

ERA Conference: Darfur and its Impact on Sudan and the Region

Story Summary of Panel 1: Origins of Darfur Conflict

1. Dr. Eltigani Salih Fidail

[Sudan's Minister of International Cooperation, and who sometimes acts as Sudan's Minister of Foreign Affairs. Eltigani hails from El-Fasher in Darfur.]

Dr. Eltigani said that Darfur has always had “uneasy relations” with the Sudanese authorities, “since the time of the Sultanates in the west (and) with the different (Sudanese) kingdoms.” He insisted that Darfur even maintained “strained relations” with successive national governments after Sudan became independent from Britain in 1956.

According to Eltigani, Darfur's constant willingness to keep its “autonomous identity, may have weakened the (region's) sense of being a part of a whole.” The integration of Darfur in the nation-building process was undermined by the “divide-and-rule policies of the British, and by the failure of the successive (Sudanese) governments to connect Darfur with the other parts of the country.”

Darfur's disconnection with other parts of the Sudan was also evident, said Eltigani, in the poor road networks that existed in the area. This, he commented, made it more difficult for the people of Darfur to communicate with other groups in Sudan and to form a “common interest” with other Sudanese: “Without that common interest, it is very, very difficult to have a united Sudan.”

Eltigani said Darfur's economic and social system was “fragile” and its “agro-pastoral” economic basis was “vulnerable and at the mercy of the caprices of the surrounding environment.... The fragility is exacerbated by the failure of the few rural development projects in Darfur.... Inefficiency, the bureaucracy, and the poor planning may be part of the causes.”

He pointed out that Darfur was part of the Sahel, which had suffered successive cycles of drought over the last few decades: “The United Nations Environment Program.... gives a detailed account of the devastating consequences of the ecological changes: the loss of the forests, the sharp decline in average annual rainfall, the shrinking of the grazing areas.”

The above set the tone of Eltigani's address to the conference: He acknowledged failure in Darfur, but blamed this mostly on natural disasters and the international community.

For example, Eltigani stated: “The different (Sudanese) governments were unable to cope with the disaster, and the international community failed to provide the technical and financial support to contain the consequences. The pressure on the scarce resources became more and more acute, and triggered a number of problems.”

He stressed that the movement of Darfur's population from the north of the region to the south in recent years was also partly to blame for the crisis in the area, as desperate

people had begun ignoring traditional methods of settling disputes of grazing rights, for example. As drought had intensified in Darfur, so conflict between the two primary groups present in the region – farmers and pastoralists – over such resources as water had intensified.

The Minister said another factor playing a role in the Darfur crisis was the “banditry and poaching (that) gained ground” in the region at the time that his government was fighting a war against the Sudan People’s Liberation Movement (SPLM, from 1983 - 2003) in southern Sudan. “The government at the time was mobilizing its resources and energy to face the growing threat from the SPLA (Sudan People’s Liberation Army) and its allies. All these factors led to some kind of security vacuum in (Darfur).”

He said Darfurians consequently “retreated to their ethnic or tribal groups to seek protection through semi-organized armed groups. Small arms flooded the area, and (were) made available at a low price by roaming Chadian rebels.” As a consequence, this situation resulted in “tribal polarization” becoming “very strong (sic), and the culture of violence has contaminated the whole area. Groups loyal to their ethnic roots started to fear and hate each other. It’s a very sad reality.”

He said Darfur was now wracked with a “war of perceptions” in which there were “good guys” and “bad guys” with militias such as the Janjaweed and the Tora Bora and others fighting an ongoing battle. The elite of each group “contributed to this war of perceptions for their own agenda by fanning the flames of the tribal hatred, and other actors joined the course. The political parties who were not happy with the National Congress Party (Sudan’s ruling party) tried to make life difficult for it through the manipulation of different groups loyal to them. The neighboring countries contributed to this complex situation.”

Eltigani thus blamed many actors in the region for the Sudan crisis. This included the SPLM, blamed in part for “saturating” all the people of Sudan with “political propaganda” which had instigated groups to “look for their share of wealth and power. That message was well received by the Darfur rebels.”

Situations such as this, said Eltigani, had “transformed the rebel movements into deeply divided groups along ethnic lines, without any clear political vision. The personal ambitions, the tribal loyalties, created lack of a unified and effective leadership.”

