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Select Content Language:

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Navigation

- [Home](#)
- [FAQ](#)
- [Feedback](#)
- [Forums](#)
- [Journal](#)
- [Members List](#)
- [Private Messages](#)
- [Recommend Us](#)
- [Search](#)
- [Stories Archive](#)
- [Submit News](#)
- [Surveys](#)
- [Top 10](#)
- [Topics](#)
- [Web Links](#)
- [Your Account](#)

English Topics

- [Business & Economy](#)
- [Editorial](#)
- [Entertainment](#)
- [General News](#)
- [Interview](#)
- [Law](#)
- [Letter to Reporter](#)
- [Life & Art](#)
- [Opinion](#)
- [Politics](#)
- [Rearview Mirror](#)
- [Science & Tech.](#)
- [Social](#)
- [Sport](#)

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Interview: "I think one of the major mistakes committed by the international community is its reliance on rebel groups as if they are legitimate *de jure* representatives of the Darfuri people"



Mehari Taddele, Executive Director, African Rally for Peace and Development

Mehari Taddele is a fellow of three prestigious programs at Harvard University: the Eleanor Roosevelt at Harvard Law School, the Global Advocacy Fellow at Human Rights Program and Mason Fellow at John F. Kennedy School of Government. He is Executive Director of African Rally for Peace and Development and Programme Coordinator at African Union Commission. He holds MPA from Harvard University and MSc from the University of Oxford and LLB from Addis Ababa University.

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Bruck Shewareged interviewed Mehari on the Darfur crisis which, coupled with the recent problems in Southern Sudan and other parts of the country, could put the very survival of the country itself in question. Excerpts:

There are a number of factors that are said to be the causes of the Darfur conflict, including the need to secure natural resources (water) as one World Bank study put it. In your opinion, what is the primary cause of the crisis in that region?

In terms of causes of conflicts in Africa, we have several theories that are being tabled for discussions. If we come to Darfur, clearly the environment has a serious impact on the conflict as the cause i.e., environmental degradation making survival of life in general very difficult and expansion of populations to areas were they can find grazing land and water. Generally, we can put competition for resource and control of land as one major cause. But is that a new one? Competition for resource has been a major cause for many conflicts.

The reason why Darfur has been an example rather has to do with the state being able to penetrate to peripheral areas which naturally and historically have never been the case, central government going to peripheral areas and trying to control the resources and the peripheries trying to remain independent. In a way it is between Khartoum and Juba (South Sudan), Kessela (East) and Khartoum.



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So, generally speaking, it is the government being able to penetrate peripheral areas and in many cases using transnational companies with government approval to exploit resources of different kind. This can include petroleum. There are cases where explorations are going on by different companies including ANCA, EPICO, SUDAPEC, JUNIPOC which is also a merger of several kind of petro companies.

I also see resistance to this kind of control by the government from the peripheral people including Darfuri, Southern Sudan and Beja people in North Eastern Sudan. This is, generally speaking, the case. The only difference I see in the Darfur case is that it is very globalized, too internationalized to be handled by regional powers or by the government of Sudan unlike the case in Northern Uganda conflict which we don't hear about though the humanitarian crisis is of the same genre in terms of number of deaths, displaced people or destruction of property that has been happening. In the Democratic Republic of Congo also, you see also people dying not from direct violence but due to diseases or malnutrition.

There are some assertions that the peace agreement signed between Khartoum and Southern Sudan rebels served as an immediate cause or a catalyst to the conflict in Darfur. How so?

Basically the conflict in Southern Sudan has been there since the 1970s. There were several peace initiatives which were not successful. The first one was initiated by Ethiopia under the auspices of Emperor Haile-Selassie. All were not successful compared to the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA). CPA has granted real power, written or *de jure* power to Southern Sudan people. The first part of the agreement was to hold a referendum whether South Sudan wants to remain with Sudan or become independent. The second part of this agreement is equal share of the revenue which was not really seriously calculated in terms of the amount of revenue that can be generated, essentially the oil produced in the South. And the oil exploration areas are mainly bordering Southern Sudan and the other parts of Sudan specially Northern Sudan.

