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Darfur Rebels 101

By Omer Ismail and Maggie Fick | January 2009

It is conventional wisdom among diplomats, journalists, and analysts that Darfur's rebel groups are hopelessly fractured into scores of rival factions, most of which are little more than clusters of bandits who opportunistically profit from lawlessness and chaos that has resulted from the war.¹ At a recent event in Washington, D.C., a former White House special envoy for Sudan claimed that there are "dozens of independent groups operating in Darfur."² While this may have been true for a period of time, this narrative of an irreparably fragmented rebellion is music to the ears of the Sudanese government, its supporters, and those pundits who seek to find moral equivalency between the Sudanese government and Darfur's rebels. The facts on the ground tell a different story. While there are certainly divisions among the various rebel factions in Darfur, only four groups are relevant to peace negotiations, and the differences between them owe more to personal and ethnic rivalries than substantive disagreements over the issues central to most Darfuris.

This paper identifies key rebel groups, and explains what they represent, what divides them, and—most importantly—what could potentially *unite* them if a credible, sustained, and internationally backed peace effort was put in place. Based on the Enough Project's regular and extensive contacts with key rebel officials, our strongly held view is that Darfur's rebels largely agree on the basic issues that must be addressed in order to bring about peace in Darfur. These issues are: political empowerment, security guarantees, and restitution and post-conflict support for the victims of this conflict. Moreover, these core demands are consistent with those of Darfur's citizens, as represented by civil society groups, women's coalitions, and Diaspora organizations. As the U.N./AU mediation begins to circulate a framework agreement for Darfur, it can blunt the divisions amongst the major rebel groups by establishing an inclusive negotiation structure that involves Darfur civil society groups and by focusing negotiations on these shared core demands.

The major players among the rebel groups

The rebellion in Darfur has never been cohesive, but the decision by one rebel faction to sign a peace agreement with the government—the 2006 Darfur Peace Agreement, or DPA—significantly exacerbated pre-existing divisions, causing the rebels to splinter into a dizzying number of factions in the weeks and months that followed.³ To no one's surprise, a joint U.N./AU effort to hold new peace negotiations in Sirte, Libya, in November 2007 never got off the ground. Many rebel factions refused to participate and those that did had negligible military or political strength. In the past year, however, a single dominant rebel group has emerged, along with three smaller but important factions.

The most dominant rebel group currently in Darfur is the Justice and Equality Movement, or JEM. The other three important entities are factions of the Sudan Liberation Movement, or SLA. The SLA and the JEM were the two rebel groups that launched the initial rebellion against the Sudanese government in 2003. Both movements voiced frustration over decades of political and economic marginalization of Darfur by the central government in Khartoum. Yet there are critical structural differences between the two movements. The JEM has always had a centralized leadership structure, while the SLA began as a fragile alliance of rival leaders with strong ties to their home regions and ethnic groups. While the JEM has remained largely a cohesive movement, the SLA's innate diversity played a significant role in its dramatic fragmentation. Owing to a variety of factors discussed below, three SLA factions have emerged as the most significant and, along with JEM, would need to be included in any peace process that hopes to succeed.

1. Justice and Equality Movement (JEM)

The JEM began with strong leadership from former government minister, Dr. Khalil Ibrahim, a national political agenda, and a loyal and capable fighting force composed almost exclusively of ethnic Zaghawas.⁴ Moreover, the JEM has always had better access than the SLA to funding sources and supporters outside of Sudan because of its Islamist roots, its connections to the Zaghawa Diaspora in Chad and elsewhere, and its relationships with financiers in the Persian Gulf. Over time, the JEM has become the largest and most militarily significant rebel group in Darfur.

Although the two rebel groups initially sought to cooperate politically and militarily, the JEM's past relationship with the Sudanese government and key figures within the Sudanese Islamist movement complicated its relationship with the SLA and stigmatized the JEM among many Darfuris and key players in the international community, including the United States. Dr. Khalil quickly earned a reputation as a spoiler. The JEM refused to sign the DPA in May 2006, opting to continue fighting with increased support from the Chadian and Eritrean governments.⁵ The JEM also refused to participate in the 2007 talks in Sirte, Libya, arguing that many of the rebel factions invited to the negotiations were either militarily irrelevant or proxies for the government. Instead, Khalil strengthened his military forces, launched successful raids against Sudanese government positions beyond Darfur's borders, defended the Chadian government from Sudan-backed Chadian rebel groups, and prepared for one of the most significant events of the six-year conflict in Darfur: the May 2008 attack on the Khartoum suburb of Omdurman.