The Sudanese government, according to the Minister, thus found it “extremely difficult” to negotiate with the disparate rebel movements. “This situation has a very negative impact on the population. It has caused great war-induced losses of life, by malnutrition and disease and so forth, deterioration of infrastructure and basic services, massive internal displacement and thousands of refugees, development projects frozen, serious environmental degradation....”

Eltigani said the governments of Chad and Central African Republic (CAR) had also failed to secure their borders, which resulted in “cross border violence and arms traffic” that had encouraged “insurgencies in the area” and “tarnished the image” of Sudan.

He made a plea for hostilities in the Darfur region to end immediately, and said an “efficient (peace) monitoring mechanism” should be present in the area. There was a great need, Eltigani emphasized, for “strong financial support” for United Nations and

African Union peacekeepers, and the international community should engage “seriously” to ensure there is peace. In this respect, “pragmatic mediation is needed”.

2. Dr. El-Tahir El-Faki

[Speaker of the Legislative Assembly of the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM), one of the major rebel group in Darfur. El-Faki was born in another troubled Sudanese region, Kordofan, but said his roots were in Darfur. A medical practitioner by trade, he studied medicine at the University of Khartoum, graduating in 1978. His work has taken him to a few “Arab countries” and then into Europe before returning to Sudan, where he joined the country’s Medical Corps before moving to Britain where he worked as a surgeon.]

El-Faki maintained that JEM was not confined to Darfur, but was a “national organization.” He stressed also that Darfur was not a local, but a regional crisis, involving many actors.

He said when forces allied to the government had begun killing black Darfurians, rebel movements such as his had risen up to protect them and to fight for the rights of all “marginalized” groups in Sudan.

El-Faki explained that the Darfur conflict had its origins in the Sudan government’s sidelining and persecution of certain groups in the country. The rebel commander dismissed an assertion made previously by Sudan government authorities – that most people living in Darfur were not ‘indigenous’ Sudanese, but rather ‘foreigners’ from elsewhere in Africa. He conceded that while many Darfurians were indeed originally from West Africa, this, however, did not mean that they were foreigners.

His statements coincided with some of those made by Eltigani. For instance, El-Faki confirmed that Darfur had always seen itself as separate from the west of Sudan, but he emphasized that this was due to “historic reasons.” “Darfur itself was a sultanate (in the 1800s) that was not part of Sudan and it was only annexed to Sudan in 1916.... Darfur in fact did not join (the Sudanese state) on its own (voluntarily); it was annexed by the British to Sudan.”

He said the people of Darfur were not “racist warmongers” constantly fighting outsiders for scarce resources as Khartoum liked to present them, but were actually very peaceful. “They (have always been) very hospitable (and) provided land for people to stay” and have even intermarried with the new arrivals, he said. “The population is.... indigenous black people, and they are also Arabs.”

But he added that the Khartoum authorities had always differentiated between Arabs with dark skin, and those with lighter skin. The darker you were, said El-Faki, the less likely you were to be favored by the state.

Darfur’s “marginalization” was enhanced he stated by “underdevelopment, lack of infrastructure, lack of sharing the wealth and the power” that is concentrated in Khartoum.

“The center (of power in Sudan) has been ruled by certain elites, specifically from the northern region who are.... Arab stock.”

El-Faki said state assets were concentrated in Khartoum which had “deprived the other regions” resulting in “underdevelopment, marginalization and feeling of inferiority.”

In order to gain some power, and some assets, he maintained, some Sudanese and Darfurians began feeling that they had to abandon their black African roots to become “Arabized” in order to be accepted by Khartoum so that they could survive. At the same time, people of religions other than Islam were persecuted as a result of Khartoum’s policy of “Islamization” with very serious consequences, such as two and half million people killed in southern Sudan.

He said the government had used the people of Darfur and Kordofan as “foot soldiers” to wield the “tools of destruction” against the southern Sudanese, during Khartoum’s long war against the SPLM. He then offered an apology to “our people in the south for the violence perpetrated on them by our people in Darfur and Kordofan, unknowingly or mistakenly....”

Darfurians and others had allowed themselves to be manipulated by Khartoum over the years, said El-Faki, in the misguided hope that the Sudan government would institute “equality and justice for all” in Sudan. But when the people of Darfur realized that the Khartoum government was bent on continuing its oppression, even of them, that’s when the rebellion in the region began in earnest.

“Since independence, Sudan has been ruled by presidents that all come from one region. Not only from one region - they’re only of three ethnic groups. And these ethnic groups are the Shaigiya, the Jaalin and the Danagla. When we look as well to the ministerial posts, and to all the top posts, it’s all within those three: the Shaigiya, the Jaaleen and the Danagla.”

