



Salaam Darfur

By Heidi Kingstone

What strikes you most as you come in to land at Nyala are the dozens and dozens of dry, seasonal riverbeds that stretch and snake over this flat, hostile land where resources have been at the centre of fierce tribal wars.

It's less than an hour and a half by plane from Khartoum to the capital of South Darfur, one of three provinces in western Sudan. South Darfur, North Darfur, and West Darfur together are the size of France, in a country the size of Western Europe. We circle round and round to land and a small town



built in perfect grid formation gleams in the barrenness.

The image we have of Darfur is of death and destruction, so Nyala is quite a shock: a reasonably vibrant African town with a few paved roads, electricity, shops and even a football boutique. A couple of restaurants, aimed at the estimated 17,000 foreigners who have come to enforce peace and bring stability and development. The area notoriously is deprived and was made famous in 2003 by the atrocities committed by the pro-government 'janjaweed' militia. This area has long been neglected and marginalised by the Khartoum government, and those who ruled before.

Deprivation is obvious, and one of the demands is for this part of the country, that was once an independent sultanate, to share in power.

People want development – to have schools, hospitals, water, sanitation and more infrastructure. It has also been an area of long-standing internal clashes. These used to be settled by the head of local tribes but they no longer exert the same power.

On Saturday evening, as the sun sets, the town returns to life after the weekend. Little rickshaws share the road with donkey carts, beaten up old cars, international NGO vehicles, bicycles and men in white robes on motorbikes and many pedestrians. A skinny little boy in orange shorts flashes his tiny bum and runs across the street. Men on horseback ride past K2, a restaurant catering to the urge of internationals. I order the grilled chicken. Or I think I do. The translation was so bad it could have been Chechen. It was so good in fact that I insisted we return the next night, but there was no chicken left so I tried the pizza, which was world-class awful. I ordered vegetarian and looked forward to solving another gastronomic mystery and discovering what 'organ' would be, hoping it was not raw liver of camel, but oregano. Darfuri camels are prized for their meat and their racing abilities. Outside before sunset the men sit in circles and play daha in the sand with stones, a game like noughts and crosses in their white jallabiyas and imaas (turbans) or tagiyas (hats), but when the night air is cool the town comes to life. There is even a cinema that has been there for years showing Bollywood movies.

In the morning, snakes of girls in white headscarves weave their way to school. Later on in the day you see people resting on their haunches, leaning against low brick walls seeking shelter from the scorching sun. Others sit on large truck tires, planted in the sand. The government forbids you from taking photographs, security informants lurk secretly, but I find it strange that there are no pictures of President Omar al-Bashir.

The town was largely protected from the violence, which remains rampant outside its environs. Even inside the town there are one or two murders a night. Darfur is incredibly poor, yet even poor Darfuris give money to those less well off. I pass one young woman, no more than a girl, dressed in rags, carrying a small baby, and an old woman with a cane, both homeless. At this time of year the wind blows constantly and you can sense desertification that so threatens the people and the landscape.

The market
sells fresh

oranges, mangoes, bananas, and is filled with merchandise. At a food stall on the street a falafel seller wears a rubber glove while he kneads the balls before tossing them into the boiling oil. I stop at a restaurant and sit with a woman in a blue and white polka dot tobe, the traditional wrap that elegantly covers Sudanese women. She is the mother of five children who was married to a prosperous businessman. When situation deteriorated in 2003, he left. To support her family she cooks for one of the charities. Two of her daughters are at university in the capital, and she is learning English. The restaurant is scarily decayed, and dirty beyond belief. I am not brave enough to eat so I merely observe.

I have been told on several occasions just how kind the Sudanese people are and it is proved to me on more than one occasion. I have misplaced my keys and Saaed, a Sudanese man who works for the UN, offers to help as I am stranded. Men and women cannot ride together on a motorbike, especially men with beards as they are religious, so he pushes his all the way to

where I am staying. When I protest, he says do not be too sensitive, it is the Sudanese way. They would never leave anyone, much less a woman alone. He explains, like in so much of Africa and the Middle East, that because he has a job he is expected to support his whole family. Which he does: "With pleasure." That's the contradiction of places like this. Such kindness is shown to women on the one hand, and on the other they are raped in the desert as they collect firewood.