Although the JEM's attack on Omdurman failed to unseat the regime and JEM's expeditionary force was routed, it demonstrated JEM's increasing ambitions and reach while highlighting the potential vulnerability of Sudanese armed forces. The JEM is now the strongest rebel group on the ground and increasingly positioned to directly challenge Sudanese forces, but it lacks the air power that the Sudanese military regularly brings to bear against rebel forces and civilians. It recently announced that it would "attack very soon the positions of the Sudanese government" in unspecified Sudanese cities and warned civilians to stay away from "all military positions in Sudanese cities" because their attack is "imminent."⁶ While obviously this may be bravado from the JEM, it does seem symbolic of the group's increasing confidence.

Based largely on its military success and the continuing political leadership failures of other Darfuri rebel groups, the JEM has begun to garner new support among non-Zaghawa Darfuris and in Sudan's Kordofan region. Although the JEM has not been immune to splintering and

personality clashes, the movement led by Khalil Ibrahim is relatively cohesive and demonstrates a much higher level of sophistication than its counterparts.⁷ In November, the JEM sent delegates to Doha, Qatar, to attend discussions with the Sudanese government over potential peace talks.⁸ While other rebel groups have been critical of the Qatari initiative, representatives of the JEM told Enough that they were willing to consider the Qatari proposal and present their perspective on a possible peace process.

2. Roots of the Sudan Liberation Army (SLA)

Darfur's longstanding resentment of the central government began in the late 1980s, after a devastating famine led to increased tensions over scarce natural resources between nomadic Arab populations and non-Arab Darfuri farming populations. During the late 1980s and 1990s, the Khartoum government consistently backed Arab groups in violent, racially driven conflicts to take land from non-Arab groups. The SLA has its roots in the self-defense militias formed by communities in western Darfur in the mid-1990s to protect non-Arabs from attack.

In early 2003, as peace talks to end the devastating 20-year civil war between the central government and the Sudan Peoples' Liberation Movement, or SPLM, edged toward the landmark Comprehensive Peace Agreement (eventually signed in 2005), marginalized political leaders and supporters from Darfur's Fur, Zaghawa, and Massaleit communities combined their self-defense militias to form the SLA and began attacking government posts in Darfur.⁹

Bottom line: The JEM is the best armed and most tightly organized Darfuri rebel group today, and their participation in negotiations is essential to reaching a durable peace agreement.

Desert Combat

In the arid region of Darfur and neighboring eastern Chad, the number of vehicles an armed group possesses is the best indication of its military strength. With skilled drivers and fighters, pick-up trucks become fearsome battle wagons called "technicals," and obtaining and maintaining vehicles is critical to survival. A common "technical" is a Toyota truck equipped with a mounted machine gun or another light weapon such as an RPG antitank grenade launcher. Each truck holds 10 soldiers, their weaponry, and provisions such as food and fuel. They can cover long distances quickly and nimbly through rough terrain, making them ideal for desert warfare. In 1990, rebel leader turned Chadian President Idriss Déby made the 450-mile trek from eastern Chad to the capital of N'djamena in 300 battle-ready pickups and ousted then President Hissène Habré.¹⁰

The hijacking of humanitarian vehicles—particularly Toyota Land Cruisers—has been a consistent danger for relief organizations trying to deliver aid to the vulnerable civilians caught in the middle of the Darfur rebellion. Aid

vehicles are often outfitted with state-of-the-art communication and navigation systems, and they have proven to be soft targets for armed groups and bandits seeking to either increase their military capacity or turn a profit by selling the stolen vehicles to other armed actors.



The SLA no longer exists as it did at the outset of the rebellion in 2003. From its earliest days, it was plagued by internal divisions and power struggles based principally on intense personality clashes and ethnic differences between Abdel Wahid Mohamed al-Nur, a Fur, and Minni Arko Minawi, a Zaghawa.¹¹ Clear organizational and command structures were never firmly established, and additional divisions erupted between military and political leaders within opposing factions. By late 2005, the SLA had splintered into three different movements led by Abdel Wahid, Minni Minawi, and a group of Abdel Wahid's former commanders.