A key cause of the Darfur conflict, said El-Faki, was that the people of the region felt they had no hope of advancement, and no hope of true political representation. The “eruption” of Darfur, therefore, “was not because there is a problem of shortage of water, or shortage of land.”

El-Faki said there was indeed more violence in Darfur in recent years because traditional methods of keeping peace between farmers and nomads regarding meager resources had been “destroyed by the National Islamic Front (now the National Congress Party) government, and that was deliberate and specific, because they have favoritism towards the Arab stock.”

He said this was as a result of the government’s “Arab Islamic Project” Here most of the Darfurians – because of their inherent Islamic sentiment - joined the National Islamic Front, when it came to power in 1989, and worked fervently for its cause, but (only) to realize at the end that their “Islamic subscription has not given them equal rights to those of (‘pure’) Arab stock. They realized that they are too black to be counted as Muslims.”

El-Faki said it “meant nothing” to be a Muslim in Darfur; to be favored by the state one had to be a light-skinned Arab Muslim; “anything else” would be persecuted.

As soon as Khartoum “sensed” that there was “rebellion” brewing in Darfur, El-Faki explained, it had resorted to tactics it had previously used against the SPLM: “And that

was arming the Arab militias, specifically ethnic groups. It's not the black Darfurians (who are causing the problems). Ethnic Arabs have been armed, have been supplied with weapons, have been given money, have been given access to the highest authority in the country."

The government-backed Janjaweed militia had "directed their offense against the poor civilians, resultant of which is 300,000 people dead" almost all of which are "black Africans. Another three and a half million have been displaced from their original land and they are internally displaced, some of whom are in shantytowns, and some of whom are in areas far away from their real areas of abode."

El-Faki said the Chadian authorities had "borne the brunt of what is happening in Darfur.... Half a million refugees are in Chad, because of the cross border relations between the tribes in Darfur and Chad."

He stressed that it was beyond doubt that "marginalization and racial discrimination" were the key drivers of the Darfur conflagration. The racial aspect, El-Faki said, had again been highlighted when JEM forces attacked Omdurman near Khartoum in May.

JEM was formed to fight such oppression, El-Faki maintained: "We are not fighting the Arabs, per se. We are fighting for justice and equality for our people, for the marginalized people.... Yes, we are carrying up arms, but we were forced (to do this); there was no way for us to do it other than that."

He said JEM had negotiated "many times" with the government to end the violence, but that the state had never negotiated in good faith and had continued killing the people of Darfur.

He added that Khartoum's intention remained as it had been at the very beginning of the Darfur "uprising": "To destroy (the rebels) militarily."

In contrast, he said, JEM and other rebel groups had shown themselves dedicated to peace, by, for example, contributing to peace talks (that eventually led to the failed Darfur Peace Agreement (DPA)) between the Sudan government and the largest rebel group in the region, the Sudan Liberation Movement.

El-Faki repeatedly emphasized that JEM stood for "peace, genuine peace. We want sustainable peace.... We are extending our hands to a peaceful settlement" and that military action was the rebel group's last resort.

He said the "only thing" that would save Sudan from "fragmentation" and "disaster" was a broad peace settlement that took into account, all of Sudan, not just Darfur or just the south. That process, he insisted, should be implemented according to specific timeframes, and strict monitoring by the international community.

3. Dr. Gerard Prunier

[Dr Gerard Prunier is a French-Canadian internationally respected Africa specialist. He obtained a PhD in African history from the University of Paris, and is currently a researcher and international political consultant on East and Central African Affairs based in Addis Ababa. He's spent the last 40 years in East and Central Africa.]

Prunier said that for the first 50 years of Sudanese independence, the “common wisdom was the conflict in the Sudan was a religious conflict between Christianity and Islam. And for the past five years, that explanation has just completely evaporated with Darfur. Muslims are killing Muslims, so perhaps the explanation of the first 55 years was wrong.”

He set out to explain why Muslims were killing Muslims in Darfur. The first reason for this, according to Prunier, was something he referred to as “differential integration.” For various historical reasons, he emphasized, Darfur has always been separate from the rest of Sudan because it had never been part of the Nile valley, nor of the eastern reaches of the land. “The core elements of Darfur is western African, Sahelian western African.... Now, of course, it would be unthinkable to have an independent Darfur - but it doesn't mean that Darfur is blended into a nation state that we could call the Sudan. It's absolutely not the case. Actually Darfur is not even blended into itself. So, (it's) even less (integrated) than the rest of the so-called Sudan.”