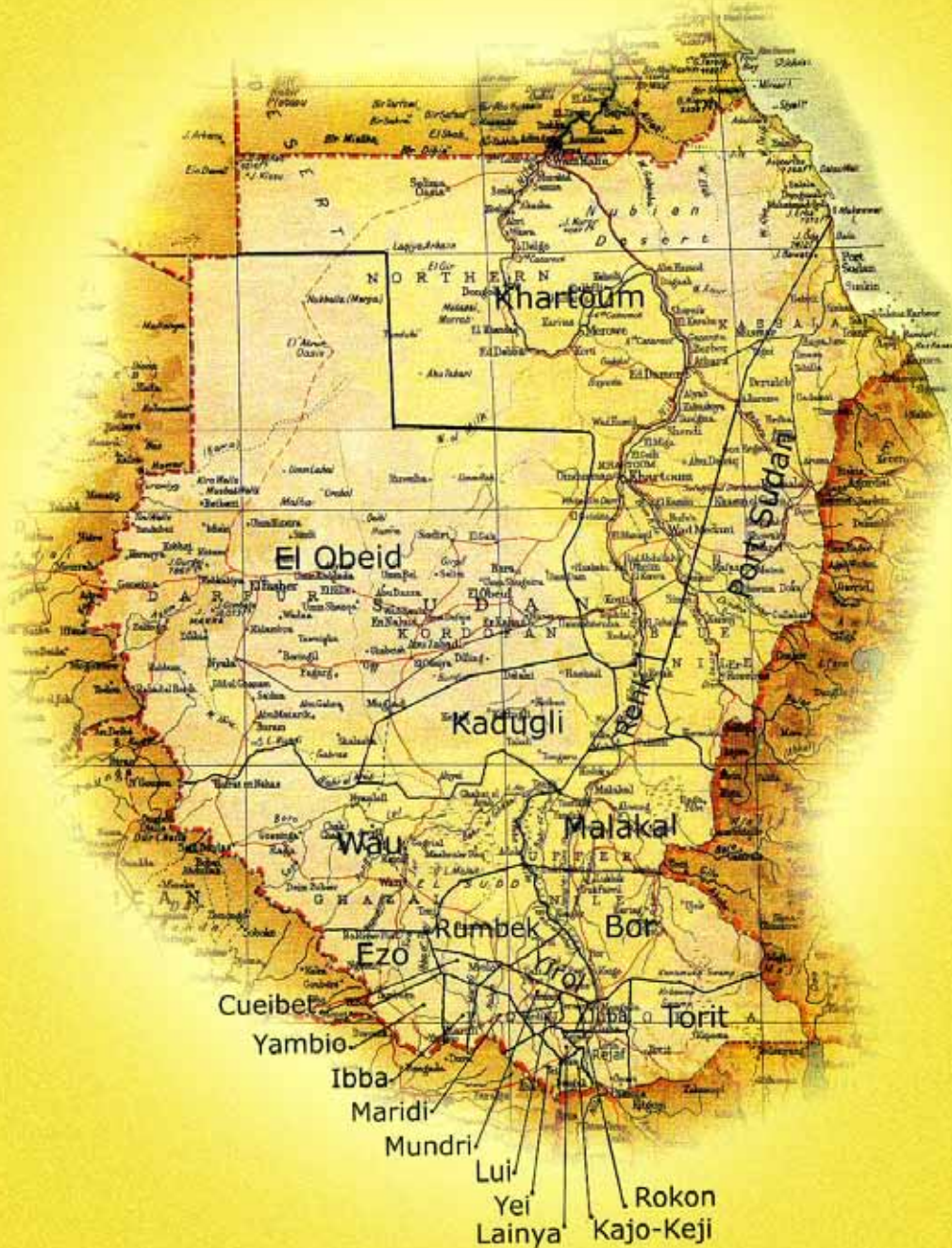
Nyala is important to the Khartoum government not least because of its airport, and it has the only railway stop apart from the capital that links it to Port Sudan on the coast. So the massacres of 2003-4 took place outside the city, where the banditry still continues. Yet now it is impossible to travel from one village to another due to the number of armed rebel and militia groups who control the roads, far more dangerous than when the violence peaked in 2003-4.