Today, the strength of all of the rival SLA factions *combined* does not match the JEM's capabilities, and only a few of those factions can claim support among the people of Darfur. However, the participation of certain SLA factions is critical to peace efforts, as some of these groups have some legitimacy and could play a spoiler role in any new negotiations.

A) SLA/ABDEL WAHID

Throughout the conflict, Abdel Wahid has sought to sustain his folk hero reputation among the Fur population, the largest ethnic group in Darfur. As a student activist in Khartoum in the 1990s, Wahid came to believe that change in Darfur could come only through armed rebellion, and he was instrumental as a political organizer in his native Jebel Marra region (a mountainous area at the crossroads of North, South, and West Darfur and Darfur's most fertile agricultural area) in the lead up to the SLA's initial offensive against the Sudanese military in 2003.

Currently, Abdel Wahid's significance is based principally on support from some of the 2.5 million Darfuris—particularly those from the Fur community—who live in camps for internally displaced persons. Through his refusal to sign the DPA and his skillful use of the Western media, Wahid has portrayed himself as a lone voice for Darfur's most marginalized people. However, he commands few troops on the ground and has not visited Darfur since 2004. Many of his former soldiers have defected to join other factions, especially rival Ahmed Abdel-Shafi's SLA splinter group, and Abdel Wahid now retains the support of only a few commanders confined to a small portion of Jebel Marra. Although Abdel Wahid's refusal to participate in peace negotiations until U.N. peacekeepers are fully deployed and the Janjaweed militias fully disarmed boosted his popularity, Darfuris have begun to question the logic of holding negotiations hostage to his agenda. Now living in exile in Paris, his credibility as a voice of Darfuris and his political support even among his native Fur people is waning.

B) SLA/MINNI MINAWI

Minni Minawi signed the DPA under considerable international pressure from the United States, United Kingdom, African Union, and others. At the peace talks in Abuja, Nigeria, the international community had ill-advisedly placed a time limit on reaching a final agreement. As the talks approached their artificial finish line, the Sudanese government accepted the terms of the DPA and the international community immediately focused in on Minawi. He was widely considered the only rebel commander with significant military capacity and, following rather crude logic, diplomats felt that if he signed then Abdul Wahid and JEM would be forced to join or risk losing the war.¹² In fact, Minawi's decision was in some ways the nail in the coffin both in terms of his own support among Darfuris and his faction's strength as a fighting force in Darfur. Immediately after Minawi signed the agreement and joined the Sudanese government as a senior assistant to President Omar al-Bashir, many of his commanders joined other SLA splinter groups, were

Bottom line:
Despite diminishing military and political relevance, Abdel Wahid's buy-in is a useful complement to a peace agreement because he remains the most outspoken and visible leader from Darfur's largest ethnic group.



co-opted by the Sudanese government to fight groups that refused to sign, or turned to crime and banditry. Forces formerly loyal to Minawi were largely responsible for the string of carjackings and attacks on aid workers in the wake of the DPA negotiations, and these forces continue to play a role in the ongoing armed banditry in Darfur. At the same time, many of his closest political advisers abandoned him and launched their own rebel factions.

Since Minawi joined the Sudanese government, he has been largely regarded by Darfuris as more sellout than savior, and he has been increasingly marginalized and undermined by Khartoum. He has largely ceremonial duties related to implementation of the DPA, but that agreement is irrelevant without its acceptance by the JEM and others. Yet the government of Sudan seeks to keep the DPA on life support to sustain the fiction that it supports a peaceful solution in Darfur, while the external actors that helped to negotiate the deeply flawed DPA continue to support the deal in the futile hope that their efforts were not in vain and in efforts to preserve their reputations.

In June 2008, Minawi left Khartoum and returned to Darfur, informally suspending his participation in the Sudanese government to protest the poor implementation of the DPA. Given that the DPA has finally been recognized by the international community as incomplete and incapable of bringing peace to Darfur, Minawi's insistence that it be implemented is another sign of his movement's lack of relevance among other Darfur rebel groups.