This can be a cause of conflict in the long term even if Southern Sudan secedes from Sudan in general.

The CPA, which has given *de jure* power to Southern Sudan, initiated and encouraged the Darfuri people, and some of the movements have been sponsored by SPLA of Southern Sudan. There was hope that Darfur will get the same kind of attention that Southern Sudan has acquired through the struggle. It encouraged other groups also to claim that kind of attention from Khartoum. And in many cases, guns have been used as a means to be heard. And many would consider that a very good amplifier of the voices of these people who are neglected.

You can see Sudan being a patch of Peace Agreements (PAs) where you have peace agreement with the South (CPA), peace agreement with Darfur (DPA), with Eastern Sudan (EPA), and now the Bejas are demanding the same kind of agreement, and what is remaining in North Western part of Sudan which might also come. So, basically, the peripheries, as I said earlier said, are asserting their power to come up with a peace agreement with Khartoum. And this is if you wish, a really new case with the exception of Ethiopia where you have rebel groups starting from rural areas coming to the capital and controlling and establishing a system.

But this is basically about separate initiatives coming together to push Khartoum to come into terms of peace agreements. Basically and legally speaking, the constitution is amended, and amended seriously. The laws that are now in place are governing as a constitution i.e., CPA, DPA, EPA. I don't know how the constitution can be considered as a really a constitution of Sudan. So Sudan is a patch of PAs in general.

With so many Darfuri liberation groups existing - there are two Justice and Equality Movements (JEMs) to my knowledge at least - will they ever be heard and seriously reckoned with? Can the Darfuri people be really represented?

There are two serious questions that you raised. One is the legitimacy issue in terms of representing the Darfuri people. The second is, "Is it possible to have an impact if the rebel groups are not unified?" My answer on this has actually been in a sort of disagreement with several international organizations, one of which is the International Crisis Group (ICG). They have been pushing for unification of the Darfuri rebel groups. And I was saying imposed unification will not work for several reasons but mainly imposition is against democratic principle. If unification is imposed on rebel groups I don't think they will be democratic internally and the fracture and fragmentation will increase exponentially. And that has been seen. I have been raising this concern, including with the United Nations and several other international organizations. That has not been addressed. We have seen in Arusha (Tanzania) rebel groups going there originally from two rebel groups, SPLM and JEM. Now you have about twenty factions, including Group Four, Commanders Team of Ninety, JEM itself being split into two, Khalil Ibrahim's group and other commanders within JEM. So basically, this has to do with the democratic nature of rebel groups and the role of armed groups taking their own destiny and determining also the destiny of the Darfuri people in general.

I think one of the major mistakes committed by the international community is its reliance on rebel groups as if they are legitimate *de jure* representatives of the Darfuri people. I have been again raising this concern that at most the rebel groups have to be seen as *de facto* legitimacy bearers. They shouldn't be taken as the sole decision makers on the destiny of Darfur and on negotiations. So the best way to deal with this kind of fracture and fragmentation which is becoming very difficult for the negotiation to succeed is to include representatives from internally displaced people (IDP) and refugee camps to be involved in these negotiations, and to the extent possible to bring the negotiations from Abuja, Arusha, Lybia to Darfur itself by carving out security zones where IDPs and refugees can negotiate on the term of Darfur. I believe that this is one of the difficulties that the international community has to address.

With rebels failing to pose a united front, and with powerful countries not willing to force the government of Sudan to capitulate, and other countries still not committed to send in troops, aren't we likely to witness total ethnic cleansing in Darfur? And what kind of precedent will this put in the future for Africa?

Generally speaking, let me start by mentioning what I call the five major mistakes the international community has committed in Darfur; and these can be committed in several other conflicts in Africa. The first one is, like I mentioned, too much reliance on the rebel groups. And the second one is the very narrow approach to the problem itself. It would have been better to approach this conflict and its solution by looking at the whole of Sudan instead of looking at Southern Sudan, and then Darfur and then Eastern Sudan, and what may happen in the near future in Beja area. Instead of looking at peace from its pieces it would have been better to look at peace in the holistic approach and engaging the Khartoum government including the Afro-Arab Northern Sudanese people who feel that they might be cornered in this whole debacle that is caused by Darfur because of the internationalization of this conflict.

