

NIAS-IPRI Brief

Failing Peace in Darfur

Multiple Actors, No Outcome

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The Darfur conflict is the first genocide of the 21st century that remains unresolved and fuming after 18 years. The multiple attempts to reach peace have simultaneously remained a failed endeavour. The questions of religious identities, ethnicities and political representation impeded the realization of conflict resolution. The brief will attempt to analyse the reasons behind why the Darfur peace agreements stand as glaring examples of failed negotiations and strategies.

Introduction

The Darfur conflict, infamously remembered as the ‘First Genocide’ of the 21st century remains as an obtrusive example of failed peace initiatives and negotiations in the Sudanese history. Since 2003, the Darfur conflict has emerged as a matter of contention and stretched but fruitless deliberations at both regional and international platforms. The widened ethnic and religious divide caused due to the corrupt and incompetent governance has enabled the conflict to escalate to catastrophic extends resulting in death of thousands, war crimes like rape and systematic torture to remain rampant and displacement of millions from the region. The brief will trace through the past 18 years of discord and looks at the Darfur Peace Agreement (DPA), the various ceasefires, and attempt to understand the limitations and the possible reasons that caused an obvious failure to the peace process.

Understanding the role of the actors

The Darfur conflict is between the Rebels or Darfur Militias and the Sudanese Popular defense forces. The militias are collectively called the Sudanese Revolutionary Front (SRF) or simply the ‘Resistance’. The SRF constitutes of two main large militias, the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM), Sudanese Liberation Movement/ Army (SLM/A) and various other minor

factions from Zaghawa, Masalit and Fur communities of the region. On the other side, the Sudanese defense forces are aligned with a local Arab militia called 'Janjaweed' which has now been transformed to a formal military force recognized by the Sudanese Government called the Rapid Support Force (RSF)¹.

Both sides have alleged to have committed war crimes including indiscriminate attack on civilians, rape, extra-judicial executions and Genocide. As a collective initiative from UN and African Union, a peace keeping force (United Nations – African Union Mission in Darfur, UNAMID) was also on the ground since 2007, but had withdrawn completely by 2019.

A brief background

The Darfur region is the country's most inaccessible region which had remained as an independent Islamic sultanate in the western regions of country. Darfur was made a part of Sudan in 1916 by the British. The region has over 80 ethnic communities, the most predominant among them were the Masalit, Zagawa and the Fur. Unlike the rest of Sudan, Darfur has large number of communities practicing Christianity and African tribal animism, but throughout history the people integrated well via exogamous marriages and other social interactions creating a complex social fabric. Like most parts of the Sahel, majority of the demography is engaged in agricultural and pastoral activities for income, thus making land and water the most contested natural resources. Conflicts in the region can be traced back to 1930's when tribes engaged in occasional confrontations over the ownership of pastoral and grazing land and water. The increasing desertification and recurring droughts resulted in heightened tensions between the communities. The influx of cheap weapons from conflict ridden neighbors like Chad and Central African Republic resulted in a violent atmosphere. The region is also infamous for its Apartheid trends between Arabs and Non-Arabs.²

Pan-Arabism and exclusionary identity politics

The rise of Pan-Arabism in the neighbouring Libya and Egypt resulted in the formation of a small political elite in capital Khartoum who were largely Muslims, they monopolized both economy and the politics of the country. Regions like Darfur in the peripheries of the country was often left out from development and welfare, this created a bitter impression among the

¹ Brenden Koerner, "*Who are the Janjaweed, a guide to Sudanese Militiamen*", The Slate.com, 2004

² Ahmed Sikainga, "*World worst Humanitarian crisis, Understanding the Darfur conflict*", Origins, 2005

Non- Arabs and Non-Muslim communities of the region and accused the government for systematic marginalization. The situations in Darfur spiraled down into a complicated affair during the reign of Omar Al Bashir, the former president who was ousted out of power in 2019 and is currently serving imprisonment. Developmental activities in Sudan were concentrated in the capital Khartoum and the nearby districts which are largely inhabited by the Arabic speaking Muslims who are politically elite, leaving rest of the country deprived of betterment. To Darfur, this was discriminatory on the lines of religion and ethnicities. Much of Darfur is underdeveloped, resources are contested and scantily available, lacks basic infrastructures like hospitals and educational institutions and most importantly the ethnic communities had strong impression that an adequate political representation from the region was restricted by Khartoum and the Muslim elites.

