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# Complicating Darfur

DAVID LANZ

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REVIEW OF ALEX DE WAAL, ED.

***War in Darfur and the Search for Peace***

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The conflict in Darfur, as commonly reported by North American journalists and activists, has a familiar narrative. Darfur, in these accounts, is a place where history is of little importance in understanding the present, where an evil Arab government has induced Arab tribal militia to kill hundreds of thousands of innocent black African victims and displace millions more. The sole heroes in the tragedy are Western aid workers and activists who courageously save lives and speak out against the atrocities. Through these voices, Darfur is portrayed as a place where the forces of evil will continue to wreak havoc on a population of suffering victims without any agency until Western military forces intervene to save them.

*War in Darfur and the Search for Peace*, edited by Alex de Waal, fundamentally contradicts the simplicity of this typical mainstream account; indeed, it represents a welcome attempt to “complicate” the situation in Darfur. De Waal, an anthropologist currently based at Harvard’s Global Equity Initiative, is undoubtedly one of the foremost Sudan experts, having worked in (and on) the region for more than 20 years. *War in Darfur and the Search for Peace* features contributions from an impressive group of scholars from Sudan and the West. The result is a sophisticated and highly relevant collection of essays that is likely to become one of the most important reference guides on the conflict. The book addresses three main themes: first, the

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*David Lanz is a master’s degree candidate at The Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy. In summer 2007 he was a researcher with the United Nations Mission in Sudan (UNMIS). He currently works for swisspeace in Bern, Switzerland. Any views expressed here are those of the author only.*

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causes of the war; second, the international efforts to resolve the conflict; and third, how the conflict in Darfur has been described and perceived in the United States.

#### UNDERSTANDING DARFUR

The Darfur conflict is best understood as a “witch’s brew,” a convergence of local, national, regional, and international factors that erupted into massive violence in 2003.<sup>1</sup> Nationally, the roots of the conflict lie—similar to the long-lasting North-South war—in the central elite’s greed, the concentration of power and resources in Khartoum, and the systematic exploitation of the country’s peripheral areas. In terms of the conflict’s causes, de Waal links the center-periphery dimension with another persistent feature of Sudanese politics: “the inability of any one elite faction to establish unchallenged political dominance over the state.”<sup>2</sup> Thus, Sudan is a “turbulent state” affected by “chronic political instability,” making it impossible for its rulers to realize a long-term vision of democratic governance. Instead, as de Waal points out, they “have become skilled at the default option of short-term crisis management,” including the manipulation of provincial elites and the arming of tribal militias.

The piece “Native Administration and Local Governance in Darfur: Past and Future,” by Musa A. Abdul-Jalil, Adam Azzain Mohammed, and Ahmed A. Yousef, focuses on politics at the local level. The authors dissect the role of the native administration, a local governance system based on tribes that British colonial masters adopted from the pre-colonial Fur Sultanate and adapted for their “indirect rule” of Darfur. Post-independence governments have tried to undermine the authority of traditional tribal leaders and to instrumentalize them in order to gain control of Darfur. These policies have, according to the authors, “resulted in the politicization of the native administration and the increasing polarization between tribal groups in Darfur.”

Land is also relevant in this context, as Jérôme Tubiana, in “Darfur: A Conflict for Land?,” draws attention to the fact that Darfur’s traditional land tenure system, the *hakura*, excludes certain camel-herding Arab tribes of northern Darfur. Desertification, population growth, and asset depletion since the 1980s have fostered growing competition for land in Darfur and have threatened the existence of landless tribes. It is not surprising, Tubiana remarks, that the infamous *Janjaweed* militias consist primarily of young men from exactly these tribes.

Roland Marchal, in “The Unseen Regional Implications of the Crisis in Darfur,” contributes an interesting perspective on the regional dimen-

sion of the Darfur crisis. Given its central location, Darfur has become the terrain of regional power struggles, which contributed to upsetting a delicate balance between local tribes. In the 1980s, Libyan leader Colonel Muammar el-Qaddafi sought to topple then-Chadian leader Hissène Habré and used Darfur as a springboard for his military adventure. Marchal notes that, in this context, “Arab tribes benefited from generous military supplies, which helped militarize land disputes and social contradictions in Darfur.” Eventually Habré was brought down and, with the support of Tripoli and Khartoum, Idriss Déby, a member of the Zaghawa tribe from the border region between Darfur and eastern Chad, installed himself in N’Djamena in 1990. The Darfur conflict broke out 13 years later, and Déby remained neutral so as not to jeopardize his alliance with Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir, who had helped bring him to power. When Khartoum began sponsoring rebel groups in eastern Chad, Déby himself was put under pressure by members of his own Zaghawa clan. In this context, he desperately needed military support from the Darfur rebel movements, many of whose leaders are also Zaghawa. Consequently, the Chadian government began to provide logistical and military support to the rebels in 2005, protracting the conflict and turning Darfur into the stage for a regional proxy war.

