

Testifying for Darfur

No Light at the End of the Tunnel for the internally displaced in Darfur

Jane Williamson, UNHCR Protection Officer

March 2007

There is so little light at the end of the tunnel that it is difficult to know where to start on the situation in Darfur. It's a terribly black dark situation and I have keep reminding myself of that there have been other countries, other situations elsewhere, like Cambodia, that have seemed this black at some point in history and have recovered.

While the world's media has generally used the idea of an Arab-African divide as a kind of popular 'hook' for the Darfur story, the reality – in a land where everybody is African, everybody is black, everybody is Muslim, and pretty much everybody speaks Arabic – is much more complex. Darfur is a dry, arid land, poor in natural resources. Like much of territory right across Africa at that particular latitude, just below the Sahara, nomads and farmers live in a delicately constituted co-existence. Darfur society consists of roughly two groups: the nomadic tribes, generally but not always accurately conflated with the ethnic tag of 'Arab', who own little or no land and who seasonally migrate, and farmers, generally referred to as the "African" or indigenous tribes of the area, who are settled. The two ways of life have a kind of symbiotic relationship with each other which is constituted by complex traditions and customary law governing the use of land other natural resources. In Darfur, nomads traditionally moved north during the wet season when grass is available for animals in normally barren areas. When the grass starts to dry out after the rains, nomads move south. This is a simplification – there are many many different nomadic tribes some of whom move enormous distances each season, crossing entire countries, while others stay within one local area. In the best of times, the nomadic movement south takes place along various fixed customary routes within Darfur and happens in the months after the main annual harvest. In the best of all possible worlds, nomads and their animals – camels and cows – pass through already harvested fields without causing any damage – possibly even enriching soil and bringing trading opportunities with them. Rules about routes, timings for the journey, damage to property are regulated traditionally. If a camel damages a tomato crop, for example, the camel will be impounded in the village while the local chiefs (sheiks) of the groups involved negotiate a compensation arrangement.

In the current climate of Darfur, any natural social and ecological balance between the various traditional ways of life is a distant memory. With desertification, depleted natural resources, long years of neglect in terms of development and infrastructure, conflict over land has intensified in recent decades in Darfur. Those now living in IDP camps in Darfur can recall regular attacks on villages and displacement from as early as the 1980s. This localised conflict in Darfur had a very complicated relationship to national politics in Sudan and Sudan's position as both an African and an Arab state. By 2003, with a peace deal almost concluded with the long suffering south of Sudan, a new rebel movement emerging in Darfur was the last thing Khartoum wanted to deal with. The subsequent wiping clean of the slate in Darfur – through government aerial bombing raids on villages and ground attacks by armed so-called “Arab” militias or “janjaweed” is well documented in accounts of the recent events in Darfur. More than 2 million people are now internally displaced, villages across Darfur are now empty of their former inhabitants who are living in over crowded camps, and a further 200,000 Darfuri refugees are in neighbouring Chad.

Among the various roles I undertook during two years in Darfur, one of the most confronting was the several months I spent last year in one particular IDP camp in West Darfur in the town of Mornei. As a UNHCR protection officer, I was tasked with ‘doing protection’ in the camp. To ‘do protection’ is to monitor and promote the human rights and well being of those in the camp and it can mean a whole range of different practical activities depending on the needs of the population. When I was assigned there, we decided to start by talking with the population to get to know them and to let them tell us directly about their situation.

Protection monitoring is normally one of the most enjoyable parts of the job – going on foot around the camp and sitting with families in their houses, sharing a cup of tea and allowing them to talk directly about what are their problems and how they see the solution. This activity is a very significant part of the idea of documenting human rights/protection issues, and compiling it and using our position as UNHCR to ‘speaking the truth to power’ – one of the fundamental ideas of human rights work.