The United Nations African Mission In Darfur (UNAMID) will spend \$2 billion here this year, with their mandate to protect civilians. UNAMID is on level four high alert, one step from full evacuation. There is a nervous tension as the country waits to see what will happen with the International Criminal Court indictment of Sudanese president Omar al-Bashir and whether it will issue an arrest warrant on the charges of genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes. UNAMID is here on the reluctant invitation/agreement of the host government who impedes much of their work, regardless of its own internal divisions.

Nineteen kilometers away, over a bumpy, unpaved road, there is no illusion about anything. Kalma camp, one of several, is where internally displaced people (IDPs) live. These are 'classified' areas, some can be visited and some not. There are no official figures for how many residents live there but it is estimated to be anywhere from 53,000 to over 100,000 and it is one of many such camps.

The government worries that these camps are becoming like the Palestinian ones in Lebanon and that guns are slipping into the camps. It was on that pretense that government forces surrounded the camp on August 25th, and entered, ultimately shooting dead more than 30 people, including many women, elderly people and children. We pass their grave, a mud mound covered with rocks, on the way into the camp, which is now more like a fortress, with armed forces protecting the IDPs who live in utter deprivation. Women in vividly coloured robes, sit patiently waiting for food distribution. Donkeys graze in the garbage.

At noon when I arrive there is a meeting going on between the camp leaders, there are nine sections, divided on ethnic and tribal lines, the community volunteer police and UNAMID police. Over the past two months there has been a spate of cattle-rustling, animals taken from the 'jangaweed', which here is a term referring to all semi-nomadic Arabs, and traced back to the camp, but the thieves have not been caught, and the jangaweed have come to look for their animals.



Some in the gathered crowd believe these are government plants, but theft has gone up in Nyala town, and there have been instances of rape, murder and illegal brewing of alcohol in Kalma. Recently SP1000 (about US\$500) was paid as compensation to a victim whose cattle were stolen. The sheikh of sheikhs, Sheikh Ali, who has real attitude and has been appointed chief camp spokesman, stands up in his blue-grey trenchcoat over his jallabiya and says that crime must stop because they do not want to give the government any excuse to enter the camp. There is a round of vigorous applause. When a woman, Khajida, stands up to speak and suggests, in a feisty, forceful manner, that these thieves should be handed to the janjaweed as punishment, the room erupts into cheers.

But when the UNAMID civil affairs office calls their pre-arranged meeting a verbal spat breaks out between the factions because Sheikh Ali had not told another sheikh about the meeting. It is an internal power struggle. The Fur, the biggest victims in Darfur, have become perpetrators of violence. It manifested itself in October 2007 when they drove thousands of people they didn't like from the camps, burning their huts in a replay of what had been done to them. So it was IDPs fighting IDPs.

A few days later when I have lunch with a Sudanese, he says the IDPs don't want lessons on civil rights but that they want food. They look at the big 4x4s driven by the UNAMID staff, and wonder why more isn't being done for them, although the World Food Program does provide food for IDPs. There is also a

thriving business in ration cards distributed to IDPs, who sell the food.

Kalma is a pretty desperate place where IDPs chose to stay, some say, because they have no where else to go. The government wants them to return to their villages, but the villages have been destroyed, and the roads are too dangerous to travel even if they wanted to go, and often their lands have been occupied. The ethnic tensions that erupted before are now erupting in the camps between tribes. The government wants the camps to disband so they make it extremely difficult for humanitarian assistance to get in to the camps, and the agencies are terrified that one wrong move on their part and they will be closed down. The IDPs refuse to return to their villages until the rebels are disarmed. But you cannot disarm one element and not the other. As one western diplomat says, if you do, the strong will prey on the weak.

Darfur has strained international relationships for the government, but it is not a conflict that can be reduced to one sentence: Arab against Africans. But the central government is exploiting tribal rivalries, jealousies and greed to perpetuate a situation which is now out of their control. Even if the government wanted to end the situation, it is possible they couldn't.

In February 2002, insurgents attacked a central government location in El Fashir, the capital of North Darfur, from which the present crisis grew. For the previous decade, groups of bandits stole cows and looted other valuable possessions.

