

Darfur Crisis: Backgrounder 2008



Over 4 million people are affected by the ongoing conflict in Darfur, western Sudan. About 2.5 million are homeless, forced to live in makeshift camps, reliant on humanitarian aid for their survival. Find out more about the crisis and the need to support the CWS/Caritas Darfur Appeal.

About Darfur:

Darfur is an area in western Sudan the size of France. It is home to 6 million people. The region is predominantly Muslim. The main ethnic groups are the African Fur (after whom the region is named) and the Arabic Baggara people. Other groups include the ethnically African Zaghawa, Masalit, and Midob peoples. Traditionally people live as nomadic herders or settled farmers. Today nearly half the population, primarily the farmers, have been forced from their homes and can no longer practice their agricultural livelihoods.

About Sudan:

Sudan is the largest country in Africa (2.5 million sq km) and has a population of 35 million. Despite large oil reserves and other natural resources, the majority of Sudanese live in poverty. An authoritarian military government, which has been described as one of the most repressive regimes in the world, rules the country. Sudan is divided geographically, religiously and ethnically. The north is dry desert, Arabic, Muslim and in control of the country's economic and political life. The south is watered by the Nile, has fertile plains and oil reserves, is African and non-Muslim, with the majority of people following traditional faiths or Christianity. Since independence in 1956 there has been ongoing civil war over resources and along ethnic lines. The population is 52% African and 39% Arab, with the Africans feeling they are exploited by the Arab ruling classes.

What is happening in Darfur?

The most recent conflict in Darfur is entering its sixth year, with conditions for civilians deteriorating. Whole villages have been razed to the ground and it is too dangerous for people to leave the makeshift camps that have been their homes for more than three years. They rely on international support to survive and are desperate for a peaceful resolution to their situation. Despite the expression of international concern, promises of peacekeepers, and a supposed peace agreement, the violence continues between various militias and government backed forces. It is the men, women and children of Darfur who continue to suffer.

- 2.5 million people, more than 1 in 3 of the regions people, are living in refugee camps
- 250,000 people have been forced from their homes in the last year
- 450,000 people have died from violence, disease or starvation since the conflict began in 2003
- 4 million people are dependent on food aid
- 100,000 civilians would die every month if humanitarian aid was stopped



See inside for:

> voices from Darfur
> timeline

> civilian needs and CWS humanitarian aid
> international action and inaction

> how the conflict began
> how to help

How did the conflict start?

Conflict began in the arid and impoverished region of Darfur early in 2003 after a rebel group began attacking government targets, saying the region was being neglected by Khartoum. The rebels say black Africans are oppressed in favour of Arabs.

The rebel attacks came after decades of tension over land and grazing rights between the nomadic Arabs and settled African farmers. Climate change has played a role with water shortages and desertification in the area fuelling hostilities between communities. The underdevelopment of the region and its poverty has also contributed, with resentment over the government's failure to provide resources, services and opportunities.

The government response to the rebel attacks was to unleash the Janjaweed, camel riding militias. They have targeted African communities, often supported by government air raids. The Janjaweed have been responsible for razing villages, destroying homes, water supplies and crops, raping women, murdering civilians, abducting children and forcing over 2.5 million people to flee for their lives.

In my home village life was alright," says Hadija Abdurahim Abdulkarim. "I was able to cultivate my own fruit and my own vegetables. I was independent and self-sufficient. There are so many difficulties here in the camp."

Timeline

2003

February 26: The Darfur Liberation Front publically claims credit for attacks on government targets in Darfur. This is seen to mark the start of the current conflict. Over the next few months, rebels win 34 out of 38 engagements.

July: Janjaweed offensive begins in earnest. The Janjaweed are government-backed militias, comprised of nomadic Arabic-speaking African tribes. In the 1980s and 1990s they carried out campaigns of terror and suppression for the Government of Sudan. Over the next few months they will kill thousands of people, rape women, abduct children, burn houses and crops, kill livestock, destroy water services and loot all belongings. Arab villages are largely left untouched. Non-Arab villages are razed. In some cases they are only 500m apart.

December: UN declares Darfur one of the world's worst humanitarian situations.

2004

April 8: An African Union brokered ceasefire is signed in Chad. It is violated repeatedly by all sides.

July: The UN Security Council gives the Government of Sudan 30 days to disarm the Janjaweed, bring its leaders to justice and allow humanitarian assistance. The threat is not enforced and Janjaweed terror continues.

September: US President George W Bush declares genocide is occurring in Darfur.

October: The African Union expands its peacekeeping force to 7000 troops.

2005

Fighting continues, peace talks stall and by December Chad declares itself to be in a state of war with Sudan as violent clashes along the border increase.

2006

May: The Darfur Peace agreement, brokered by the African Union, is signed by the Government of Sudan and a faction of the Sudan Liberation Army rebel group. Other rebel leaders reject it. Rebel movement splinters and violence escalates.

August: UN Security Council passes resolution for a 23,000 strong, UN-led peacekeeping force but Government of Sudan consent is needed. They reject the plan, proposing sending 10,000 Sudanese soldiers to Darfur instead.

September: Government of Sudan unleashes new military campaign in Darfur and asks African Union peacekeepers to leave.

November 17: Compromise peacekeeping force announced, including UN peacekeepers to support the African Union.

2007

April: African Union peacekeepers targeted. China pressures Government of Sudan into accepting 3,000 UN peacekeepers.