It is no coincidence that Darfur’s current rebellion erupted when the North-South peace process was in its final stages. The fruit of this process, the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA), does not include specific provisions for Darfur. In his piece, “The Comprehensive Peace Agreement and Darfur,” Adam Azzain Mohammed points out that proponents argue for the CPA being “a charter for the transformation of governance in Sudan,” which benefits all the periph-  
 eries, including Darfur. However, as Mohammed argues, “the CPA cannot solve all of Darfur’s problems,” in particular with respect to power-sharing. Cognizant of the inadequacies of the North-South peace process, the Darfur rebels, following the example of the southern insurgents, the Sudan People’s Liberation Army/Movement (SPLA/M), decided to stage a rebellion in order to obtain compromises from the government at the negotiating table at a later stage. Also, the international community was heavily involved in the CPA negotiations and wanted to avoid “rocking the boat” by criticizing the Sudanese government for what was happening in Darfur.<sup>3</sup>

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## NEGOTIATING DARFUR

On May 5, 2006, the Sudanese government and the Minni Minawi faction of the Sudan Liberation Movement/Army (SLM/A) signed the Darfur Peace Agreement (DPA) in Abuja, Nigeria. A few months later, it was clear that the DPA was a complete failure; not only was the agreement never implemented, it actually made matters worse. In their piece, "Darfur After Abuja: A View from the Ground," Abdul-Jabbar Fadul and Victor Tanner confirm that violence actually increased after the DPA was signed, and that signatory and non-signatory rebel groups fought each other instead of uniting against the government. Significantly, the authors note, the DPA also compromised the neutrality of the African Union (AU) peacekeepers, who were obliged to defend a deeply unpopular agreement that most rebels vehemently resisted. As a result, attacks on peacekeepers multiplied.

Much of the second part of *War in Darfur and the Search for Peace* attempts to explain why the DPA failed so miserably. The shortcomings of the mediation and negotiation process, particularly in the final days leading up to the signing of the DPA, are the central focus of the book's contributors, all of whom, including de Waal, were members of the AU mediation team. Peace talks began in Abuja in July 2004, with little subsequent progress made until April 2006, when the international community—in particular the United States—lost patience and resolved to put an end to the negotiations by using "deadline diplomacy." One week later, just short of the deadline, the AU mediation team drafted a compromise proposal. International heavyweights, including former U.S. Deputy Secretary of State Robert Zoellick and Nigerian President Olusegun Obasanjo, then descended upon Abuja to close the deal. With the government's agreement to the AU mediation team proposal largely assured, Zoellick and Obasanjo turned their efforts to the rebel factions, using both threats and inducements to broker consent. Ultimately, Minawi signed, but both his SPLM/A rival, Abdel Wahid Mohamed al-Nur, and the leader of the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM), Khalil Ibrahim, refused to do so. In the weeks after the signature of the DPA, the AU continued to mediate between the Sudanese government and al-Nur, and apparently they came "desperately close to an agreement, which . . . would have tipped Darfur towards peace."<sup>4</sup> The authors of *War in Darfur and the Search for Peace* univocally blame the failure of the Abuja negotiations on a rushed international community that destroyed the process by imposing artificial deadlines. In "The Making and Unmaking of the DPA," Laurie Nathan argues that the precipitous conclusion of the DPA hampered the flexibility of the mediators, contributed to a lack of direct

negotiations between the parties, made it impossible to involve stakeholders from Darfurian society and most importantly “precluded . . . the parties’ ownership of the DPA.”

Explaining the failure of the DPA, the contributing authors of *War in Darfur and the Search for Peace* place a surprisingly large emphasis on the negotiation process rather than the broader political context. Elsewhere, de Waal enumerates four conditions for successful peacemaking in Sudan: “solidification of central decision making . . . , cohesive leadership of the provincial insurgency, containment or resolution of conflicts in the neighboring states, and a cohesive international approach.”<sup>5</sup> As de Waal pointed out himself,<sup>6</sup> none of these conditions were met during the Abuja negotiations. One can argue, therefore, that given the political context, it was never realistic for the parties to achieve an effective and durable peace agreement for Darfur—even if al-Nur had signed the DPA and the final mediation had been less rushed and less manipulative.

The Abuja talks kept the parties engaged in a peace process and may have selectively contributed to de-escalating the conflict; however, the authors demonstrate that the DPA had an unmistakably negative impact on the situation in Darfur. It is not clear whether the Abuja negotiations have done more harm than good, and thus it is questionable whether peace talks should even have taken place under the prevailing conditions. Answering this extremely difficult political and moral question would be presumptuous. However, it is unfortunate that the book does not provide a more critical perspective on the limits of peacemaking as a conflict resolution tool and that it fails to assess the feasibility of alternative approaches.