Prunier named the second reason for the Darfur conflict as “colonial neglect.”

Here, the British colonialists had never given a “damn” about Darfur, he said. Indeed, “they got it dumped on their lap, completely because of World War One causes. They didn't want it. Actually, they argued with the French and with the Italians, Why don't you take it? Darfur could have been a part of Libya; Darfur could have been a part of Chad, if the French or the Italians had agreed. Because the Brits said, frankly, we've got other things to think about; we're fighting the Turks on the Suez Canal (for example).” Once the British had possession of Darfur, Prunier argued, “they didn't know what to do with it. So they didn't do anything at all.”

The British colonial overlords spent so little money on Darfur that in 1928, the region represented a miniscule one per cent of Sudan's tax revenue base.

Prunier pointed out that according to the 1956 census in Sudan, “Darfur was between 13 and 16 per cent of the population.... Yet revenue was only one per cent. That shows it was a dirt-poor area. Darfur has never been exploited; there was nothing to exploit. The Brits didn't try to turn it into anything whatsoever.... Darfur was a periphery of a periphery.”

To further emphasize his point, Prunier added that in Khartoum at the time of independence, about 55 per cent of Sudanese had some schooling, but in Darfur, “less than 12 per cent of the people ever attended any kind of school.”

The analyst's third reason behind the Darfur situation was what he called “independence hijacking.”

Darfur, he maintained, had in fact always been marginalized in the “discourse on Sudanese nationalism” leading up to independence in 1956. “A place like Darfur simply had no say whatsoever in the structure and features (of) an independent Sudan at the time of independence. It was outside the discourse. It was completely on another planet in terms of the choices that were to be made for an independent Sudan.”

His fourth reason was what he called “the post-1956 zero sum game.”

Prunier presented figures which demonstrated that over the years, Darfur's population had grown at a faster rate than its economy. "So you have an area which is already dirt poor, with the population growing faster than the economy. As a result, the per capita income is declining steadily in the years that follow independence. This is a zero sum game...."

And virtually all of Sudan's wealth and power, he asserted, had always been in the hands of a very specific "elite" which had through the years managed to stay in power by cleverly integrating some individuals from so-called marginal groups – such as those from Darfur and southern Sudan – into their power structure.

"This is how they've survived over the years. This is their genius."

Prunier said the "stupidity" of other Sudanese political parties that have failed to survive, or to successfully challenge the ruling elite, was that their leadership was made up purely of certain exclusive ethnic Arab groups.

In contrast, "the intelligence of the (Sudanese elite) has been to integrate some black people, some eastern people, some people from Darfur, into their power structure in homeopathic doses." Prunier stated that the al-Bashir elite had taken these elements from marginalized groups and "sprinkled them into the domination structure. It's extremely clever."

He described Sudan's ruling elite as the "most intelligent, most clever group of people who have ever ruled Sudan"... but also the "most dangerous."

Prunier said the unequal status quo through the years was bound to remain because it was only economic growth that allowed for the integration of peripheral people, and there was no economic growth in the Sudan until 1999: "In global terms, nothing until the oil economy."

He added: "The problem is that the oil economy is being hijacked by the state, and it is not being used.... in a wider way for the economic growth of the population."

This was typical of almost every other oil-producing nation, including Angola, Nigeria and Algeria. Sudan was just following a "pattern," Prunier commented.

The analyst said the fifth reason behind the Darfur violence was the discrimination suffered by the people of the region.

He disagreed with Eltigani and others of the Khartoum government who maintained that the Darfur conflict was as a result of inter-tribal battles for scarce resources, and other such factors. It was not caused by natural catastrophes but rather was "human-made conflict." Prunier said natural disasters such as drought and desertification certainly exacerbated the problems in Darfur, but were not the primary causes of the death and destruction in the area.

Furthermore, the Khartoum government had not done much to manage such natural disasters: "Dr Eltigani is right; there was the phenomenon of desertification (in Darfur) and the problems with the relationship between the nomads and the settled peasants,

but how is it dealt with? In a way that would make it more bearable, or in a way that would make it worse?"

Prunier added that Libya was a "hidden hand" behind the Darfur situation. He described the introduction of Libya and that country's "Arab supremacists" into the situation as "so toxic".