June: China defends its supply of arms to the Government of Sudan as reports come out of the Sudanese disguising attack planes as UN aircraft.

July 31: The hybrid UN/AU force was finally approved. It is to take over on 31 December and is called UNAMID (United Nations African Union Mission in Darfur)

October 27: Peace talks start in Sitre, Libya. Key rebel groups do not attend and the talks are abandoned.

November: Rebel groups unite. There are now 2 key rebel alliances to negotiate with the Government of Sudan in a more orderly fashion.

2008

February: Fresh offensive by Government forces and Janjaweed against Darfur rebels, trapping thousands of civilians. Death toll reaches 450,000.

March: 25% deployment of UNAMID peacekeeping force.

July: The International Criminal Court Special Prosecutor asks ICC judges to charge President of Sudan, Omar al-Bashir, with crimes against humanity, war crimes and genocide for actions in Darfur.



Women celebrate as they receive household goods from CWS partners.

What do people need?

People arrive in the camps bringing what little they can carry. They need plastic sheeting, water containers, cooking utensils, blankets and other basic necessities. As well as needing replacements for these essential items, they also need food, health care, access to clean water and sanitation and their children need to go to school. As the camps become their long term homes they need assistance with agriculture and income opportunities. The trauma of the conflict affects everyone so they need counselling and support to deal with their present reality and build their skills and hopes for when they can rebuild their lives.

"Of course we want to return to our village one day," says Bakhi Adam Isak. "But for that to happen the Janjaweed have to disappear first. If we can feel safe where we live, we won't need any outside help."

CWS humanitarian aid

Christian World Service has been supporting the ACT International-Caritas network in Darfur since 2004. It is one of the largest humanitarian programmes in the region and represents the efforts of Protestant, Catholic and Orthodox churches throughout the world. Almost half a million people receive help through these programmes, including shelter, food, health, nutrition, water, sanitation, education, agricultural support and counselling. The programmes are aimed at those in most need and from all ethnic groups.

The ACT/Caritas programme includes:

- building, equipping and staffing health clinics
- training health workers
- food programmes for malnourished children and expectant and new mothers
- drilling of bore holes and repair of hand pumps and hand-dug wells to provide clean water
- construction of latrines for households, schools and in public areas
- health and hygiene education campaigns
- schools
- distribution of seeds, tools, tree seedlings and other requirements for agricultural cultivation
- peace building work with people from across communities
- counselling

While the focus is on saving lives, CWS partners are also working to give people in the camps the skills to manage their own relief programmes and rebuild their communities in the future. Much of the work is undertaken by volunteers within the camps.



The chance to learn new skills, literacy and make a living from sewing or baking is seen as a blessing in the Darfur camps. "I am very happy because I have learnt," says Amina. After fleeing her home three years ago she has attended classes and counselling through the ACT-Caritas programme. Now she passes on that knowledge to new arrivals. "I should teach the others all these skills."

What does the future hold for Darfur?

Humanitarian aid will not bring an end to the fighting or suffering in Darfur but it's needed to help people survive. Aid must continue so civilians caught up in the conflict can have their basic rights to life – to food, clean water and education – met. The next step is for the world to commit to finding a just and lasting peace for Darfur.

The efforts of the international community – including the UN, the African Union, the US and UK governments – have been weak. While many politicians make bold statements at home, their words have failed to translate into actions overseas. The UN Security Council has passed numerous resolutions calling on the Government of Sudan to disarm the Janjaweed militias in Darfur, provide full humanitarian access and promote security in Darfur. Additional measures such as sanctions have been threatened if resolutions are not complied with, however there have been no deadlines. Soldiers from member countries of the African Union have been serving in Darfur as ceasefire monitors but their numbers are very small and their role limited. They are not able to provide security for the local people.

Sudan is a strategic trade partner with several members of the UN Security Council. China, for example, receives 7% of its oil from Sudan. The few governments with influence over Sudan are reluctant to put pressure on the government to commit to finding a resolution to the conflict for fear of jeopardising their own trading relations with the country. Based on Sudan's behaviour over the past five years, it is clear that government leaders will not support disarmament and conflict resolution without some meaningful pressure and political consequences from the international community. The Government of Sudan must stop harassment of aid efforts and ensure unhindered humanitarian access to those in greatest need.

Darfurians overseas have welcomed the request for an arrest warrant against the Sudanese president by Luis Moreno-Ocampo, the chief prosecutor of the International Criminal Court on July 14, 2008. They have told the UN Security Council:

“Our people have cried out for justice for the last 5 years only to see the humanitarian and political crisis worsen. Mr Moreno-Ocampo's request to examine the culpability of President Al Bashir for the genocide committed against our friends and families brings us some hope that the international community may finally match its rhetoric with actions.”

How can we help?

Give

Promote and support the CWS/Caritas Darfur Appeal so humanitarian assistance can continue.

Hold a Benefit Concert or special event to raise funds and awareness about Darfur.

Share

Let people know the situation in Darfur and remember those suffering. You could hold a special worship service, light candles for hope, or organise a vigil.

Write

Write a brief letter to the Prime Minister raising the situation of the people of Darfur and asking what action the New Zealand government will take as part of the United Nation's Responsibility to Protect those vulnerable to genocide. You could ask people to sign the letter if they were willing.



CWS partners are giving children in Darfur the opportunity to go to school. Not only does it occupy the time of young people, many who no longer remember a life outside the camps, but give them skills for rebuilding their communities in the future.

All photos: ACT International/Caritas



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