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**NARRATING DARFUR**

The third part of the book describes the media coverage of the Darfur conflict in the United States. In her essay “Narrating Darfur: Darfur in the U.S. Press, March–September 2004,” Deborah Murphy examines more than 80 editorials and Op/Eds on Darfur. Most pieces perpetuated a “narrative, which assigned polarized Arab and African identities to the perpetrators and victims, usually labeled it genocide, and assumed the government control-

led the violence.” In terms of remedies, most writers urged outside military intervention, often invoking the shame of international inaction during the Rwandan genocide in 1994. Murphy finds that “most of the articles reviewed were not really about Darfur itself.” Rather, she says, “Darfur was the latest forum for the still-unresolved debate over what role the U.S. will play in the world when its values are in jeopardy but its interests are not at stake.”

Press reports were instrumental in the emergence of an influential Darfur advocacy movement in the U.S.—arguably the largest of its kind since anti-apartheid in the 1980s. There is no doubt that advocates have played a positive role, but at present they are stuck in the simplistic nar-

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rative they created to grab the world’s attention. “For them, Darfur is not a place with a complex history; it’s a moral high ground,” notes Julie Flint, an independent journalist and co-author (with de Waal) of *Darfur: A Short History of a Long War*.<sup>7</sup> Projecting remedies based on simplistic assessments and flawed analogies onto a complex reality can be dangerous. The full-fledged war and widespread campaigns of destruction of 2003–2004 are over, and the

humanitarian situation has become relatively stable. Therefore, de Waal argues, Darfur needs a viable political process, not foreign military intervention. In the concluding chapter, “Darfur’s Elusive Peace,” he complains that advocates’ insistence on military solutions and unrealistic demands for a robust UN peacekeeping mission undermined peacemaking efforts and accounted for U.S. impatience with the Abuja negotiations.<sup>8</sup>

The criticism could have been carried further and the perverse effects of Darfur advocacy campaigns more clearly identified. Elsewhere, de Waal has highlighted how dangerous it is to attribute collective victim and perpetrator labels to apparently distinct ethnic groups.<sup>9</sup> Quite obviously, this contributes to the polarization of already antagonistic identities. It also fosters neglect of reverse categories; the international community tends to brush aside crimes committed by “African” rebel movements and ignore the voices of moderate Arabs, who are hardly ever heard despite the crucial role that their empowerment plays in the peace process. Another problem relates to advocates’ insistence on labelling the conflict in Darfur as genocide, as well as their tendency to exaggerate the estimated number of people killed.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, this transforms concern for Darfur into an ineffective dis-



cussion about legal categories and numbers. Is it genocide or “only” crimes against humanity? Did 200,000 or 400,000 people die? Such debates carry a high opportunity cost in terms of energy, resources, and time. Resources spent arguing could be put to better use to try to improve the situation. *War in Darfur and the Search for Peace* provides a welcome antithesis to the simplistic nature of the current Darfur debate, which would have been even more useful had it formulated an explicit and comprehensive critique of the Darfur advocacy movement.

David Kennedy, a Fletcher School alumnus and recently appointed Vice President for International Affairs at Brown University, cautions us that “the darker sides can swamp the benefits of humanitarian work, and well-intentioned people can find themselves unwittingly entrenching the very things they have sought voice to denounce.”<sup>11</sup> The Darfur advocacy movement provides a case in point in this regard. Therefore, it is time for advocates to assess how far they have come and settle upon a new strategy for the future, one that will make a constructive contribution to a lasting resolution of the conflict in Darfur. Reading Alex de Waal’s new book on Darfur would be a good first step. ■

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**ENDNOTES**

- 1 Helen Young et al., *Darfur: Livelihoods under Siege* (Medford, MA: Feinstein International Famine Center, Tufts University, June 2005), 12-39.
- 2 Alex de Waal, “Sudan: The Turbulent State,” in de Waal, *War in Darfur*, 4.
- 3 Young et al., 24.
- 4 Alex de Waal, “Darfur Peace Agreement: So Near, So Far,” in *openDemocracy*, September 28, 2006, <[http://www.opendemocracy.net/democracy-africa\\_democracy/darfur\\_talks\\_3950.jsp](http://www.opendemocracy.net/democracy-africa_democracy/darfur_talks_3950.jsp)> (accessed November 4, 2007).
- 5 Alex de Waal, *Sudan: International Dimensions to the State and its Crisis* (London: LSE Crisis States Research Centre, Occasional Paper No. 3, April 2007), 15.
- 6 *Ibid.*, 18-19.
- 7 Julie Flint, “Darfur, Saving Itself,” *The Washington Post*, June 3, 2007, B2.
- 8 See also Alex de Waal, “Darfur and the Failure of the Responsibility to Protect,” *International Affairs* 83 (6) (2007): 1039-1054.
- 9 “Dueling Over Darfur” in *Newsweek*, November 8, 2007, <<http://www.newsweek.com/id/69004>> (accessed December 3, 2007). See also Alex de Waal, “Reflections on the Difficulties of Defining Darfur’s Crisis as Genocide,” *Harvard Human Rights Journal* 20 (Spring 2007): 25-33.
- 10 Sam Dealey, “An Atrocity That Needs No Exaggeration,” *The New York Times*, August 12, 2007, 10.
- 11 David Kennedy, *The Dark Sides of Virtue: Reassessing International Humanitarianism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), xiii-xiv.