THE ROOTS OF THE CONFLICT (Student Version)

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. The fighting started in retaliation to assaults on government targets by rebels and to suppress claims of regional neglect. It quickly evolved into major attacks on civilian populations, which is against international law.

There has been potential for conflict in Darfur for many decades. The causes of the current conflict are widespread:

1) **Environmental decline:** The Sahara Desert's area has recently increased due to drought, causing a decrease in the fertile lands to its south. Because of this, nomadic herders from northwest Sudan began to move to the agriculturally rich area further south. Tension built up as the nomads and their herds of cattle and camels strayed onto local farms and used precious water supplies.

2) **Governmental disregard for social, economic and political development:** The Khartoum government has ignored the need for development in Darfur in areas such as education, the economy, and the regional government. This is an even bigger problem because Darfur already suffers from environmental problems like drought. Darfuris have been made to feel excluded because their region is not developed in the same way as the rest of the country.

3) **Easy access to weapons:** There is easy access to modern weapons in Darfur because of armed conflicts in neighbouring countries, such as Chad and Libya. This access has encouraged a movement towards widespread violence and banditry in Darfur.

4) **Unwanted change in traditional structures of the region:** Since the Khartoum government is largely "pro-Arab", it has given management powers to recently arrived Arab nomads. It has also given land that belongs to Fur, Masaleet and other indigenous African groups of Darfur to Arab nomads.

   - The land is a complex mix of people (there are more than thirty main tribes in Darfur), and tribal links have always been important. 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. Because the Sudanese government has encouraged many Arabic people to move to Darfur, the insecure harmony between Arabs and native Africans has been broken.

   - In 1995, the government decided to change the regional boundaries within Darfur. This program was only applied in areas inhabited by the Fur, Masaleet and other indigenous African groups in the West Darfur State. The then Governor of West Darfur State decided to divide Dar Masaleet in West Darfur into thirteen districts without consideration of what the inhabitants wanted. Furthermore, six of the districts were put under the administration of the Arabic 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 (Muslim ruler), replacing the old titles used by the Fur, Masaleet and other aboriginal African groups.

The government's 1995 decision was one of the most devastating measures experienced by the people of Darfur in their recent history, since it ignores the existing culture and removes power from those who have traditional rights to it. Because of this, it was followed by widespread violence and destruction of lives and properties.

The combination of these factors led to the current culture of violence, racial hatred and aggressions experienced by Darfuris.

At least 300,000 people have died and another 2.5 million have been forced to flee from their homes in the current five-year conflict. 3.5 million Darfuris currently depend on international aid for their daily survival. The United Nations is calling the situation in Darfur 'the worst humanitarian crisis in the world today.' The conflict has spread to neighbouring countries like Chad and the Central African Republic, and could cause international insecurity. It also affects the peace agreement reached between North and South Sudan in 2005, following a 21-year civil war.