C) SLA/UNITY

SLA/Unity is composed primarily of Zaghawa fighters from North Darfur and is led by commanders who served under the SLA's first chief of staff, Abdalla Abaker, who was killed in 2004. Abaker's former commanders remained loyal to Abdel Wahid until the talks that led to the DPA, during which they formed their own faction, the Group of 19, or G19. The mediation team leading the negotiations refused to recognize the G19 as a legitimate rebel movement, and when the talks ended the group quickly became one of the more formidable military forces in Darfur and changed its name to SLA/Unity. In August/September of 2008, the Sudanese government attacked the areas controlled by SLA/Unity in North Darfur and forced the move-

Bottom line: As the sole rebel signatory of the already largely defunct Darfur Peace Agreement, Minni Minawi is positioned to put the final nail in the DPA's coffin and help persuade his backers in the international community to mount a more inclusive new process.

ment to retreat from its stronghold to areas further north and west near the Chadian border. However, SLA/Unity remains powerful in North Darfur because of the remoteness of the area and the Sudanese government's fear to commit ground troops after their sound defeat by the JEM in the same area in 2006.

Politically, SLA/Unity is on less sure footing. Although the movement includes a well-regarded Zaghawa leader named Suleiman Jamous (currently based in Chad as the SLA/Unity humanitarian coordinator), SLA/Unity has thus far failed to consolidate support of the Darfuri people by presenting themselves as a viable alternative to other SLA factions, while the JEM has managed to absorb a number of marginalized SLA/Unity leaders and the forces they control.

In addition, SLA/Unity has been blamed for their leading role in the September 2007 rebel attacks on AU peacekeepers in Haskanita. Enough has learned that one of the SLA/Unity commanders may be under investigation by the International Criminal Court for his role in the Haskanita attacks, along with the commander of a splinter faction of JEM and potentially another SLA faction. Jamous recently told Enough that the SLA/Unity is willing to cooperate with the International Criminal Court's investigation of this incident and that they are open to the Qatar peace initiative, but they need to know more details before they fully commit.

3. Dealing with the remaining SLA factions

The remaining SLA factions—which in most cases consist of little more than a dissident commander with a satellite phone and perhaps a website—are neither militarily nor politically significant. Armed bandits masquerading as rebels, they lack real military capabilities but contribute to the already poor security situation on the ground. These actors should not be dealt with in the context of a peace process, as a place at the negotiating table would grant them undesired political legitimacy. These groups should be viewed as security hazards rather than representatives of the Darfuri people.

Common calculations: What unites the rebels?

Although divided by allegiance, rebel groups share a roughly similar core set of political demands. These issues are easily identified, as they have been expressed by various rebel parties in previous failed peace negotiations. However, the international community has failed to establish a sustained peace process that can unify the factions on the substance of an agreement. Such a process must include the key issues so that leaders who have disagreed in the past have an incentive to work together toward common goals despite their differences.

Three sets of issues must be part of any peace agreement. These must be discussed in a process that includes not just the key rebel groups outlined above, but also civil society organizations and Diaspora groups. While international diplomats are often loathe to meaningfully include civil society in peace talks, the lack of broad support within Darfur for previous negotiations and agreements is a major reason why they failed. A renewed peace effort for Darfur must widen the support for a deal in Darfur and abroad and better represent the interests of average Darfuris. These interests are:

Bottom line: Despite their internal leadership divisions, the SLA/Unity has significant territorial control in North Darfur and could become a spoiler if left out of the peace process.

1. Political empowerment: Darfuris took up arms in 2003 because of the deliberate political marginalization of the Darfuri people by the government in Khartoum. The question of how power will be distributed in Darfur in particular, and in Sudan more broadly, especially in light of the status of the CPA, must be agreed upon by all rebel parties and the Sudanese government. The rebels have indicated that their vision of power-sharing means representation for Darfuris in all sectors of the government and in the Sudanese Armed Forces, in proportions that are consistent with the most recent census in Darfur (from 1993; the 2008 census did not include Darfur because of insecurity) which concluded that 20 percent of Sudanese are from Darfur.¹³