The publication and distribution of '*The Black Book: Imbalance of Power and Wealth in Sudan*' in 2000, brought in stark images of the dire situations in the country to the larger public which was already under the grip of strong sense of resentment and grief, galvanized the public sentiments³. Disproportionate development, discriminatory behavior and preferential political control from the authorities encouraged various factions to emerge across the country to represent their interests, some of which have evolved into armed militias.

The inception to the existing chain of events can be traced to the early violent attacks led by the SLA. Since 2002, the group has been active in the region. The rebels attacked police stations, army garrisons and patrolling troops. Much of the early rebel activities went unnoticed as Khartoum was engaged in the Second Sudanese Civil War and most of the armed forces were deployed to establish control in the regions where the civil war was fought. On 25th of April 2003, the SLA entered Al-Fashir, the capital city of North Darfur and raided the army garrison. The rebels were met with an unprecedented success, much of the army machineries including bombers and helicopters were destroyed. This incident left the armed forces and the government humiliated. Subsequently, various successful attacks were launched by the SLA in nearby districts causing further insecurity and created strategic instability in the region.

³ Alex Cobham, "*Causes of Conflict in Sudan: Testing the Black Book*". Queen Elizabeth House, University of Oxford, 2005

Spiraling of the conflict

The government responded with mobilizing aerial forces with sharpened military intelligence to fight the SLA and the Justice and Equality movement (JEM), another armed militia in the region. The armed forces upped their offensive by arming the Baggara herders nicknamed as the '*Janjaweed*' or the 'the Devils on horse-back. The Janjaweed was an Arab pastoralist community which maintains conflicting interests with the Fur, Zagawa and Masalits. These herders emerged brutally effective and became a key element in the government's response to the growing threat posed by the Darfur rebels. The defense forces aligned with the armed Janjaweed militants engaged in a scorched earth policy, villages were raided and destroyed indiscriminately, agricultural lands and pastoral animals were either looted or slaughtered.

State-controlled media and undocumented war crimes

The media in the country was largely under the direct overseeing of the government, thus many reports regarding the crimes of war such as rape, torture went undocumented in the early periods of the war. Various reports also suggest that mass Extra-judicial executions at the hands of the defense forces were common during the days of heightened conflict. The only means to information regarding the violence was the evidences collected by the humanitarian officials in the region. According to various sources, the Janjaweed militants always were in larger numbers than the armed forces. Most reports generated during this period suggests that, the majority of the victims were men. By the early 2004, due to the increasing influx of migrants into neighboring countries fleeing from the growing insecurity attracted international attention.

Regional consequences

The Darfur conflict escalated which made an immediate cessation nearly impossible. The government was accused of aiding the Janjaweed militants to effectively engage in an ethnic cleansing in which thousands were massacred. Mass executions became a norm in the region, according to humanitarian officials, for instance, on March 5th 2004, government and Janjaweed forces executed 145 members of Fur tribe, including several tribal chiefs. Women and children were highly victimized during the period, they were exposed to rape and other forms of sexual abuses⁴. As a means to flush out the SLA and JEM, the access to humanitarian aid and assistance to Darfur was restricted by the governmental forces, causing many

⁴ Human Rights Watch, "*Darfur Destroyed: Ethnic cleansing by Government and Militia forces in Sudan*", Human rights watch Publication, 2004

civilians to die from malnutrition and lack of medical care. It also forced millions to migrate to Chad and CAR seeking asylum, resulting in regional instability.

The conflict remains unabated, with millions forced to flee and thousands mounting up dead. The scenario was expected to take a positive turn after 2019, when the former president was ousted from power and replaced with a military-led civilian transitional government.⁵ Despite of various renewed efforts for resolution the region remains highly volatile.

From Ceasefires to Peace process: Challenges and Consequences

Talks to establish peace and order was initiated as early as 2003, beginning with the Ndjamenan peace talks held under the mediation of Edris Deby, the then President of Chad which climaxed in 2004 at a failed ceasefire agreement. Later, under the leadership of African Union (AU), Peace Negotiations were held in Addis Ababa (2004), Abuja (2004,2005) which failed to create a significant impact. The Abuja peace talks resulted in the signing of Comprehensive Agreement (CPA) in 2005 which formalized Darfur Peace Agreement (DPA) (2006), with representatives from AU, the UN and dignitaries from the US.

