Dateline Darfur: Of Monsters and Saints, Villains and Victims

By **Ayesha Kajee** | Wednesday, August 23, 2006, published in *The Globalist*

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At least according to Hollywood celebrities, the continuing conflict in Darfur is a black and white issue. However, as Johannesburg-based Ayesha Kajee explains, the conflict, and who's to blame, is much more complex. In fact, even well-intentioned Western aid may be in part responsible.

Often, when researchers and writers analyze and categorize war and war criminals, we tend to make conflicts sound much more orderly — and sometimes far more one-dimensional — than the chaos and anarchy experienced by those directly affected by the hostilities.

Each one of us, as recipients of information, ought to examine more closely what we read, see and hear and to interrogate the reasons behind the degree of interest shown by the big media houses.

In surveying recent coverage of international criminal justice, for example, the non-expert reader could readily conclude that Slobodan Milosevic and Charles Taylor, with a few cohorts like Ratko Mladic and Friday Sankoh, were almost solely responsible for the respective atrocities unleashed in the Balkans and West Africa.

Labeling individuals and groups as monsters or saints, villains or victims is both tempting for the writer and attractive to the reader — since it places the incomprehensible into a familiar frame of reference.

Who's to blame

But this tendency to paint things in black and white, with few shades of grey, while allowing most of us to remain in our comfort zones, is both naïve and dangerous.

Few would deny the culpability of despots like Milosevic and Taylor, and rightly so. However, in our zeal to see these tyrants receive justice, we may lose sight of the various nuances that shade conflicts and of the culpability of others, including the "international community."

Go ahead, scratch the surface

As outsiders removed from the physical and political battlefields, we pride ourselves on our neutrality, independence and objectivity. But if we fail to dig deep enough, we sometimes ignore the geopolitical and strategic issues, often resource-driven, that may have originally fomented or exacerbated the fighting.

At other times, in order to support the frame of reference that we have established, we may disproportionately highlight or downplay factors such as ethnicity, religion, regionalism and language.

My work in politics, human rights and transnational justice — combined with trips to countries such as Sudan, Rwanda, Angola and Zimbabwe — has brought home to me that the reality experienced by civilians often differs vastly from what is depicted in the media and in analytical tomes.

The recaltricant parties who refused to sign the recent Darfur Peace Agreement may well be capitalizing on the attention that the region is receiving.

Outside interference

An unpalatable truth is that, at various times, conflict levels can either be greatly reduced or significantly exacerbated by generally well-meaning "interference" from the outside.

The tragedy, of course, is that the international community has all-too-often been slow to respond when decisive action is most needed. The Rwandan genocide of 1994 is a case in point.

Why Darfur, why now?

On the other hand, those of us who mobilize against specific human rights violations would be horrified to think that sometimes such efforts can cause as much harm as they do good.

How many of those who protested in the recent mass campaigns for Darfur, for example, paused to question, "Why this specific conflict, right here, right now?" Nor do many people actively research the origins of the hostilities and contributing factors beyond what they imbibe from the mainstream media.

This observation is not meant in any way to negate the dire humanitarian crisis that currently exists in Darfur, nor to imply that the Darfur conflict is not a bloody and heinous one.

What lies beneath

Rather, it seeks to question why Darfur has become "the celebrity issue of the day", when similar situations in the Central African Republic, eastern Chad and northern Uganda, to name but a few, go largely unnoticed.

Indeed, within Sudan itself, reports from the impoverished Eastern region suggest that, in humanitarian terms, the people there are worse off than most Darfurians. Why have neither Hollywood nor the major media houses bothered to highlight these situations?

Simplified reality

Second, many reports of the Darfur conflict have framed it simplistically as a violent clash between rebel African militias with links to the southern Sudan Peoples' Liberation Army on the one hand, and Arabized pro-government "Janjaweed" troops on the other.

While this is not untrue, few reports have noted that the combatants on both sides are black Africans and that, unlike the earlier north-south civil war, most combatants on both sides in the Darfur conflict are Muslim.

Civilians now fear the rebel fighters as much as they fear the Janjaweed.

Fewer still have bothered to unpack the complex ethnic dimensions underlying the hostilities or the longstanding skirmishes between settled agrarian farmers and Arab-speaking nomadic pastoralists over land.

Ethnicity matters

Almost none have investigated allegations that while the government has armed the Janjaweed, recent weapons and vehicle acquisitions on both sides can possibly be linked to unrest across the border in Chad — and to attacks on peacekeepers and aid workers.

Third, it is worth noting that the recaltricant parties who refused to sign the recent Darfur Peace Agreement may well be capitalizing on the attention that the region is receiving.

The casualties of "peace"

Some analysts and diplomats feel that the holdouts are making "unreasonable and avaricious demands that would not have been deemed worthy of consideration before the international pressure

(to reach a peace deal in Darfur) became so strong."

While extended deadlines to sign the agreement have passed, the true losers are the civilians who continue to be killed and maimed by those who refuse to stop fighting.

Civilians now fear the rebel fighters as much as they fear the Janjaweed, with opportunistic factions inciting ethnic strife between the Zeghawa and Fur tribes in the region.

Spiking oil prices

Could the heightened international interest in Darfur be related to spiking global oil prices and studies suggesting that Darfur has potentially rich oil reserves, a factor that most mainstream media have downplayed over the past few years? With the continued rise of industrialized powers in Asia and their demands for fuel, competition for oil and other resources is set to increase.

Unexploited reserves

In Khartoum, sources across the party spectrum confirm that Darfur does have unexploited oil reserves, with some also citing the existence of uranium and bauxite in the region.

Though Darfur has been used as an example here, the dangers inherent in one-dimensional and incomplete analyses are mirrored in various wars around Africa.

From Congolese gold to Liberian diamonds and Nigerian oil, the politics of resources in conflict situations can rarely be discounted. Nor can the impacts of ethnicity and regionalism.

The fallacy of moral clarity

Writers and analysts need to guard against oversimplifying complex situations by pigeonholing combatants as "good" and "evil", without exploring the plethora of factors that underpin most conflicts.

Each one of us, as recipients of information, ought to examine more closely what we read, see and hear and to interrogate the reasons behind the degree of interest (or lack thereof) shown by the big

media houses and the mobilization of mass support for certain situations and not others.

The mask of "monster" or "saint" is easily painted on. As independent thinkers, we need to persistently seek the truth, in order to unmask all the villains and ensure justice for every victim.