2. Security: Peace in Darfur is not possible without a radical change to the security situation in the region and a substantive restructuring of the security apparatus in Khartoum. First, the U.N./AU hybrid peacekeeping force, or UNAMID, must be fully deployed and afforded unrestricted access throughout Darfur. Second, the international community must support and closely monitor a comprehensive disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration program, or DDR, that disarms the Janjaweed militias, dismantles the governmental institutions that support them, and demilitarizes the other armed groups and bandits. Third, a peace agreement must allow for the safe and voluntary return of the 2.5 million displaced Darfuris to their homes. Finally, wider security sector reform must include a measure of civilian oversight to the security apparatus in Khartoum, and a new system of policing in Darfur. Such reforms must consider the realities of traditional life in Darfur, allowing farmers and herders to carry rifles to defend their land and livestock in keeping with their history.

3. Welfare: Darfuris whose livestock, land, and possessions were stolen by government-sponsored Janjaweed militias must have adequate restitution. The government of Sudan must agree to allocate substantial funds for a restitution process with international oversight to ensure that the funds are dispersed fairly. The hotly contested question of land tenure and property ownership in Darfur must also be addressed. This process, along with international prosecution and a well-resourced approach to transitional justice, will help satisfy the Darfuri demand for justice while enabling people to rebuild their lives, reestablish their livelihoods, and begin to recover from the devastating effects of the genocide.

“One Darfur”: The importance of engaging Darfuri civil society

The divide-and-destroy tactics of the Sudanese government and, to a lesser extent, the tensions between various rebel factions have highlighted ethnic differences in Darfur. Nonetheless, members of Darfuri civil society have demonstrated courage and leadership throughout the conflict and are working toward peace. Enough has observed that in some areas in Darfur, sedentary farmers and Arab nomads have worked together to forge dialogue and restore principles of co-existence and peaceful conflict resolution. This suggests that there is an important element of consensus within Darfuri civil society at this juncture, but peacemakers should not expect these groups to speak with one voice.

Meaningful participation by civil society actors will be crucial to broadening support for peace negotiations among Darfuris and ensuring popular ownership of both the peace process and its outcomes. In past peace efforts, particularly the DPA talks, civil society members were sidelined or manipulated by the Sudanese government. A strong presence of civil society groups that

legitimately represent the people of Darfur (including community and tribal leaders as well as women's group representatives) can help set a tone and agenda for the talks, mitigate the negative impact of rebel divisions, and help prevent the talks from being hijacked by armed groups.

Outside of Darfur, a network of relatively well-organized Diaspora organizations is supporting the efforts of Darfuri civil society to promote peace. African women's organizations such as Femmes Africa Solidarité have sponsored forums to bring together women from all over Sudan and the African continent to articulate and emphasize the role of Darfuri women in peacemaking efforts in Darfur. Organizations such as the Darfuri Leader's Network, or DLN, have conducted effective advocacy abroad for renewed dialogue in Darfur.¹⁴ While the Diaspora community serves an important role, the onus still remains on organizations in Darfur to carry on the dialogue and organize around common principles, understanding that there will be strong differences of opinion. Nonetheless, the merging of Darfuri civil society organizations with prominent Diaspora groups attests to the growing political will inside and outside of Darfur that could help pave the way to a promising new process.

Conclusion: Uniting for peace

Rebel divisions are not the primary obstacle to peace in Darfur. The international community must not allow Khartoum to blame rebel divisions for the government's inaction to end Darfur's suffering, nor are rebel groups to be blamed from the international community's failure to mount an effective diplomatic strategy for dealing with Sudan's multiple crises. Although divided by personalities and power struggles, Darfur's rebel groups and civil society leaders share the common goal of peace and justice for their people. A credible peace process to resolve the war is feasible, but it requires leadership from the international community. Sustained pressure should be placed on Khartoum to ensure it does not obstruct the consensus building between Darfur's armed and unarmed constituencies. With sufficient political will and substantial diplomatic efforts, Darfuris can find common ground and a peace agreement could be within reach.



