

Eastern Sudan: A Forgotten Crisis

While the world's attention is fixed on the Darfur killing fields, eastern Sudan struggles to cope with nearly 200,00 displaced people.

By Ayesha Kajee in Johannesburg (AR No. 87, 13-Dec-06)

If Darfur, Sudan's neglected westernmost region, is the Cinderella of the country, then eastern Sudan must be its ugly stepsister.

Subjected to similar levels of marginalisation by the Khartoum government as Darfur, and a virtual absence of social service infrastructure, the humanitarian crisis in the east may be even worse than that in Darfur, according to some diplomats and aid workers.

Eastern Sudan, a vast sun-blasted terrain of some 300,000 square kilometres, is home to between 3 and 4 million of Sudan's poorest people.

The region has gold mines and gas reserves, and the east coast city of Port Sudan is essential for the export of the "black gold" (crude oil) to China and India that is the country's main revenue earner. But the per capita income in some areas is as low as 25 US cents a day. Since the World Bank's international poverty line categorises people living on less than one US dollar a day as being extremely poor, the inhabitants of eastern Sudan must rank among the most abjectly impoverished citizens on the globe.

While the world's attention is fixed on the Darfur killing fields and the plight of Darfur's refugees, the three eastern Sudanese states of Kassala, Red Sea and Gedaref together host about 74,000 internal refugees - called IDPs, internally displaced persons, by bureaucrats - and more than 110,000 refugees from neighbouring Eritrea and Ethiopia.

A number of refugee camps are so poorly resourced that they do not even have plastic tarpaulin to serve as shelter from the elements. Some refugees who fled to Sudan to escape recurrent warfare between Eritrea and Ethiopia have lived here in limbo for between two and four decades - a plight that the United Nations this year called "one of the ten most under-reported stories on earth".

The region has been subject to a low-intensity rebel insurgency over the past eleven years. The eastern rebels have had similar complaints to those in Darfur and southern Sudan - marginalisation and neglect - and their demands are similar too: they want greater power sharing and a larger proportion of the profits from Sudan's oil wealth.

Until recently, the Khartoum government's response to rebel strikes has been, as in Darfur, counter-insurgency by the Sudanese army and affiliated militias. The fighting has forced thousands from their homes in relatively fertile areas to camps in desert-like, drought-stricken areas.

Eritrea has armed and provisioned the eastern rebels in retaliation for Khartoum's support of Eritrean rebel groups. Most of the rebels are Beja herdsmen who wage hit-and-run attacks against government soldiers from the backs of their camels.

The eastern rebels have also received support from the southern Sudan People's Liberation Movement, SPLM, in the far south and the Justice and Equality Movement, JEM, which is one of the main rebel groups in Darfur.

After the signing of the north-south Comprehensive Peace Agreement, CPA, in January last year - painstakingly negotiated to end decades of conflict between the Muslim north and the Christian

and animist south - the Eastern Front, a coalition of rebels from the two largest ethnic groups in eastern Sudan, intensified their protests in anger at their exclusion from the agreement.

Sudanese government forces gunned down 27 peaceful demonstrators in Port Sudan last January, sparking an international outcry. The government also incarcerated rebel leaders without charge and allegedly tortured them, suspended humanitarian access, closed the border with Eritrea and imposed a state of emergency in an attempt to limit rebel activity.

The attempt proved misguided and backfired. Rebels stepped up attacks on such strategic government installations as the 1500-km Chinese-built oil pipeline which pumps 500,000 barrels of oil from the centre and south of the country to Port Sudan each day. Facing so much pressure from the Darfur conflict and preoccupied with handling the infant and fragile peace in the south, Khartoum needed "to put out this [east Sudan] fire", said Ahmed el-Amin Terik, an adviser to one of the eastern state governors. "It wasn't like the eastern rebels were so much of a threat. But even a mosquito doesn't let you sleep." The fighting in the east is estimated to have cost some 5,000 lives in the last ten years, compared with hundreds of thousands in Darfur and the south.

Conversely, the rebels realised that the planned withdrawal of SPLM troops and weapons from the east, under the north-south peace deal, would weaken their support base. Eritrea, desiring better relations with Sudan, hosted peace negotiations in Asmara, which culminated in the signing of a peace agreement between the Sudan government and the Eastern Front in mid-October 2006.

