



# Rights NOW

The newsletter of the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee

## The Challenge of Darfur

By Sarah M. Peck

The situation in Darfur is far from simple. Darfur, a region of Sudan roughly the size of Texas, began to unravel in 2003, when two rebel organizations attacked a government installation in North Darfur. The rebels and their supporters sought equal treatment for the people of Darfur, who have suffered years of neglect and discrimination at the hands of the Sudanese government.

The government responded swiftly and violently, arming Arab militia groups — commonly known as the Janjaweed — to attack civilians in a brutal scorched-earth campaign. The Sudanese army often participated alongside the Janjaweed, bombing and burning villages; killing, raping, and kidnapping civilians; and driving people out of their homes. The government, however, flatly denies any links with the Janjaweed.

Many have described this conflict as one simply between “Arabs” and “black Africans.” However, it is better characterized as a government-driven campaign of violence that has pitted pastoralist Arab ethnic groups against non-Arab agriculturalist ethnic groups.



UUSC works in Darfur to protect women and girls from sexual and gender-based violence, and leads an advocacy effort — Drumbeat for Darfur — to mobilize to end the genocide.

2006 Courtesy of Erin Boyd

Today, large parts of Darfur lie in smoking ruins, with over 300,000 dead, 2 million internally displaced, and another 250,000 refugees in Chad.

Four years later, the situation has cracked wide open. Arab militias and rebel factions have splintered, fighting each other, attacking civilians, and participating in banditry and armed attacks on humanitarian-aid groups, as well as African Union troops.

The Mahria and the Terjem, two Janjaweed groups that drove the Fur ethnic group off their lands, are now battling each other for that land and resources. This exemplifies the new Arab-on-Arab violence that is developing alongside the continuing violence, with each group seeking to secure as much land and resources as

they can before a resolution to the violence is reached.

While there have been attempts at peace talks, the stubbornness of the Sudanese government and the splintering of the rebel forces have so far prevented any real progress. Only one rebel group signed the

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## The Challenge of Darfur

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Darfur Peace Agreement in July 2006, which has done little to improve the situation on the ground. Subsequent attempts at negotiation have failed.

Amid this high-level insecurity, the African Union maintained 7,000 soldiers and police, which did not have a mandate to protect civilians. These troops were also chronically under-funded and found themselves under attack by armed groups in Darfur.

On July 31, 2007, the United Nations approved a United Nations-African Union Hybrid Operation in Darfur, UNAMID, which does have a mandate to use force, if necessary, to protect civilians and uphold the Darfur Peace Agreement.

The international community is pinning its hopes on UNAMID as the best way to stop the violence. This 27,000-member force could be an effective way of restoring some order to the region, but its success depends on the international community's strong and consistent support. As this article went to press, UNAMID is on the ground in Darfur, but still lacks funding and other necessities, such as helicopters and landing areas. The peacekeeping force also has yet to reach its full 27,000-member complement.

### What UUSC is doing

UUSC is addressing the Darfur genocide in two ways: working on the ground to protect women and girls from sexual and gender-based violence, and leading an advocacy effort — Drumbeat for Darfur — which engages in long-term lobbying efforts and mobilization to end the violence.

Systematic rape and gender-based violence is being used in Darfur against women as a weapon of war, leaving behind long-term emotional and physical scars for survivors and their communities. Armed groups attack women and girls when they leave their villages and internally displaced persons (IDP) camps to search for firewood, water, and grass for fodder. Traditionally, this is women's work, and women in the camps have explained that men have not taken on the role because, if found, they would be killed, while “we are only raped.”

Generally in conflict situations, rape is committed with relative impunity, and in Sudan, protection systems for women are close to nonexistent. Under Sudanese law, if a woman does not produce a witness to rape, she will be in danger of being convicted of adultery. One middle-aged survivor living in an IDP camp told a UUSC representative that she was raped while collecting firewood. She said she received treatment from the government hospital, but that the attending doctor refused to believe that she had been raped. He told her she was unclean and accused her of committing adultery.

UUSC is developing both income-generation projects and alternative-fuel possibilities for internally displaced women to limit their need to leave the camps and thereby reduce their vulnerability

In South Darfur, UUSC has engaged a consultant to work with women in newly established women's centers inside IDP camps. Our consultant has overseen an income-generation study for 10 camps and has found several alternative money-earning

projects. She has trained 15 male camp leaders about gender-based violence and brought women's voices to that discussion. This is critical as one reason why women in Darfur are vulnerable to rape is that, as a group, they often lack the standing to raise their protection issues with camp leadership. Already, six leaders have agreed to form gender-based violence committees within their camps.

### What you can do to help

#### Join the Drumbeat for Darfur

By joining UUSC's advocacy effort to end the genocide — Drumbeat for Darfur — you will be kept up to date on important policy issues, legislation, and developments on the ground. UUSC will give you targeted action points, helping you focus on the most critical issues affecting Darfur. To join, visit [www.uusc.org/drumbeatfordarfur](http://www.uusc.org/drumbeatfordarfur) or e-mail [drumbeatfordarfur@uusc.org](mailto:drumbeatfordarfur@uusc.org).

#### Communicate with your legislators

UUSC is pushing for specific U.S. legislation aimed at helping the people of Darfur. At our recent D.C. Days of Action (December 8-10, 2007), UUSC activists and supporters urged their senators to appropriate \$724 million in funds for the UNAMID mission. Ongoing advocacy is critical to ensuring effective peacekeeping forces are placed on the ground to protect lives and end the killing.

#### Donate to UUSC's Darfur program to protect women from rape and gender-based violence.

To make your donation online, visit [www.uusc.org/darfur/donate.html](http://www.uusc.org/darfur/donate.html).

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