

Sudan: Divide and Destroy in Darfur

By John Prendergast

7 June 2006

AllAfrica.com

Negotiating the end of a war is tricky enough. But in the case of Darfur, mediators were also faced with the implicit task of ending what the Bush administration calls genocide, and what nobody can deny have been gross crimes against humanity.

Such a tall order, coupled with an abrupt negotiating deadline, produced an agreement that leaves more questions than answers. And unless a United Nations force is deployed immediately to guarantee its implementation, it will also leave over two million homeless Darfurians vulnerable to further exploitation.

One question without a rational answer is why it took so long to broker this deal. When the U.S., UK and African Union finally set a deadline and committed high level support to the process, it took just weeks to finalize a deal. Why didn't this happen a year and a half ago? Up to two hundred thousand lives could have been saved, and the dynamics on the ground would have been more amenable to reconciliation and reconstruction.

Once a deadline was announced and attention galvanized, the mediators tilted their proposals in favor of the government because they recognized the regime's dominant position on Darfur's battlefield. But if that power imbalance is left unchecked, it will allow the government to continue its divide and destroy approach to dealing with its opposition throughout the country -- a ruthless modus operandi that has already produced two and a half million war-related Sudanese deaths since the late 1980s.

Khartoum's divide and destroy strategy will continue to splinter Darfur along ethnic lines, use proxies like the Janjaweed and dissident rebels to sow intercommunal conflict, and buy off politicians to keep Darfur from developing as a region. This is the same tactic the ruling party is pursuing in post-conflict southern Sudan: maintain a strong center that controls security and most of the oil revenue and leave peripheral areas weak, divided and underdeveloped, unable to mount an effective challenge, whether armed or electoral.

The Darfur Peace Agreement suffers from the same systemic flaw as the deal brokered for southern Sudan, the ironically named Comprehensive Peace Agreement. Neither deal is in fact comprehensive, but instead address Sudan's problems region by region, just as the ruling party's divide and destroy strategy requires. Despite all having the same grievances, southerners, westerners and easterners are all left to fight over scraps, while the real power in the center remains largely intact in the hands of the ruling National Congress Party. Left unchecked, ruling party officials will continue to use militias to destabilize parts of the country prone to opposition, and will continue to support rebels in neighboring countries deemed unfriendly, as they do now in Chad, Uganda and Eritrea.

International monitoring, leverage, and peacebuilding will be the keys to Sudan's transformation. Now that the Darfur deal is signed, a UN force -- ideally 20,000-strong -- must deploy to ensure that the Janjaweed militias are indeed neutralized, and that civilians are protected from what will continue to be a harrowing security environment. This is little different from what the existing UN force in southern Sudan will have to do, where elections and an independence referendum in the next five years will require aggressive monitoring of militia who want to undermine southern stability.

To ensure compliance, the international community needs to build leverage. The best way to do that in an environment of total impunity is to use the three tools of accountability: International Criminal Court indictments, UN targeted sanctions, and divestment from stocks doing business with Sudan. Diplomats might be tempted to do the opposite, and say the tenuous peace deals in Darfur and the south are all that are needed, and bygones should be bygones. That approach, however, will reinforce the tendencies of senior government officials - and perhaps some rogue rebels - to undermine the agreements and continue their destructive actions. Until there is clear implementation and an end to major human rights abuses, the accountability sticks should continue to be pressed in the face of every violation of the agreements.

Finally, a peacebuilding strategy should prioritize support for regional institutions in the south, Darfur, and the east, which can promote cooperative problem solving and deepen civil society's stake in peace efforts. Sudan's peace agreements have only been signed by the most heavily-armed actors, and political power remains concentrated in the hands of the ruling party. In this sense, the heart of Sudan's multiple conflicts remain unaddressed. The end goal must be an equitable, durable and appropriately decentralised political settlement for Sudan that replaces the corrosive dominance of strongmen. Millions of Sudanese lives depend on it.

John Prendergast is Senior Advisor to the International Crisis Group, and was formerly Director of African Affairs at the National Security Council. He is co-authoring a book on citizen activism with actor Don Cheadle.