



## THE ROOTS OF THE CONFLICT

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Since 2003, the Darfur region of Western Sudan has been in conflict, involving the Government of Sudan and its non-governmental military force known as the Janjaweed, and local indigenous African people. While fighting started in retaliation to assaults on government targets by rebels and to suppress claims of regional neglect, it quickly escalated into large-scale attacks on civilian populations, which is in violation of international law.

The conflict in Darfur has been simmering beneath the surface for decades. The roots of it are various and interrelated:

- 1) **The ecological decline of the region:** As the Sahara crept farther southward due to desertification, nomadic herders from the upper northwest of Sudan began to encroach on the agriculturally rich area further south. Tensions increased as nomads and their herds of cattle and camels strayed onto local farms and used precious water supplies.
- 2) **The social, economic and political marginalisation of the region and its people:** None of the successive national governments in Khartoum have ever made any effort to provide education and development in a region. This has been exacerbated by environmental problems such as drought. The persistent neglect of the development needs in Darfur has left a deep sense of exclusion and economic and political marginalization among the people of the region.
- 3) **The easy access to weapons:** The influx of large quantities of modern weapons into Darfur from neighbouring countries, in particular from Chad and Libya since the 1970s, has allowed to easy access to weaponry. Internal armed conflicts that erupted in Chad as well as the Chad-Libyan war in the 1980s have played a major role in inciting Darfuris to procure and accumulate large stockpiles of modern weapons. Easy access to weapons encouraged the proliferation of a hitherto unknown culture of large-scale violence and banditry in the region.
- 4) **The deliberate destabilisation of the traditional structures of the region:** In pursuit of its “pro-Arab” policies, the government has delegated administrative powers and allocated land owned by Fur, Masaleet and other indigenous African groups of Darfur to the recently arrived nomadic groups, destroying the traditional structures of the region.
  - The land is a complex mix of people, and tribal affiliations have always been important. There are more than thirty main tribes in Darfur and despite the fact that both Arabic and non-Arabic identities have always been more political and cultural than racial, due to centuries of co-existence and intermarriage, people identified themselves as either belonging to an Arabic or a non-Arabic tribe. In pursuit of the Arabic expansionism, the Sudanese governments have supported and encouraged the cross-border immigration of Arabic nomads into Darfur, destroying the precariously balanced harmony between the tribes.
  - In 1995, the government embarked on a program, remarking the geographic boundaries in Darfur. This program was selectively implemented in areas inhabited by the Fur, Masaleet and other aboriginal African groups in the West Darfur State. The then Governor of West Darfur State unilaterally decided to divide Dar Masaleet (Land of

the Masaleet) in West Darfur into thirteen emirates, and granted six emirates to the nomad tribes in the area.

- The government has also replaced the historical chieftain system and its traditional title of Shartai (Mayor) and Sultan with a new system. It has appointed pro-government elements from the Arab groups as leaders and gave them the title of Emir, replacing the old titles used by the Fur and Masaleet other aboriginal African groups.

The government's 1995 decision, undertaken in complete disregard of the traditional methods for land distribution in Darfur, was one of the most devastating measures experienced by the people of Darfur in their recent history. It was followed by widespread violence and destruction of lives and livelihoods.

The combination of these factors has led to the unprecedented culture of violence, racial hatred and aggression currently experienced by the people of the region.

At least 300,000 have died and another 2.5 million have been forced to flee their homes in the current five-year conflict. 3.5 million Darfuris currently depend on international aid for their daily survival, a situation the UN calls 'the worst humanitarian crisis in the world today.' The conflict now threatens security outside of Sudan, having spread to neighbouring Chad and the Central African Republic. It also affects a fragile peace brokered between North and South Sudan in 2005, following a 21-year civil war.