even rumours of coup plots among the soldiers in N'Djamena and other towns. To some extent these problems were all moderated by the movement of a small but potent French force to the eastern Chadian

town of Abeche, which afforded Deby protection against border forays of whatever provenance, while simultaneously visibly placing Paris's marker in the region.

To a degree, Chad's role is now eclipsed by the intervention of the African Union, which hosted talks between the GoS and the rebels, and placed a small force of military observers into the troubled region. For its part, Khartoum probably calculated that the AU force was too small and limited in its operational capabilities to constitute a major embarrassment, particularly once the most destructive part of the militias' operations had been completed. For domestic reasons as well as the need to avoid alienating the Arab states, the Chairperson of the AU, Nigeria's President Obasanjo, was also unlikely to advocate a course of action robust enough to suggest alignment with the policies of a US government pilloried locally as anti-Islamic.

The rubric of "African solutions", in the form of AU intervention, also suited those international players who saw no point in antagonising Khartoum needlessly. The Naivasha agreement, with all its flaws, had been long in coming, and might pave the way for lucrative cooperation with a moderately realigned GoS, from whom more political and economic concessions could then be sought. On this view, that AU intervention, diplomatic or military, was hardly likely to contribute to a radical change of the situation in Darfur was of little consequence, except to the Darfurians. In the meantime, the AU could take satisfaction from being seen to act, and the international community at large could use this modest intervention as an alibi for its own willing impotence.

Washington waxed eloquent on the horrors of the humanitarian situation in Darfur, but although the dominance of the moral high ground offered a minor distraction from the US-led coalition's embarrassments in Iraq and Afghanistan, Khartoum was aware that Washington had invested too much in the Naivasha peace process to jeopardise long-term policy aims in a region to which it was reluctant to commit ground forces even in a peacekeeping role. Any significant US-sponsored motion in the UN Security Council could safely be warded off by the intervention of Sudan's friends there, and whatever the Secretary-General and other senior members of his staff might say about humanitarian catastrophe and even genocide, this was unlikely to result in concerted action that would seriously discomfort Khartoum.

Beyond all this, there was a private realisation in many UN circles that the ability of the GoS effectively to disarm their auxiliaries in Darfur was limited. Certainly air and ground support to the so-called *janjaweed* might be curtailed, but much of the effective damage had been done, and the international community would find it extremely difficult to return to their devastated lands the hundreds of thousands of people displaced by a scorched earth policy. In effect, unless the course of events was changed dramatically by external intervention, the chance of which seemed extremely remote, any political settlement to the Darfur conflict would occur largely on ground of Khartoum's choosing. The welfare and security of the displaced might well end up hostage to a measure of political protection for the ruling elite in Khartoum.

How all this will play out as the Naivasha peace process with the SPLA moves into its next stage, filling out the details and implementation of the framework agreements, remains to be seen. Certainly there will be few neutral observers who will have many illusions about the essential cynicism of the GoS after its performance in Darfur. Indeed, there are many who maintain that Khartoum's rulers have yet to abide by the terms of any political agreement they have made since independence in 1956.

It should be borne in mind, however, that although the Naivasha agreement broadly represents the domestic and international power balances pertaining at the time of its conclusion, shifts in these balances are to be expected; both in the natural course of events unconnected with the peace deal, and as the influence of that deal are felt. These shifts will not always be anticipated or intended by those parties most directly affected.

The principals to the framework agreement,

whatever their public posture, were obviously concerned at Naivasha to secure their own privileged position in any future dispensation. The framework agreements effectively sealed the domination of the current regime in Khartoum for the immediate future. After all, a guarantee of six years in power would allow most regimes the opportunity to arrange the domestic political and economic environment to their advantage, entrenching patronage and internal security networks. This would be particularly true if the end of the fighting opened the way for foreign investment and further oil exploration and exploitation. As for the SPLM/A, the agreement implicitly recognised its political hegemony in the south and gave it a significant claim on influence at the centre, again, without having to test its support among the population at large. One of the principal problems facing its leader, Dr John Garang, over the next six years would be to persuade the majority of southerners that their interests could be best served in the context of a united "democratic" Sudan. This would give him an important bargaining chip in his future relations with Khartoum, though his initial difficulties will centre on the problem of creating a viable state structure in the neglected south.

There remains the question of the degree to which non-participant parties to Naivasha can now be convinced that the agreement may pave the way to a more open and inclusive dispensation.

This, in turn, raises the issue of how the principal beneficiaries of the peace agreement attempt to persuade possible allies of the open nature of their ultimate intentions – whether towards democratic opening, or the confirmation of the Islamic (or Arab) nature of a united state.

How the current GoS and the SPLA move over the next few months will be telling, though not decisive, in this regard. Whether either party will be able to retain the initiative it seeks to assert, singly or jointly, will be interesting to observe. Should they sense that they are failing to do so, will they be able to divert, delay or abort the process altogether, or will the regional and international powers retain enough interest and influence to dissuade them from doing so?

As the victims of the Darfur conflict could attest, the Naivasha peace process is both flawed and incomplete. For better or worse, however, it appears to be what the world will have to work with for now. Peace accords are rarely equitable, often merely delimiting the field for the next conflict. But perhaps, in the light of the chilling use of that term in Central Europe a little over sixty years ago, we are better advised to steer clear of a "final solution".