

2003: Darfur

Darfur is a region in Sudan, home to a population of around six million people, from nearly 100 different tribes. Some tribes are nomadic or semi-nomadic, meaning they move around the land with their livestock. Others are farmers who remain settled on their own land. Most nomadic or semi-nomadic tribes consider themselves to be of Arab descent whereas most farming tribes consider themselves to be of black African descent. Nearly all are Muslims. Geographically Darfur is a very large region, about the size of France. Historically, it was an independent state before it became part of Sudan when Britain took control of the country in 1916. Under British control there was barely any investment or development in Darfur. In 1956 Sudan gained its independence from Britain, with Darfur remaining as part of the country.

There were many regional tensions, particularly as people in Darfur felt that they were neglected and marginalised by the Sudanese government in Khartoum, the capital city. Development, spending and resources were concentrated on the capital and the centre of the country (a continuation of how things had been under British rule) – hundreds of miles away from the Darfur region, where people were struggling. In 1983-4 there was a famine in Darfur which killed nearly 100,000 Darfuris, compounding the difficulties facing the people of this area.

In 2003, two rebel movements – the Sudan Liberation Army (SLA) and the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM) began to attack the Sudanese government – hitting military targets such as airbases. In response the government launched Arab militias called the *Janjaweed* (which translates as ‘devils on horseback’).

Over 400 villages have been completely destroyed and the violence has resulted in millions of homeless civilians. They have used the slash and burn method – destroying villages first by military air support, then using the *Janjaweed* to launch ground attacks, killing and raping as they move around. The villages and fields are burnt down and then re-burnt later in the season to prevent the land from being farmed and the village from being repopulated.

This conflict is therefore between the black African farmers (some of whom belong to the rebel movements SLA and JEM) and the *Janjaweed* militias, which Arab nomadic tribes have joined.

The Bashir government are seeking to destroy the African farmers – the rebels – and have provided air support, helicopters and fire arms to the *Janjaweed* and the incentive of land to Arabs for joining the militias.

Sponsored by the government, the *Janjaweed* have continued to target black Africans in Darfur for the last 12 years. The United Nations has described the situation as one of the world’s worst humanitarian crises. Over 2.7 million people have been displaced and are living in camps across Darfur. About 300,000 Darfuri refugees are now living in neighbouring Chad. The UN estimates that around 4.7 million people are still affected by the situation; denied basic human rights and relying on humanitarian aid.