

# Sudan in the firing line

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AT a time when the credibility of the war on Iraq is taking a beating in both the US and Britain, their media has latched on to the year-old conflict in the Darfur region of Sudan, to highlight the humanitarian lapses of a major Muslim country. The furore also serves to establish the credentials of the West as the main upholder of civilized values.

Judging by the way reports of mass killings and ethnic cleansing of hapless black Africans by government-backed Arab "janjaweed" militias from the desert region of western Sudan have been played up by the BBC and CNN, it appears that the government in Khartoum is actively involved in what amounts to genocide.

Memories of massacres in Rwanda, and the ongoing atrocities in Congo and other African states in the grip of civil war, have pushed the UN Security Council to assert the role denied to it elsewhere. It took the urging of many Asian and African countries to persuade the council not to impose sanctions but to give Sudan time to put things right, by reining in the Arab militias, and providing security and humanitarian assistance to the uprooted Africans.

An objective analysis of the "problem" shows that the western powers are making a concerted effort to pursue their own agenda against the Islamic world, for their own ends. President Bush clearly wants to capitalize on his popular standing as the chief exponent of the war against terrorism. His ratings on economy and general leadership have declined steeply, but the US electorate still rates him highly for the conduct of the war on terror. Apart from playing up the continuing threat from Al Qaeda, danger is also perceived from Islamic fundamentalists who are violating the rights of ethnic minorities in Muslim countries.

The simplistic explanation offered in the western media of the crisis in Sudan is that there was a rebellion last year in the region, spurred by the compromise Khartoum reached with the rebels in southern Sudan on the grant of autonomy. The government in Khartoum reacted by arming and letting loose the "janjaweed" Arab militias, who are blamed for carrying out murderous attacks on the indigenous black Africans, killing tens of thousands and uprooting a million locals from their villages, with many seeking refugee in Chad across the desert border.

The truth about Sudan is quite different. The *New York Times* carried an article by Sam Headley, former editorial page writer of the *Wall Street*

*Journal*, on August 8, based on his visit to the "janjaweed" area of western Sudan. Far from being the allies of the regime in Khartoum, the "janjaweed" are a group of Arab and African tribes who have been contending for a fair share of the vast desert of Darfur where they roam looking for pastures. When the British left in 1956, the problem of nomadic tribes in a region twice the size of France was left unresolved.

Since February 2003, local rebellions have broken out, with anti-Khartoum groups sponsoring them. The so-called movement for justice and equality is the creation of Hassan Al-Turabi, one-time ally of President Bashir, who is in jail because of his militancy. This faction also receives support from groups in Chad, Eritrea,

Sudan was included by the US in its list of terrorist states. However, the government of President Bashir has got rid of the Islamic radicals headed by Turabi, and has cooperated with the international community in ending the 25-year old civil war in southern Sudan. It has entered into agreements with many western companies to develop and exploit its rich mineral resources.

Some of the current propaganda in the West reflects a desire to weaken, and even dismember, Africa's largest country. Certain human rights groups, and organizations representing Christian missionaries, do not appear to mind tampering with the truth. Sudanese Foreign Minister Mustafa Usman Ismail spends much of his time contradicting falsehoods still being spread by the western media.

Among the points he has made are the following:

— Sudan, far from arming the "janjaweed", is trying to disarm them, and some of the leaders have been arrested and imprisoned.

— Sudan does not need foreign troops. It has agreed to African Union troops coming to look after the security of African observers, but is capable of policing the

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which broke away from Ethiopia, has encouraged a group, called the Sudan Liberation Front, to start political agitation. The intra-tribal fighting has spread, and the government in Khartoum relied on the Arab tribals to counter the rebellion. The mass movement of refugees has dramatized a situation that requires a political solution.

The situation, as handled in the UN Security Council, is largely influenced by its western members. Among these determinants is the view adopted by the US Congress that genocide is going on in the region. British Prime Minister Tony Blair also sought to divert attention from his embarrassment over Iraq by talking of dispatching British troops to Sudan. When the Sudanese government sought a clarification from the British ambassador, he denied any plans to send troops.

However, the government in Khartoum has received a more sympathetic hearing from the African Union, which has scheduled meetings later in the month between the Sudanese government and the rebel groups in Ouba, the Nigerian capital. The meeting of the Arab League foreign ministers in Cairo also called for more time than the thirty days given to the Sudanese government under the UN resolution.

The manner in which the plight of the refugees in Sudan is being highlighted in the western media appears to reflect a continuing desire to defame Islamic countries as being incapable of maintaining civilized standards. Until a few years ago,

region.

— The number of casualties in Darfur owing to unrest and conflict does not exceed 5,000, and the oft-quoted figures of 30,000 and 50,000 are exaggerations. As the representative of the European Union stated after a visit to the area, there has been no genocide.

— Sudan is already providing substantial quantities of humanitarian aid will facilitate delivery of additional supplies.

Taking into account the relevant facts, notably the findings of the African Union and the Arab League, as well as the European Union and the prestigious *New York Times*, there is no need for desperate measures. The Sudanese government is cooperating with the UN, which has a representative in Khartoum, monitoring progress. The proposed meetings under the auspices of the African Union in Ouba later this month will start a process that should lead to the easing of political tensions.

Pakistan has played a responsible role, opposing sanctions or condemnation, but urging the Sudanese government to move expeditiously to carry out its obligations. Any inclination to politicize a humanitarian problem, or needlessly pressure Sudan needs to be resisted. One would hope that problems left over from colonial times would not be exploited to maintain unjustified pressure on a government that is in compliance with international norms. Sudan should be spared being dragged into America's election-year politics.