The main concern of the IDPs in this and all camps in Darfur is the daily violence faced by IDPs. Areas around camps and in between major settlements are now extremely dangerous – IDPs describe Arab or nomad militia groups who are armed and sometimes wearing military uniforms – who move in these areas and attack IDPs who attempt to

move outside of the camp. The IDPs were subsistence farmers before they were displaced. They made their livelihoods by growing crops and raising animals such as goats and sheep. IDPs are now crowded into camps – in our case a camp of 75,000 persons. There is no possibility for such a large number of people to have reasonable access to farming land and other traditional agricultural livelihoods. IDPs, who are ostensibly now a kind of landless semi-urban poor in Darfur, have found that the only livelihood available to them is the collection of firewood and grass outside the camp for selling in markets in the camp or town where they live. The collection of firewood is itself dangerous because it requires IDPs to go outside of the camp and thus risk violence, including rape, robbery, beating and verbal intimidation. It is also an environmentally unsustainable activity. IDPs in Mornei camp reported to us that over collection of firewood in the areas near the camp means that they travel further each year from the camp to find sufficient firewood to generate cash income.

IDPs in Mornei camp related a horrific catalogue of violence. Due to the risk of violence, IDPs go out to collect firewood in large groups where possible and there were regular reports of groups of female IDPs being approached, while out collecting firewood, by armed men on horses or camels. Several women would be selected and the others chased away. The selected women would be brutally sexually assaulted and then left severely injured out in the open. When others ran back to the camp for help, they were often faced by totally under-resourced and uncooperative police. Several families reported either having to pay police for petrol so they could rescue rape victims with a vehicle, or going out to rescue assaulted family members with a donkey cart. In addition to these sexual assaults on women, IDPs reported being robbed of their firewood, donkeys and personal belongings including one case where some women were robbed of their clothes while outside of the camp. IDPs who tried to cultivate small scale farms in areas close to the camp reported verbal intimidation by armed nomad/Arab groups and destruction of the meagre crops they were able to plant.

The international community is fighting a more than uphill battle to counteract the damage inflicted by this constant violence. The use of rape as a weapon against IDPs is a hallmark of the Darfur conflict and the community of agencies have tried a number of strategies to address it. Women's centres have been established in most camps which provide vocational training, social activities and some degree of emotional support for women. However, most women IDPs do not have a lot of free time to attend the centres. With a devastated local economy, there is very little market for the

small scale handicrafts which women produce in the centres. In the end, the need to generate cash through firewood is overwhelming and women keep putting themselves at risk.

In Mornei camp, MSF has recently opened a women only clinic in order to encourage more women who have been sexually assaulted to seek treatment since reporting levels, even for confidential and private post rape medical treatment, are believed to be alarmingly low.

A widely implemented programme for introducing clay fuel efficient stoves into Darfur households has been very successful. However, since IDPs collect firewood in order to sell it, rather than for household use, this has limited impact on the level of violence.

The small things that we can do as humanitarian agencies are so limited in the larger context of an environment of absolute impunity. Attacks against IDPs by militias roaming the areas between camps and major settlements go uninvestigated and unpunished. Direct attacks on humanitarian agencies have increased dramatically in the past six months making the operating environment almost impossible for NGOs and the UN alike. Plans to upgrade the current African Union forces and to bring in some level of UN peace-keeping support for the AU mission move along at a snail's pace.

This dire overall situation in Darfur and the difficult global politics surrounding it made it extremely difficult for us while sitting in the houses of these IDPs and listening to their stories. We found ourselves repeatedly thanking them profusely and having to explain how limited our capacity to change things for them are – despite the resources which the IDPs see that we have. While many IDPs had very good suggestions for how to implement our humanitarian programmes better – for example by expanding the women's centres or improving distribution of relief items – their ultimate cry for help – that the militias that attack them should be disarmed and that they should have a way to return safely to their villages, remains extremely elusive.

Jane Williamson

(UNHCR Protection Officer and former volunteer with JRS Cambodia)