



BACKGROUND TO THE CONFLICT: REBEL MOVEMENTS

The rebel movement was split from the beginning between the Sudan Liberation Movement/Army (SLM/A) and the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM). The SLM/A has the backing of the Fur, the largest of the black Muslim tribes in Darfur, through the leadership of Abdul Wahid al-Nur, as well as significant backing from the Zaghawa and Masaleet tribes. Led by Khalil Ibrahim, JEM is a smaller, mostly Zaghawa operation made up of Islamists who were purged from the government in 1999.

Today, the Darfur rebel movement has splintered from two groups to more than fifteen, many of which are little more than armed bandits.

THE ORIGINAL DARFUR REBEL MOVEMENT

The two groups fighting in Sudan's Darfur region - the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM) and the larger Sudan Liberation Army (SLA) - have very different ideological backgrounds.

The Sudanese Liberation Army (SLA)

The Sudanese Liberation Army (SLA) is backed by Eritrea. Until 2003, the group was known as the Darfur Liberation Front. Rebels in Darfur emerged in February 2003 under the name of Darfur Liberation Front. The Darfur Liberation Army announced no connection with the Southern rebels, but called in the middle of March 2003 for "an understanding" with the opposition forces which fight the Islamist government in Khartoum.

In March 2003 the Darfur Liberation Front announced that it had downed a helicopter that was carrying an official in the province. Later that month, the Darfur Liberation Front announced that the movement would be called the Sudan Liberation Movement and the Sudan Liberation Army (SLM/SLA).

The Darfur Liberation Front was a secessionist organisation calling for the secession of the area of Darfur from Sudan. The SLM/A issued statements that it does not seek independence, but demands greater political autonomy and a more equitable share of resources from the central Sudanese authorities¹.

The Justice and Equality Movement (JEM)

The **Justice and Equality Movement (JEM)** is said to be backed by a Sudanese opposition leader, Hassan al-Turabi².

¹ "The objective of the SLA is to create a united democratic Sudan....Sudan's unity must therefore ultimately be based on the right to self-determination and the free will of the various peoples of Sudan... on an economy and a political system that address the uneven development and marginalization that have plagued the country since independence," SLA Secretary-General Minni Arkou Minnawi, Political Declaration.

² Turabi, the former speaker of Sudan's parliament and the ideologist of its Islamist revolution, was removed from office in May 2000 and imprisoned by Sudan's military. During the late 1970s he had worked with Sadiq al-Mahdi, the leader of the Mahdist political party and grandson of The Mahdi.

In 1989 President Omar al-Bashir overthrew the government of Sadeq al-Mahdi. The coup was backed by the National Islamic Front of Islamist leader Hassan al-Turabi. Mr Turabi became the leading ideologue of the new government and was seen as the power behind the throne.

In 1991 he organised an Arab Popular and Islamic Conference and became its secretary-general. From this platform Mr Turabi went out of his way to offer African Muslims from peripheral regions of Sudan, like Darfur, a means of obtaining a share of power. He recruited them into his movement, and gave them some prominence.

In 1999 Mr Turabi was involved in a showdown with President al-Bashir, when he introduced a bill into the national assembly reducing the powers of the presidency. Mr Bashir reacted by dissolving the assembly and declaring a state of emergency. He also purged Mr Turabi's supporters from the machinery of government. It was the African Muslims from Darfur who were removed at this time who went on to found JEM.

Other rebel groups

Other rebel groups in the region, some little more than armed bandits, only serve to complicate matters further. The Sudan Federal Democratic Alliance (SFDA) is led by Ahmed Ibrahim Diraige, a former governor from the Fur tribe, but it seems to have little armed backing. The National Movement for Reform and Development (NMRD) is an off-shoot of JEM led by Jibril Abdel-Karim and aligned with Zaghawa groups backed by the Chadian president. However, it also has little influence on the ground in Darfur. Some other new groups include the Popular Forces Troops and the Sudan Democratic Group. It is doubtful that these groups have much support.

THE EVOLUTION OF THE ORIGINAL REBEL GROUPS

On April 8, 2004, the first cease-fire agreement between the Darfur rebels and the government was signed in Chad, which allowed African Union observers into the region.

The Sudanese Liberation Army (SLA)

After the ceasefire, a split has happened between Nur, who controlled the political arm of the SLA and Minni Arcua Minnawi, who controlled the military arm of the rebel group and staged a rigged vote to gain control of the political arm.

On November 7, 2005 in Kenya, the Sudan Liberation Movement was permanently separated from the Sudan Liberation Army. In May 2006, Minnawi signed a peace deal with Sudan, and he officially joined the government in Khartoum. Most of Minnawi's commanders deserted him when he left for Khartoum, although a small group that claims loyalty to Minnawi remains active in Darfur. Meanwhile, Nur took refuge in Eritrea, and although he continued to command great respect among the Fur and started the Non-Signatory Faction (NSF) within the SLM, he lost most of his control over the rebel forces fighting under the SLM name. Ahmed Abdel-Shafi took command of this faction, calling it SLM-Classic.

In the past years, the SLM has splintered even further, with loose groupings like SLM-Unity and Group of 19 (G19) existing as umbrella organizations for what can largely be described as groups of armed bandits. The G19 is split between the Zaghawa and Meidob tribes, and each tribal faction is further split into groups organised by powerful leaders. Abdullah Yehia and Jar el-Nabi Abdel-Karim control the largest Zaghawa rebel groups. Suleiman Marajan leads the most powerful Meidob group. Other G19 leaders have fled to Chad, such as Adam Bakheit and Khamis Abdullah Abaker, and have little power over the events in Darfur.

The Justice and Equality Movement (JEM)

Ibrahim attempted to reinvigorate JEM by aligning it with some of the G19 groups. After they scored some tactical victories in 2006, disagreements over the spoils sunk the alignment. This caused some JEM commanders to head out on their own. Some of these JEM members have pursued closer ties with the government, while Ibrahim maintains his tougher stance. Bahr Idriss Abu Garda was ejected by Ibrahim for allegedly negotiating with Khartoum in recent weeks. In June, Ibrahim Yehia left the JEM and aligned himself with the Khartoum government. Other splinter groups, such as the JEM-Eastern Command, are at odds with the government and Ibrahim's rebel group.

On May 10, 2008, JEM launched an armed attack on Omdurman, one of the 3 towns that form greater Khartoum. This was first time that a rebel group has engaged government forces near the capital, marking an escalation in the Darfur conflict.

JEM leader Khalil Ibrahim Muhammad published *The Black Book: Imbalance of Power and Wealth in the Sudan*, which accuses Arabs of having a disproportionate representation at the top levels of government and administration.

JEM still has links to Hassan al-Turabi, which is why it is accused by the government of being involved in an alleged coup plot in Khartoum, which it accuses Mr al-Turabi of masterminding.

Although JEM and SLA come from different ideological backgrounds they have managed to cooperate in their fight against the government and the Arab militia, the Janjaweed. But they have continued to maintain separate identities and this has led to tensions. While the Sudanese Liberation Army is a member of the National Democratic Alliance (NDA), the umbrella opposition organisation grouping, the Justice and Equality Movement is not.