The third mistake, I think, is excluding Afro-Arabs who might feel ethnic security dilemma, and will not be able to provide all the support they can extend. So addressing that is necessary. Of course, the insufficient support to AU Mission in Sudan (AMIS) and the lack of full mandate of AMIS which was not provided by the African Union and heads of states have also been the cause of problems.

I think that, whether Darfur is another genocide in Africa or not is more of legalistic argument than realistic one. On the ground, the death toll is more than 300,000 and more than one million IDPs and refugees. This has to be sufficient to consider this debacle, as a major crisis of our time. Regardless of the genocide argument, Darfur as it is now, I think, is really a humanitarian crisis of appalling dimensions.

Recently the Southern Sudanese government quitted its partnership with the Khartoum government due to lack of agreement to determine whether an oil endowed area falls under the administration of Khartoum of the South. And if, as many fear, this leads to the re-start of armed conflict, won't the very survival of Sudan itself be in question?

I agree with what you have said. The question has to do with, like I said, how Sudan should attend to this problem, whether it should approach in holistic manner or by pieces. The idea was if you attend to Southern Sudan which is mainly a conflict between blacks and Afro-Arabs, between Christians and Muslims, the conflict was more demarcated or delineated in terms of race and religion. That is not necessarily the case with Darfur. At least religion was shared. The government in Khartoum thought that because of this factor, there will not be these kind of initiations and resistance from any other corner of Sudan.

The survival of Sudan, because it's becoming a patch of peace agreements, is put into question. And the reason why all Sudanese, Africans, and international community globally have to try and put all their efforts before disintegration of Sudan is that disintegration starts or begins with Southern Sudan. As you said, the partnership between Southern Sudan and Khartoum has come to the brink of collapse, and this might lead to a crisis that is very violent and bloody because there will be a border dispute even if Southern Sudan decides to secede through referendum. Whether the government of Southern Sudan will remain peaceful with Khartoum government until 2011 is also questionable by itself.

At any rate, conflict in border areas will involve a lot of actors and the conflict could be internationalized, causing an appalling catastrophe.

Unlike the southern Sudanese people the Darfuri seems to be not getting a lot of sympathy and support from African countries. Why do you think is that?

Well, I don't know whether I will take that assertion as it is. I strongly believe that there is a divided position on this. African countries, which are also members of the Arab League, have taken their own initiatives, albeit fragmented ones. The Eritrean government has taken a serious initiative. Whether it's destabilizing or stabilizing effort is questionable. The Lybian government and Chad have taken several initiatives. Egypt, to some degree, has taken an initiative.

What I was trying to say was that several African countries are not extending military support to the Darfur rebels as they used to support the Southerners.

The Darfuri get a lot of support from Lybia in terms of military assistance. There have been a lot of reports showing that they have been giving money and arms to the Janjawids mainly.

But the Janjawids are on the side of the government, waging war against the Darfuris?

Basically, that is a distinction that we have to make, a decision that is very necessary, especially, for policy-makers and then the international community. We have to address the concerns of the Janjawids who are not mainly doing this

not as a deliberate policy of Khartoum but perhaps thinking to get way from the insecurity they might be feeling.

Generally speaking, several African countries did want to contribute troops to peacekeeping. Rwanda, because of its past history intervention is becoming part its foreign policy, in any conflict that looks like ethnic cleansing or genocide. Ethiopia has been interested in contributing to that as far as IGAD and the AU allows it and the UN authorized it. Other countries like Ghana and Nigeria have been interested in sending troops. The only concern that they have is financial issue. There were several pledges that didn't make their way Darfur or African Union.

There was difference rather on the categorization or characterization of the Darfur conflict. Unlike the US, and AU didn't believe that the Darfur Crisis is genocide. And for reasons that are to be appreciated but not also following the jurisprudence of African courts especially the International Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR), which has decided that a political group can be the target of genocide. And in this case if the Darfuri people in general are siding with the rebel group, and that is the politics, then that will be tantamount to genocide according to African jurisprudence, which has been challenged by many other jurisprudence or lawyers. Basically, this is about the characterization of what we should call the Darfur crisis, the debacle in terms of humanitarian crisis. So I wouldn't take that as a serious impediment in terms of commitment.

