

# DIARY

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**A**long the stretch of highway leading to the international airport in Khartoum there are illuminated signs of Sudan's President Omar el-Bashir alternating with those of Luis Moreno-Ocampo, the prosecutor of the International Criminal Court who has indicted him. The country waits to see if the ICC will issue an arrest warrant for its leader, the first for a sitting head of state. It marks a turbulent time in this turbulent country. Bashir has already been indicted on ten counts of war crimes, crimes against humanity and genocide, although it is speculated that the last might be dropped. If a warrant is issued, a state of emergency could be declared and a defiant government that does not recognise the jurisdiction of the ICC would strengthen its grip on power. Already people are being arrested and fear pervades the streets. Sudanese men and women who work for NGOs have been beaten; the government believes they are providing evidence against Bashir.

There is an election scheduled for July 2009 (although the government threatens to cancel it), and a referendum scheduled for 2011 to decide the future of the country. After Africa's longest-running civil war came to an end in 2005 with the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement, the semi-autonomous government of South Sudan was established. The next step will determine whether or not the south becomes independent. The south is landlocked but has oil; the north, where power is concentrated in Khartoum, has the sea. Is it better for Sudan to remain as one country, with access to the northern African countries, and a part of the Muslim world, or should it be allowed to fragment into a clutch of small African countries? What are the other consequences: another civil war? conflict in the east? The Sudanese are also perplexed that Darfur has grabbed the headlines when the numbers of dead from the north-south civil war totalled millions: Bashir has not been indicted for crimes in that conflict. But Darfur is what everyone talks about. At a British embassy reception I had an interesting conversation with a gay (illegal here) Sudanese man. 'The Sudanese,' he tells me, 'are the most racist people in the world.' His family comes from one of the ruling northern tribes. 'If I told my father I wanted to marry a Darfurian [all ironies aside], he would kick me out.'

In Nyala, the capital of South Darfur, there are many rebel factions operating, and I go



to see a number of them. Or at least I think I do. All the headquarters look the same — derelict, wind-blown, with men sitting around all wearing and saying the same thing. It's as if I left through one door, got turned around, and went back in again.

Kalma camp is one of many in which an estimated 70,000 internally displaced people (IDPs) have sought refuge since 2003.

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Darfur is desolate at the best of times, and nowhere more so than here, where people live in shelters constructed with twigs and whatever else they can find. Unamid, the hybrid UN and African Union peacekeeping force, spends \$2 billion a year in the Darfur region. On 25 August the government entered the camp, supposedly looking for weapons, and shot more than 30 people, including women and children. We pass their graves as we enter. The IDPs asked for more protection, and since then the UN has built a boundary protected with barbed wire, sandbags and lookouts. No one wants the government to come back in, but this is not a failed state; it has a right to maintain law and order. There has also been a spate of cattle-rustling and many people think the thieves are plants from Khartoum, but there has been a rise in crime even in Nyala, and many tribal tensions exist inside the camps. Travel outside the main towns has become hugely dangerous over the last few years, and the arms situation is out of control. The massacres that took place in Darfur between 2003 and 2005 have stopped, but then the government has liquidated much of its opposition. Many rebel leaders live lives of luxury in European capitals. Perhaps there are improvements here and there, but the international community can never say what the endgame is. Political alliances are shifting: the Sudanese People's Liberation Movement now forms part of the government with the ruling National Congress Party, its old enemy. No politician in Sudan has clean hands, and if Bashir goes it is likely that someone else from one of the dominant northern tribes will replace him. 'Who would you put in charge?' asks one savvy Western diplomat.

The devils who came on horseback now ride in stolen 4x4s. Carjacking is a hobby in Darfur. A friend was held up and forced to lie face down in the sand as gun-totting militia men threatened to kill her and her Sudanese colleagues. They didn't, but they did rob them. Somewhere out there a Janjaweed wears last season's Roberto Cavalli sunglasses.

I was told that no trip to Sudan was complete without meeting the Black Pope of Terrorism, Dr Hassan Turabi, who engineered the 1989 coup d'état that brought Bashir, now his mortal enemy, to power. He comes across as a reasonable, gentle, turbaned sheikh. But he oversaw a gruesome period in the country's history. Osama bin Laden used to be Turabi's neighbour in the luxurious suburb where he has his house. It was at Turabi's invitation that bin Laden came to town. Turabi says 'he was a very gentle, soft-spoken and fragile man'.