A Brief History

Darfur, part of western Sudan, is comprised of over 90 mostly-Muslim ethnic groups. Within Darfur, non-Arabic-speaking groups tend to farm, while Arabic-speaking groups are primarily nomadic herders. Darfur has long been a marginalized within Sudan, which increased under the al-Bashir government.

Tensions have grown in Darfur due to environmental changes, as drought and desertification heighten conflicts over land between farmers and herders. Fed up by disenfranchisement and heartened by the movement for independence in southern Sudan, some Darfuris took up arms in 2003. Two groups consisting mostly of non-Arab Darfuris formed the SLA and the JEM. After several victories, the Sudanese government took action against these Darfuris, recruiting landless Arabs into the Janjaweed, whom they armed and tasked with quelling the rebellion, focusing on the Fur, Zaghawa, and Massalit peoples. Villages have been looted and destroyed, men killed, women and girls systematically raped, homes set afire, and survivors chased into the desert. While violence has slowed in recent years, the Sudanese government has recently re-escalated the conflict including in February when Sudanese armed forces raped over 200 Darfuri women in Tabit, North Darfur. Beyond attacks directed by the Sudanese government, the militarization of local militias in Darfur has led to many deadly intercommunal conflicts.

In August and October, the Sudanese government and the SRF declared ceasefires in an attempt to negotiate a permanent peace agreement to resolve the conflict. However, there is still deep distrust between Darfuris and the Sudanese government.

Key Terms

Omar al-Bashir: The autocratic President of Sudan. He has built a strong central state that marginalizes peripheral areas of the country. Bashir has no tolerance for dissent, and, as has been the case in other parts of the country, his response to rebellion in Darfur was to terrorize civilians. He is wanted by the ICC for genocide and war crimes.

Janjaweed: Meaning “devil on horseback,” the Janjaweed is made up of pastoralist Arab Darfuris that the Sudanese government organized into a militia and armed. They carried out much of the violence in Darfur, and they have recently been officially incorporated into the Sudanese military under the name “Rapid Support Forces.”

Sudanese Liberation Army (SLA): One of the most prominent Darfuri rebel groups, primarily formed by non-Arab Darfuris. It has a more secular orientation than the JEM.

Justice and Equality Movement (JEM): Another prominent Darfuri rebel group, also consisting mostly of non-Arab Darfuris. The JEM has split into factions, with the largest faction led by Minni Minawi.

Sudan Revolutionary Forces (SRF): An alliance of rebel groups in Sudan, including JEM and SLA, which aims to coordinate efforts between the different organizations fighting in Darfur, South Kordofan, and Blue Nile.

UNAMID: The joint UN-African Union peacekeeping force in Darfur, formed in 2007. Their presence has consistently been opposed and obstructed by the Sudanese government.

Doha Document for Peace: Signed in 2011, granting some provisions to increase Darfuri power and representation within the Sudanese government. However, many prominent rebel groups did not sign the agreement.