



HARD LIFE: Refugees from Sudan's western Darfur gather water from a well at Djabal camp near Gos Beida, eastern Chad. Envoys from the UN Security Council are to visit the camp.

PICTURE: FINBARR O'REILLY/REUTERS

Living on the edge of a knife

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. It's easy to understand how resources have been at the centre of fierce wars here over centuries.

It's less than an hour-and-a-half by plane from the Sudanese capital Khartoum to South Darfur, which is 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, modern town in perfect grid formation gleams in the barrenness.

The image we have of Darfur is of death and destruction, so visiting Nyala is quite a shock, particularly to see a reasonably vibrant African town with a few wide, paved roads and electricity, shops and electrical goods ... even a football boutique.

There are a couple of restaurants, too ... aimed at the estimated 17 000 foreigners who have come to enforce peace and bring stability and development in an area notoriously deprived and made infamous since 2003 by atrocities committed by the pro-government "Janjaweed" militia.

This area has long been neglected and marginalised by the Khartoum government.

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. It has also been an area of long-standing internal clashes that had in the past been settled by the heads of local tribes, who no longer exert the same power.

On Saturday evening the town returns to life after the weekend. Small, motorised rickshaws share the road with donkey carts, beaten-up old cars, international NGO vehicles, bicycles and men in white robes on motorbikes, as well as 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 internationals.

I order the grilled chicken. Or I think I do. The translation was so bad it could have been Chechen. But it is so good I insist we return the next night. There is no chicken left, so I try the pizza, which is world-class awful.

Outside before sunset the men sit in circles and play dahan 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

The Darfur situation is so arcane and complicated that even a professor who has lived there all his life admits he doesn't understand it, writes Heidi Kingstone



YOUTH POWER: A teenage fighter from the Justice and Equality Movement in the back of an armoured vehicle at a meeting. PICTURE: REUTERS

there for years showing Bollywood movies.

In the morning snakes of girls in white headscarves weave their way to school. Later on you see people resting on their haunches, leaning against low brick walls, seeking shelter from the scorching sun. Others sit on large truck tyres planted in the sand.

The government forbids you to take photographs, security informants lurk, but I find it strange there are no pictures of President Omar al-Bashir.

Here it is women who are the construction workers.

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 the situation deteriorated in 2003, he left. To support her family she cooks for one of the charities. Two of her daughters are at university, and she is learning English.

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 Saeed, a Sudanese man who works for the United Nations, offers to help as I am stranded.

They would never leave anyone, much less a woman, alone. 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 when they collect firewood.

The city is important to the Khartoum government, not least because of its airport, but also because it is on the railway line from the capital to Port Sudan on the coast. So the massacres a few years ago took place outside the city, where the banditry continues.

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 US\$2-billion here this year, with its mandate being 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 (ICC) indictment of Sudanese president Omar al-Bashir, and whether it will issue an arrest warrant on charges of genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes.

Unamid is here on the reluctant invitation or agreement of the host government, which impedes much of its work.

Nineteen kilometres away, over a bumpy road, is Kalma camp. It is one of several where internally displaced people (IDPs) live. Only some can be visited.

There are no figures for how many live there, but estimates put the camp population at 73 000, and it is one of many.

The government worries about these camps, which are unstable, and could end up ruled by armed militias. It was on that pretence that government forces surrounded the camp on August 25, ultimately shooting dead more than 30, including 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, armed



MERCY FOOD: Refugees from Sudan's western Darfur region receive rations at a food distribution point at Djabal camp, near Gos Beida in eastern Chad. PICTURE: REUTERS

forces guarding the IDPs who live in utter deprivation.

Women in vividly coloured tobes sit patiently waiting for food distribution. Donkeys graze in the garbage.

There is a meeting between 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" (a term referring to all semi-nomadic Arabs) and traced back to the camp, and the jangaweed have come to look for their animals.

Theft has gone up in Nyala town, and there have been instances of rape, murder and illegal brewing of alcohol in Kalma. 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 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, suggests, in a forceful manner, that the thieves should be handed to the jangaweed as punishment, the room erupts in cheers.

When I have lunch with a Sudanese, he says the IDPs don't want lessons on civil rights, but food.

They look at the big 4x4s driven by the

(including the jangaweed) they considered pro-government, in places where political opposition had been brewing.

Janjaweed refers in general to Arabs on horseback, but Darfur is a complex mix of tribes, sub-tribes and about 80 ethnic groups, who over time have mixed 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, and where desertification is a creeping issue.

The Darfur Peace Agreement was signed in May 2006. The only signatory to the DPA is the Sudan Liberation Army Minni Minawi faction, and the government of Khartoum.

But the insurgent SLA Minni, as it is known, has fragmented, and nobody knows how many splinter groups exist, splitting as they have like amoebas, but there are probably between 10 and 20 rebel factions. Ultimately they seem to represent no one but themselves.

I go to see four of the factions, or at least I think I do. Each office is like the other: empty houses, decaying, with men sitting around, nothing much seeming to happen, all claiming to want peace.

More than once I am told that if the situation does not improve the fighting will resume. Finally, there is no one visionary leader, and the leaders who exist live lives of luxury in European capitals.

What kind of democracy is possible in a place where most of the population is illiterate, poor, has no 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 that took place between 2003 and 2005, but insecurity remains.

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, in which two million died.

The south has vast reserves of oil, largely funding the capital.

There will be a referendum in 2011 where the south will be given the option to secede. With the western economies in free fall the question is what is the future of peacekeeping in Sudan?

I tell a professor at Juba University that perhaps I have a bit better understanding, but the situation is arcane.

"I have lived here my whole life," he says, "and I don't understand it."