When the current conflict started in full in 2003, the Khartoum armed groups they considered pro-government wherever political opposition had been brewing. But not all those who fought were janjaweed, and not all Arabs on horseback are jajaweed. There is also the element of external meddling from countries like Chad, Niger, Mali, Mauritania and Libya. The conflict also spilled over from the civil war that was taking place between the north and the south.

Janjaweed refers in general to Arabs on horseback, but Darfur is a complex mix of tribes, sub-tribes and about eighty ethnic groups who over time have intermarried, mixed together and co-existed. Those referred to as African tribes largely speak Arabic, are Muslim, as is all of Darfur, and look the same as the Arab tribes. The clashes were ostensibly about resources, but they were as much about the lack of development. The clashes between the nomadic tribes and farmers have a long history in an area where water is a precious resource, where cattle graze on fertile land, and where desertification is a creeping issue. Jebel Marra, now a rebel stronghold, used

to be an area full of rich farmland, and the Fur heartland.

To this end the Darfur Peace Agreement (DPA) was signed in May 2006. The only signatory of the DPA were the Sudan Liberation Army's Minni Minawi faction and the government of Khartoum. But the insurgent SLA Minni, has fragmented, and nobody knows exactly how many splinter groups exist. Ultimately they seem to represent no one but themselves.

I go to see four of the factions. Each office is like the other: empty house, decaying, men sitting around, nothing much happening, all claiming to want peace, though nothing has been implemented, and the DPA is probably dead. More than once I was told that if the situation did not improve the fighting would resume. The picture also lacks one visionary leader, and those leaders who exist live lives of luxury in European capitals.

Determining what peace means in Darfur, describing the endgame (UNAMID is building a supercamp), and who the winner should be as there are no leaders here with clean hands, are all equally taxing issues. And what kind of democracy is possible in a place where most of the population is illiterate, poor, lacks access to education and is manipulated by

tribal loyalties and wily pseudo-politicians interested only in themselves?

Pressure from the international community managed to end the levels of bloodshed of 2003–5, but insecurity outside towns remains rampant and unpredictable with militias and rebels armed and lawless.

At this point trust between Darfuris and everyone else, including the government, is broken and may take generations to heal. But Darfur is only one piece in the complex Sudan puzzle. The longest-running civil war in Africa was between north and south Sudan. The Comprehensive Peace Agreement was signed in 2005 ending a 21-year war far more bloody than Darfur. It is estimated that two million people died. The south has vast reserves of oil, money that largely funds the capital. There is a referendum in 2011 where the south will be given the option to secede. The north needs the revenue from the south, the south needs the technology and access via the north, but the government has yet to prove to the south that they really believe in unity. There are also border issues so while Darfur rightly complains that it is marginalised and deprived, outside Khartoum, the north where the ruling elite has always come from, also suffers from lack of investment and development, as does the south. The south, another huge area, only has 10 kilometers of paved road.

The upcoming ICC decision has increased tension across the country. It hits right at the heart of an authoritarian government unwilling to give up power or money. In

Khartoum, many worry about increasing levels of violence. Until now the international community has invested a great deal of time and resources, but with western economies in freefall the question starting to be asked is what is the future of peacekeeping in Sudan when there are other priorities at home?

People ask if I understand the situation better. I tell a professor at Juba University that perhaps I have a slightly better understanding. "I have lived here my whole life," he responds, "and I don't understand it."

The devils who came on horseback now ride in stolen 4x4s. Carjacking is a hobby and a means of income for bandits, referred to by the locals as the 'Tora Bora', who have no interest in peace and no political agenda but use it as a cover. Not too long ago a friend of mine was held up and forced to lie face down in the sand as gun-totting outlaws threatened to kill her and her Sudanese colleagues. They didn't, and finally only robbed them. So somewhere out there on the Darfur plains a Tora Bora wears last season's Roberto Cavalli sunglasses. ✖

Heidi Kingstone spent four months in Afghanistan in 2007 reporting for various publications. Her work has appeared in the Financial Times, The Spectator, The Sunday Times and many other international publications. She has reported from Iraq, Rwanda, Lebanon and many other countries.