A strategic ceasefire to negative peace talks

A distinctive commonality among the various peace initiatives adopted through the course of time was ceasefires being an integral part of the peace deal. An immediate stoppage of violence which could only be established through an actionable ceasefire was essential for the implementation of the conditions of the agreements. Ideally a ceasefire calls out for the stopping of confrontations and provide room for dialogue, re-development, distribution of aid and assistance and so on, but in case of Darfur the outcomes were quite the contrary. The Ndjamenan peace talks proved futile, as the 45-day ceasefire was immediately violated in matter of days by the government, and on the rebel side, the Chadian mediation was seen suspicious and their neutrality was under doubt.

Negotiation by multiple actors

The Addis Ababa and Abuja peace talks under the mediation of AU chalked out ceasefires, but both parties raised mutual accusations and the ceasefire was short lived. An immediate result of the peace agreement was the deployment of peace-keeping troops from Rwanda and

⁵ Muhammad Osman & Bearak Max, "Sudan's Omar Hassan Al-Bashir is ousted by military after 30 years in power", Washington post, 2019

Ethiopia, the troop failed to establish a grip over the conflict as their presence exacerbated the violence.

The role of the UN

The United Nations took an active role with coordination from African Union during the second round of Abuja talks in 2005, which resulted in long and exhaustive debates and in the second deployment of the largest peace keeping troop in North Africa at that period. The Abuja peace talks culminated eventually in the formation of the first Comprehensive Peace agreement nearly after a year and half. The peace agreement was internationally acclaimed as it called out for an immediate ceasefire to ensure safe and smooth accessibility of aid to the conflict region. It also provided options to improve political representation of Darfur in the capital and most importantly advised upon the de-militarization of Janjweed rebels.

The 2006 peace agreement alike its precursors had very little success. By the time of agreement, only one faction from the SLA signed the peace agreement while others abstained and boycotted the deal. The ceasefire held absolutely no value as, the rebels raised their concerns about having their strongholds being attacked in the absence of their leadership during the negotiations. Two subsequent peace agreements were signed in 2011 and 2020, with very little improvement in the situations.

Lack of political will

At the governmental side was a primary reason for the disastrous outcomes of various peace initiatives. The government since the inception looked out for means to control the situation militarily as they feared establishing a dialogue with rebels can in turn legitimise the rebel position. The mutual suspicion held by both groups made it extremely difficult to agree upon terms, and the past history of repeated violation of ceasefires and other agreements questioned the government's credibility. The rebel groups lost their collective consensus gradually, and various splinter groups emerged on the lines of ethnicities, this weakened their position, in 2006 only one minor faction within the SLA was part of the peace agreement which eventually led to its failure.

Incompetent Mediation

Throughout the various Peace talks, one feature stood out as an obvious flaw was failed mediation. When the mediation parties fail to effectively execute their required actions thus the negotiation is doomed to fail. During the 2004 Abuja peace talks, the mediator from AU

lacked proficiency in both English and Arabic, and it required a French translator. Similarly various discrepancies were reported among the ceasefire documents. The mediation was also criticized for their flawed deadline-diplomacy strategy, which coerced the rebels to come into agreements without much consultation.

Absence of an Effective Mechanism

Most peace initiatives and ceasefire failed at the early stages primarily because there was no entity to supervise the implementation and its continuity. Fundamentally a clear asymmetrical representation was evident during the course of the peace initiatives, as the rebels lacked the expertise to engage in peace talks resulting in inefficacious deals.

Conclusion

In 2019, when Omar Al Bashir was overthrown from power by the military of the country, there was much optimism among the larger populace. The transitional government was entrusted to deliver justice and betterment. But the recent trends suggest otherwise.

Migrants from Darfur who fled from the horrors at the hands of Janjweed in Chad and other neighbouring countries returned back with hopes of rebuilding their homeland, this has resulted in resurgence of violence. Western Darfur, which was largely untouched by any conflict in the last decade has emerged as the new focal point. According to various reports, the non-Arabs have initiated to re-arm themselves to resist against the growing threats from the government forces and the Arabs. The government's failure to demilitarize the Janjaweed Militia, instead authorizing and upgrading the force into formal organization has led to much discontent in the country. Under various mediation and initiative, sustainable peace was never achieved in the region. Ceasefires that can act as precursor or facilitator to achieve peace was never effectively enforced, due to the various reason discussed earlier, and such impediments shall emerge in the future with very little scope for a comprehensive resolution.

Fundamentally both blocs in the conflict had failed to adhere to the conditions of the ceasefire, instead utilized it as an interval to re-arm, re-group, recruit and in some cases violate the ceasefire. The only way to resolve such tendencies is to establish an authoritative body to enforce a conduct to ensure smooth transition to peace. Both regional and international players must collectively invest in this regard to prevent regional instability in the Horn of Africa.










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