Endnotes

- 1 The perspective that the situation in Darfur had transitioned “from genocide to anarchy” gained some public traction in the summer of 2007, when intercommunal violence in Darfur was escalating. Enough responded to this notion with a strategy paper that argued that “the conditions in Darfur and eastern Chad today are not evidence of an end to genocide and the onset of an entirely new and different war—they are the echoes of genocide.” Enough also argued that the genocidal intentions of the Sudanese regime had not changed, and that the Sudanese government was helping to fuel the chaos that had recently emerged in Darfur. See John Prendergast and Colin Thomas-Jensen, “Echoes of Genocide in Darfur and Eastern Chad” (September 2007).
- 2 Andrew Natsios, President Bush’s Special Envoy to Sudan from September 2006 to December 2007, spoke at length of the “Balkanization” of Darfur’s rebel groups at a public panel discussion, “Challenges to Sudan’s Comprehensive Peace Agreement” at the Center for Strategic and International Studies on January 14, 2009.
- 3 See the International Crisis Group report, “Darfur’s Fragile Peace Agreement” (June 2006), for a detailed analysis of the Darfur Peace Agreement negotiations.
- 4 The men who would become JEM’s leaders were instrumental in the publishing of the “Black Book,” a document that tried to document alleged disparities in political and economic power in Sudan and illustrated the marginalization of the periphery of Sudan—with specific reference to Darfur—and the hegemony of the Arab-dominated center.
- 5 Chadian sponsorship of the JEM rebels became overt in December 2005, after Chadian rebels backed by Khartoum hit the strategic border post of Adré and accelerated a proxy war between Chad and Sudan. For more details on the proxy war and the Chadian government’s connections to the JEM, see Enough strategy paper by Colin Thomas-Jensen, “Nasty Neighbors: Resolving the Chad-Sudan Proxy War” (April 2008).
- 6 “Darfur JEM warns of imminent attacks against Sudan government.” Sudan Tribune, December 22, 2008, available at: <http://www.sudantribune.com/spip.php?article29652>
- 7 JEM maintains a regularly updated website at <http://www.sudanjem.com>.
- 8 “JEM to mull Qatari proposal for Sudan peace talks,” Agence France-Press, November 1, 2008, available at: <http://afp.google.com/article/ALeqM5gbbexTctPgYNgqLxGzpkzd9YNsUQ>
- 9 SLA was originally called the Darfur Liberation Front.
- 10 In 1990, rebel leader turned Chadian President Idriss Déby made the 450-mile trek from eastern Chad to the capital of N’jamena in 300 battle-ready pickups and ousted then-President Hissène Habré.
- 11 The Sudan Liberation Army, or SLA, is also referred to as the Sudan Liberation Movement. The splinter factions that exist today are identified as either SLA or SLM, followed by the name of their commander or another description. For the purpose of consistency, this paper uses the abbreviation SLA throughout, although SLM is also accurate.
- 12 See Enough strategy paper by John Prendergast and Colin Thomas-Jensen, “A Strategy for Success in Sirte” (November 2007).
- 13 Adopting the 1993 census as the base for the establishment of new systems of power-sharing in Sudan was agreed to by the Sudanese government and several rebel groups when they signed a declaration of principles in talks held in Abuja, Nigeria in July 2005 (these talks preceded the DPA talks, which took place in Abuja in 2006). The Sudanese government has indicated that this declaration will also govern future peace talks.
- 14 The DLN recently helped to establish a platform to consolidate efforts toward a single road map for peace. In July 2008, civil society meetings in Tanzania produced the Dar es Salaam Declaration in a process that for the first time included representatives from Darfur’s camps for the displaced. A larger, more inclusive meeting is planned for spring 2009, with the goal of finalizing a unified set of demands for a peace process. See “Dar es Salaam Declaration on reenergizing the peace process in Darfur,” Sudan Tribune, August 3, 2008.

Enough is a project of the Center for American Progress to end genocide and crimes against humanity. Founded in 2007, Enough focuses on the crises in Sudan, Chad, eastern Congo, northern Uganda, Somalia, and Zimbabwe. Enough's strategy papers and briefings provide sharp field analysis and targeted policy recommendations based on a "3P" crisis response strategy: promoting durable peace, providing civilian protection, and punishing perpetrators of atrocities. Enough works with concerned citizens, advocates, and policy makers to prevent, mitigate, and resolve these crises. To learn more about Enough and what you can do to help, go to www.enoughproject.org.