Many argue that China is simply supporting the government of Sudan for the sake of oil. But couldn't its action also be seen in terms of the wider geo-political scene, as China struggles to expand its influence in very region by undermining US interest and supporting regimes with anti-US stance?

China, I believe will not have the energy and the time to act as a bi-polar reaction to the super-power, USA. The main reason is that it needs a lot of energy to the domestic economy. And it also needs markets for its products. And whatever it spends in terms of foreign policy, it will be rather determined by the internal demands of the economy, the need for energy the need for market, expanded economic space.

So, its involvement in Sudan, I think, is not in terms of showing its power. Rather it is more determined by pragmatist economic motivations. And when it does that, it is mainly for strategic interest rather than simply profit. Most of the Chinese companies, especially petroleum companies, the majority of shareholders, and in many cases 100 percent of the shares, are held by the government. In such cases, basically, what will happen is instead of looking on the margin of profits they can get by involving themselves in these kind of risky areas, including Somalia, where they are now trying to get some concessions, they look at it as a strategic interest, securing oil supply, to cater to the demand of the economy. They will not take foreign policy as the primary concern. The driving force is the internal economy.

Why is the Arab League keeping a low profile while it can play a more enhanced role?

Let me put it this way, in two perspectives actually. One is that there are those Arab League member countries which are in Africa and near to Africa that have been involved in peace initiatives, not in the name of the Arab League but on behalf of members of the League. To mention, few, Libya, Eritrea, Egypt, even if sporadic, and Saudi Arabia which has invited several of the meetings.

As for the rest of the Arab League member countries, there is the lack of awareness of the issue. There is this geographic problem of considering member countries in Africa which are not geographically closer or related to the other members of the Arab League.

But one big reason why the Arab League might not take official, bold, active and aggressive initiatives might be, one, not to push the Darfur Crisis as if it is between Africans and Arabs perhaps. Strategically, they might prefer individual countries, neighboring countries taking up that initiative and supporting them rather.

Secondly, they do influence through the African Union their own position. And that has been noticed. African Union's position not to characterize the Darfur Crisis as a genocide was mainly pushed by this lobby of the Arab League, and common members of the AU and the League. So, I think, those countries that are aware of the situation in Darfur have been actively involved. But I can also see in the Arab population that there might be lack of awareness of the Darfur Crisis as one would expect to happen.

Will AU's mission succeed? Its troops have been attacked, under-funded and so on.

It is very sad that Darfur was a test case for AU and its new constitutive act and the mandate that were given or conferred on AU on the right to intervention in conflicts like this. And it seems like to some degree also AU wanted to test itself by going to Darfur first. I can say that the sacrifices, the efforts that were going on are something that should be appreciated by Africans and others elsewhere. It should be commendable on behalf of some African countries and that they contributed troops. And their troops have been victimized also in this conflict. But I can say it was a "successful failure" in terms of protecting the Darfur's.

A "successful failure"?

In terms of defending Darfuris, that was not attained. The main aim of AMIS was to protect Darfuris from barbaric attacks, rapes and crimes against humanity. This could have been averted if the African Union was supported by a political will at the leadership level, and also by the will to fund the mission by donor countries which have pledged but failed to keep their promise.

So, I think AMIS can provide a lot of local expertise. It can provide troops again within the United Nations mission. I think, the troops will come from third world countries. We don't expect them to come from first world countries anyway. It has never been the case. The commanders might come from them.

But again, let us not take this as a major shortcoming of the African Union by itself. It is the international community, the international system that failed Africa and the African Union. It would have been better if it were provided with sufficient funding.

In different parts of Darfur, El-Fasher for example, helicopters and tanks were not able to run because of lack of fuel. Troops were kept without salary for several months. And this has been the cause of the failure. I don't think the political will was the main problem. Rather, it is the finance causing the crippling of AMIS.

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