On ethnic cleavages in the region, he said that the so-called "Arabs of Darfur" – including the Janjaweed militia – were not viewed by the Arab elites in Khartoum and elsewhere as being 'pure' or 'true' Arabs because they had darker skin. While they were Arabs, they are second-class Arabs. There you have a whole sort of sadomasochistic relationship.... Those Arabs of the west (of Sudan) look down on the others who are really black Africans. Then they go to the south and they fight the southerners. So you have a system of everyone trying to pass as better than the other and looking down on the other segments of the population as worse than they are."

In conclusion, Prunier said all the complex and historical causes behind the conflict in Darfur made it "extremely difficult to get out of. It is not something where you can just click your finger (and end it), because the systemic causes are there, and they have to be dismantled before any solution can be brought. Of course, if people don't want to dismantle them, it doesn't help. But even if you want to dismantle them, it is not something where a little bit of good will (will suffice). No. This is much more serious than that."

Comments and Questions after the panel

A member of the government of Sudan asserted that the JEM was "confusing everything" by maintaining that racial discrimination was a basis for the conflict in Sudan: "That's not the case in Darfur and Sudan.... We are in the process of building our nation. We have problems of development."

He said Khartoum had been unable to solve "the problems of development" in Darfur because the task was too large and the government's ability to develop Sudan had been curtailed by "sanctions and embargos, and a war with the south...."

The GoS member also denied that Khartoum had marginalized certain Sudanese groups. He pointed that the government had since the 1980s appointed five cabinet ministers from Darfur, as well as 15 diplomats from the area.

He acknowledged that there were "some problems" in Darfur but maintained that his government had "at least tried" to address these: "It is not sufficient, maybe, but at least the government has tried to address injustice."

He urged patience until Sudan's general elections – scheduled for 2009 – which he said offered an ideal opportunity for "certain imbalances" in Sudan to be corrected.

In response, Jem's El-Faki agreed that there were more people from Darfur currently in the Sudan government, but said it was "not enough" and was rather part of a strategy of "manipulation" by the al-Bashir administration. El-Faki also claimed that the appointees from Darfur in reality had no real power: "The decision-making, and the most important

ministerial jobs, have not yet been given to people of the marginalized areas. It still remains in the hands of the National Congress Party and specifically within those three ethnic groups: the Shaigiya, the Jaalin and the Danagla. Race has led to nepotism.” El-Faki stressed that the people of Darfur could not wait until 2009 for the “imbalance of power and wealth” to be solved, while people were dying by the day. He also had little confidence in the elections, as El-Faki maintained the process was set to be manipulated in favor of the ruling party, which had all the “power and wealth, and what do the indigenous, marginalized people have against that power of wealth? Nothing.”

A question from the audience raised the controversial issue of the numbers killed and displaced in Darfur so far.

In response, Eltigani said the UN had estimated that there were about 625 000 people in displacement camps: “But there are (also) those who are affected by the war, who are not in the camps. The total of the displaced and the affected goes up to two million.”

He maintained that it remained unclear exactly how many people had been killed in, or died as a result of, the Darfur conflict.

“There is no body count in Darfur; nobody can say exactly what is the number.... I doubt very much that if we said 2 000, 11 000, 15 000.... Nobody can say what exactly is the number. On what basis can they give that number?” he asked.

Prunier responded: “The Sudan government doesn’t want a mortality study on Darfur, for obvious reasons. It’s still pretending there were only 10 000 (killed or died).”

He said his “personal estimate” was that “around half a million people have died so far. I would say out of this half million, probably no more than 80 000 were killed. The rest died. But if you are made to die, you are killed.”

Prunier took pains to differentiate between those who had been “killed” in Darfur, and those who had “died” there as a result of the situation.

Prunier also dismissed the government of Sudan’s contention that “integration” of all ethnic groups in Sudan was happening, simply because members of such groups were found in all parts of the country, as “nonsense.” He said economic reasons, and efforts to survive, had driven Darfurians and other marginalized groups in Sudan away from their home areas and into places like Khartoum and Port Sudan.

El-Faki said it was Jem’s estimate that more than 300 000 people have died so far in Darfur, but he made the point that even if the mortality was a mere 10 000, as asserted previously by President al-Bashir, that number, too, was evidence of widespread atrocities in Darfur.

El-Faki contended that at least three and a half million Darfurians had so far been displaced, and that there were an additional half a million refugees in Chad.

ENDS PART ONE