Under the agreement, a ceasefire was called and the eastern rebels got a presidential aide, several state ministers and members of parliament appointed from their ranks. It also guarantees that about 600 million dollars will be spent on health and water programmes for eastern Sudan over the next five years.

But the Sudan Human Rights Organisation, while welcoming the accord, expressed concerns that it "maintains the political hegemony of the ruling National Congress Party [in Khartoum] and doesn't provide sufficient funds to develop the region". Just as the May 2006 Darfur peace accord is routinely ignored by all its signatories, it is unclear as yet whether the eastern agreement will manage to stabilise eastern Sudan.

More than half a century of underdevelopment and neglect will take decades to reverse and will likely require billions of dollars. The infant mortality rate in Red Sea state is the highest in the country. Only 20 villages in there and 50 in Kassala State have access to healthcare. Half of Kassala State's population is chronically malnourished. Towns such as Tokar in Red Sea State are prone to both drought and summer floods, with more than 30,000 people affected by flooding this year alone.

In some regions, the literacy rate is as low as three per cent, a situation exacerbated by the conservative Muslim culture which predominates in the region and restricts education for women.

Religion is what brings the two parties in the Eastern Front together - the Beja Congress, representing the 2.4 million ethnic Beja people of the region, and the Rashaida Free Lions, a group who claim Arab descent. The Beja-Rashaida alliance, unusual between African and Arab tribes, was cemented through an influential religious Sufi movement, the Khatmiyyah Brotherhood.

Both groups were traditionally nomadic, but recurrent droughts and displacement due to conflict have forced many easterners to seek employment in urban areas. This has seen a mushrooming of slums around cities such as Port Sudan and Kassala, where Beja support is concentrated.

The rebels have settled for a lot less than they had initially envisaged. Though they had asked for one dollar from every barrel of oil shipped from Port Sudan, which would have netted them about

150 million dollars a year, they settled for 600 million dollars in development funds over a limited time-span. Also, Beja leaders had wanted regional autonomy but were placated with appointments in Khartoum instead. Rebels say they were pressed into accepting a diluted deal because of Eritrea's eagerness to normalise relations with Sudan.

The long-running Eritrea-Ethiopia cold war has shown signs of heating up once more, prompting the Eritrean government in Asmara to make moves to neutralise Sudan as a possible Ethiopian ally. The Eastern Front, which had largely operated out of rear bases in Eritrea, had little choice but to yield to Eritrean pressure.

Both the Beja and the Rashaida are proud peoples, a factor Khartoum needs to take heed of. Should the Sudanese government fail to fulfill its obligations to accelerate development and social service delivery in eastern Sudan, there could be Eastern Front attacks on the oil pipeline artery that delivers wealth to Khartoum's elites.

Saboteurs and hostage-takers in Nigeria and Iraq are pointing the way in which petro-economies can be held to ransom if they fail to take heed of local concerns. Given that the pipeline traverses much of eastern Sudan; that the Red Sea State hosts the nation's single deepwater port; and that impoverished, ultra-conservative communities are fertile breeding grounds for political and religious extremism, Khartoum needs to push development of the east.

The refugee situation has not been addressed by the Asmara peace agreement, and conscription-dodgers fleeing enforced military service in Eritrea continue to swell the ranks of refugees in eastern Sudan. New refugees are not allowed to work and have relied on humanitarian aid which has since been proscribed by the Sudan government. Eric Reeves, a Sudan analyst, says that Khartoum deliberately escalates "malnutrition and human mortality in eastern Sudan as part of a war of attrition against the people seen as supporting an insurgency movement (the Eastern Front)".

As a result, most refugees live in conditions where hunger is a constant and preventable diseases such as malaria take a grim toll. Despite the conservative culture, almost half of refugee households are headed by women, most of them widows. They are forced to earn money to supplement the meagre food rations that aid organisations manage to smuggle through to the region, but cultural constraints limit their mobility and the type of work they can do.

For those refugees who have lived in eastern Sudan since childhood, this is the only home they know, yet they cannot claim citizenship. Their only hope is that peace in the region may bring increased humanitarian aid, which could help to focus greater media attention on their plight.

With the ceasefire and a re-opening of the Sudan-Eritrea border, it is also hoped that regional trade, once a mainstay of areas such as Kassala, will be resumed. Leaders are trusting that stability will bring foreign aid and much-needed investment. But since the world has largely ignored eastern Sudan in its time of conflict, that indifference seems likely to persist unless global energy supplies are in the balance.

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