

Diversionsary Tactics on Darfur

Anne Bartlett

Diversionsary tactics seem to be the order of the day where Darfur is concerned. The real tragedy of Darfur – the suffering of its people – has been forgotten under a sea of pointless initiatives, all of which seem to have only one goal in mind: to create enough confusion and chaos that the status quo will prevail. On the ground - and contrary to prevailing diplomatic speak - people continue to be killed and targeted in the Jebel Marra area by government forces that now have *carte blanche* to do what they like. Meanwhile, day after day we are treated to a circus-like environment in which more and more competing initiatives are announced. Of course none of them have a hope of working, but that isn't the point. For most of those involved, self-interest and geo-political gamesmanship have been put before human suffering – a point that is not lost on those living through this nightmare every day on the ground.

For the most part, Darfur has become a giant chess game in which everyone except the local people have a stake. For the National Islamic Front (NIF), chaos in Darfur creates a useful game of smoke and mirrors through which they are able to turn attention away from the possibility that they might be held accountable for their actions. To augment this strategy, the security and intelligence arms of the government are also working overtime, using oil money to bribe anyone to testify on their behalf. This situation has become markedly worse as a result of the relative impunity the Sudanese government now enjoys. Take for example the recent press conference by the oddly named “National Group for Correcting the Track of the Darfur Crisis” (NGCTDC). Their claim that external actors are manipulating and overstating the crisis is telling, as is the copious Sudanese Media Centre (SMC) coverage of their press conference which suggests clear government involvement.

Then of course, there is the US game of “soft diplomacy” with Scott Gration at the helm. For Gration the stated aim behind this softly-softly approach is to provide “leverage” so as to extract more concessions from the Sudanese government: a kind of carrot and carrot

approach. Yet for all the talk, his plan is strangely reminiscent of a dictator appeasement policy carried out with the clear aim of currying favor with China and smoothing the way with the enormous portions of American debt they hold. More problematic still, it seems to be ahistorical in scope, conveniently stepping over the NIF's track record and paying no strategic mind to the course of events that will be set in train over coming decades if extremists continue to control the largest country in Africa. This model of friendly condescension to locals and deals done under the table with dictators is fooling no one. As locals in Zam Zam and Abu Shouk camp recently pointed out, the US approach has done nothing to enhance their security or indeed their chances of survival.

As if the cynicism and manifest self-interest of western governments isn't bad enough, there are then the interventions by regional players in the crisis. The first of these is the Doha initiative. Aside from the obvious issue of Qatar's relationship with Sudan and of course, the disingenuous behavior on the part of the African Union, there is also the idiotic behavior by the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM) which seems to be desperately jockeying to maintain its position and promote the interests of its followers. Add to this heady mix, a bunch of cellphone commanders and their sidekicks who have no credibility in Darfur, and Doha becomes nothing more than a talking shop created and maintained by NIF and Turabi supporters. Whatever one might think about Doha, seriousness or the ability to effect change on the ground should not figure into the calculation.

Not to be outdone, there are parallel initiatives from Egypt. Take for example the agreement between JEM and the Umma Party in Cairo in July. To understand this, one has to understand the desperation of all parties involved. JEM, as previously stated, has a lot of weapons, but no influence on the ground. Their backer, Al-Turabi, desperately wants to get his foot back in the political door. His relative, Al-Mahdi, is no better. The Umma Party and Al-Mahdi have neatly sidestepped their responsibility for the mess in Darfur, despite their central role in creating and perpetrating ethnic divisions in Darfur going back as far as elections in 1968. The Umma party therefore has a history of using and abusing ethnic and religious politics in Darfur and that propensity has not changed. Finally Egypt has an interest in perpetuating instability in the region, because a chaotic and underdeveloped Sudan augments their power and influence. It also prevents anyone from looking too carefully at the looming water crisis in the region.

Then of course there is the Libyan involvement. Libya's role as a power player in the crisis is equally self-interested. From the early days and the deals done with Sadiq al-Mahdi to use Darfur as a weapons dump in his fight with the Chadians, to the attempts made to fracture and buy off factions of the Sudan Liberation Movement or Army (SLA) at the time of the Abuja talks, Gadaafi's role in this crisis is constant and unrelenting. Recent weeks have witnessed a new initiative around the establishment of Sudan's Liberation Revolutionary Forces (SLRF), with Libya attempting to create one structure before the resumption of peace talks in Doha. However, their lack of seriousness can be seen in the choice of candidate to lead such a group. Tigani Seisi Ateem, former Governor of Darfur, former sidekick of Al-Mahdi and staunch supporter of the politics of the center, cannot be considered a serious candidate to lead Darfurians anywhere. Besides his disastrous tenure as Governor of the region in which he sold the rights of the people of Darfur to the government and did next to

nothing to advocate for their interests, he has no respect or constituency on the ground and certainly no ability to effect change.

As I write this at the time of Eid, the ramifications of these interests become even more devastating. Before in Darfur, Eid was a time of unity. People moved from village to village greeting each other and wishing the best for the following year. Kids dressed in new clothes, ate halawa and looked forward to this day all year as a time of joy and a celebration of their culture. Today however, kids live in camps, many of them not knowing or experiencing what Eid was like before. Many of them have no hope for the future, no understanding of peaceful coexistence and no connection to the culture or society that created them.

For Darfurians the message should be clear: your strength lies in unity and understanding, not in division and hatred. The more Darfur is fractured, the more you allow the people of the region to be used by external parties for their own interests. The only way to stop this situation is to look internally and for the leaders of the region to stand up and be counted, not for their own benefit but for the benefit of their people. It is now 7 years since local people have experienced any normality whatsoever. Without a serious effort to redress the chaos that has been created by damaging agendas of the NIF, regional interests and western governments, there will be no future to look forward to. Herein lies the challenge and, in turn, your task for the year ahead.

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