

A Collective Response on Darfur is Needed

The Government of Sudan is threatened on many fronts by unrest, largely in reaction to its authoritarian and non-representative regime. Although the conflict in Sudan had long been oversimplified as a north/south or Arab/African conflict, the emergence of intensified conflict in Darfur in 2003 shattered this misconception. And although conflict with rebel groups in the South and West are reasonably well known due to the degree of media attention they have received, rebel groups in the east also exist and pose a threat in that region. Indeed, the various conflicts ongoing in Sudan affect all the nations sharing a border with it, and need to be viewed as an inter-related whole, including the impact of non-state groups such as the Lord's Resistance Army.

In 2003 and 2004, the situation in Darfur was described by the United Nations as the world's worst humanitarian crisis. Given the current crisis in early 2007, it is all too likely that this year the situation will again deteriorate to similar levels or reach new lows. Although there is considerable debate regarding the exact number of victims, the generally accepted figures are that 400,000 people have been killed, 2.5 million displaced, and that 4 million people are now dependant on some sort of aid to survive. These figures are difficult to confirm due to the size of the Darfur region (roughly the size of France), the remoteness and inaccessibility of much of the terrain, and also due to restrictions on reporting. According to Reporters Without Borders, the Sudanese government places serious and deliberate obstacles in the way of journalists who wish to cover the conflict.

There is also reticence on the part of a number of international actors to fully address the issues in the area, in part due to economic interests. Sudan has large reserves of both oil and natural gas that are largely unexplored, and that are no longer viable for Western companies to exploit due to political considerations. Other nations have filled this void, economic interests trumping ethical ones, and this relationship of mutual interest with the Sudanese government prevents them from taking a strong stance on Darfur.

The Current Level of Risk

Darfur is a clear example of a place where the overall viability of aid operations is seriously threatened by a deteriorating security situation. Although statistics do not fully describe the human aspects of the tragedies they represent, they can be useful in describing the scope and scale of the problem. In 2006, thirteen humanitarian staff were killed in Darfur, causing a knock-on effect for untold thousands of beneficiaries.

Unlike in many other difficult working environments, in Darfur armed actors have deliberately targeted aid agencies. In December, 2006, thirty non-governmental organisation (NGO) compounds were directly attacked, causing the evacuation of 430 humanitarian staff. Serious violence occurred in Gereida, where armed men attacked NGO compounds, physically assaulting and raping staff and stealing money, vehicles and other equipment. Gereida is notable as the location of the largest internally displaced person (IDP) camp in the world, housing 120,000 people. Due to the deterioration of the security climate in the area, these displaced persons are now left almost entirely without aid.

A peacekeeping force under the auspices of the African Union has been in Darfur since 2004, and has increased steadily in size since that date. Despite good intentions, the African Union Mission in Sudan (AMIS) has not been able to contain the violence in Darfur, and has in fact become a victim itself due to targeting by other armed actors.

As the level of insecurity mounts, the Government of Sudan continues to impede the ability of the aid community to deliver aid or manage their own security. An exceptionally cumbersome process of visas for entry, exit and internal travel stifles much of the ability of individual agencies to act independently, and forms part of an overall strategy of intimidation practiced by the Sudanese government. All humanitarian agencies working in Sudan are required to hire national staff through the government, some of whom are placed in order to keep tabs on the actions of each agency.

The Government of Sudan has a history of ejecting internationals from the country whenever they “step out of line.” These persons declared *persona non grata* or refused entry visas include the Special Representative of the Secretary General, Jan Pronk, and most recently key persons in both United Nations and NGO security organisations. Similarly, an initiative by an NGO consortium to examine the feasibility of a coordinated NGO safety initiative was also halted when the staff member hired to implement the project was forced by the government to leave. These actions were clearly meant to reduce the ability of the aid sector to have meaningful impact amongst their beneficiaries.

Despite the downward spiral of security in the country, the Government of Sudan insists that it holds sole responsibility for managing security for all humanitarian agencies in the country, while simultaneously refusing to implement any effective measures.

Assessment

While all of the above information exists in the public domain, many organisations working in Darfur are loathe to be associated with it due to the effective campaign of intimidation that has been waged by the Government of Sudan. NGOs are left in a situation where the risks to their programmes and beneficiaries are rising, the level of humanitarian need is rising, the means available to manage risks are being stripped away, and the ability to even articulate the overarching situation has been degraded.

Currently, it is estimated that only 64% of Darfur is accessible to aid agencies, and this percentage is decreasing. The UN has estimated that this past January alone, an additional 46,000 people have become displaced within Darfur. The problems that have led to the current situation in Darfur have not been corrected, and indeed continue to negatively affect the civilian population.

As the security situation continues to degrade, the ability of humanitarian actors to access beneficiaries becomes increasingly tenuous. The ability of aid and development agencies to manage their own security appears to be intentionally targeted by the Government of Sudan in order to achieve a perception of the Darfur situation as being over exaggerated both to its own citizens and to the world at large, and perhaps to justify its own disproportionate actions, often using proxy forces, in areas that aid workers continue to access to relieve humanitarian suffering.

Recommendations

Given all of the above, it seems clear that the aid community as a whole should consider the following recommendations:

- All aid and development organisations working in the region should determine a basic set of principles they can all agree upon that will allow for the re-establishment of humanitarian space, and articulate these principles clearly and collectively to the other actors in the region. Although field level attempts have occurred in the past, for the protection of staff in the field this initiative should emanate from higher levels and include a sufficient number of organisations to achieve a critical mass.
- Key activities that are threatened, such as security coordination mechanisms, must continue to be established outside of the reach of hostile regional actors. The Government of Sudan must do more to provide credible security to the aid community as should all actors claiming to represent the people of Sudan. The wider international

- community should step to its own responsibilities to ensure humanitarian aid is secured so that access to all communities can be assured and sustained.
- Sustainable programmes of remote management that respect the need for comprehensive security management for national staff be considered to ensure that beneficiaries continue to receive the required aid

All aid and development agencies active in Sudan are collectively threatened, though perhaps to varying degrees, by the situation there. These risks also need to be faced and dealt with collectively if the community is to achieve the collective aim of relieving suffering.

About Safer Access

Safer Access is a network of humanitarian safety expertise formed to better enable the provision of humanitarian and development aid. It is our overall objective to improve the capacity of relief and development organisations working in insecure and complicated environments to deliver life-saving assistance to those most in need.

Our work is first and foremost beneficiary-focused, innovative and aims to have an impact across the aid sector. Our belief is that the best way to ensure continued access to beneficiaries in even the most complex and fluid situations is for organizations to institutionalize effective security planning and procedures from the outset. Our intent is always to teach and facilitate best practises – practices which both safeguard staff security while also enabling access to those most in need. Our goal is to help enable safer and more effective operating practices.

We understand and are experienced in the challenges that aid workers, both national and international, face everyday. Safer Access is a platform for the collection and distribution of expertise and information to those that need it most. To that end, we are committed to the free and open sharing of critical information – including analysis and best practices – amongst humanitarian and development organisations so as to enable them to better manage their operating risks.

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