

## "Darfur: The Truth Will Out,"

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By Eric Reeves

The near total absence of reporting on Darfur in recent years marks the success of the Khartoum regime in making of this ongoing human catastrophe a "black box," from which exceedingly little information escapes via traditional news media and the humanitarian presence that remains in the region. Khartoum has successfully intimidated Ibrahim Gambari, the head of the UN/African Union Mission in Darfur (UNAMID), and successive heads of UN humanitarian operations in Darfur. For their part, international nongovernmental relief organizations fear to be more forthright than the UN, believing (with good reason) that this will lead to expulsion or intolerable harassment. The May shutdown of operations by Doctors Without Borders/Médecins Sans Frontières in Jebel Si is only the most recent example.

But all evidence suggests that Darfur remains in the throes of a vast humanitarian crisis and that intolerable insecurity remains constant in the lives of people throughout Darfur---in camps, rural areas, and urban locations. We know this primarily from the extraordinary work of a new kind of news reporting organization, Radio Dabanga (RD). RD has a vast network of Darfuri sources and contacts on the ground and in the diaspora, and uses a variety of electronic communication measures to reach out for news on a daily basis. Darfuris working in The Netherlands collate reports with other confirming or disconfirming accounts, assess them for credibility, and then seek comment from Khartoum and the UN---usually to no helpful effect.

This is often because the UN has no access to areas that have been attacked, either from the air or on the ground. Despite a 2008 agreement that gives UNAMID complete freedom of movement, and despite UN Security Council Resolution 1591 (banning all military flights in Darfur and empowering a Panel of Experts to monitor the ban), the UN rarely investigates, typically because Khartoum refuses to grant access. Thus virtually nothing is reported from the populous Jebel Marra region of central Darfur, which has endured an almost total humanitarian embargo for over two years, and is often the site of aerial bombardment. Such bombardment is a constant in Darfur and belies various claims by a range of senior UN and UNAMID officials that Darfur is "relatively secure" or that "there is no more fighting on the ground."

In some ways even more troubling is UN refusal to halt or even report on the continuing epidemic of rape, often gang-raping, of women and girls. Rape is a subject on which Khartoum has proved particularly sensitive, and this has translated into an almost complete acquiescence on the ground. Yet from RD we learn constantly of these most brutal, even lethal sexual assaults.

UN humanitarian officers have been shamefully accommodating of Khartoum's desire that malnutrition and health data from the camps not be reported; the UN has also acquiesced in the regime's denial of access to relief workers and suppressing of what information there is on critical metrics of human well-being: outbreaks of infectious diseases, water and food shortages, the absence of primary medical care, ethnically-targeted violence against the camps, numbers newly displaced by violence, and the extreme challenges confronting those wishing to return to their lands.

It is here that RD is of particular value: not only individual eyewitnesses but sheikhs, omdas, and other leaders know that the truth of the situation of the camps will be reported by RD without fear of censorship or reprisal. For RD operates out of The Netherlands, and Khartoum's arrests of RD workers and "collaborators" in the Sudanese capital last year have made dissemination of news dispatches an almost exclusively expatriate endeavor.

Given the extraordinary levels of press and news media censorship in Sudan, RD stands alone as a beacon to many Darfuris, convincing them that in their suffering they have not been forgotten or abandoned. It is high time that the news-reporting world, which has failed to gain access to Darfur for so long, take much more seriously the findings of RD. It marks a breakthrough in reporting from the midst of repression and conflict and might well serve as a model for other victims of tyranny.

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