

**Some reflections on the invisibility of Darfur**  
**By Eric Reeves**  
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I'm often asked, "Is the Darfur situation still awful? is it still a humanitarian crisis?" It's a painful question to have to answer, if only because of the difficulty in providing even a superficial overview of such unfathomable human suffering and destruction; or the brutality of Khartoum's war of attrition against humanitarian relief efforts; or the massive and continuing displacement of civilians ([more than 1.3 million since 2007](#)). And it is just as difficult to give an adequate account of the role of the Khartoum regime in sustaining what Human Rights Watch a number of years ago called "Chaos by Design." In fact, the vast crisis in Darfur continues to be "designed"—sustained by denial and obstruction of humanitarian access; by Khartoum's granting impunity to militia proxies engaged in extortion, murder, and land appropriation; and by the relentless military assaults of the regime's regular Sudan Armed Forces and its proxy forces. The SAF air force in particular continues its brutal assaults—largely indiscriminate aerial assaults on civilian targets, of which there have been many hundreds confirmed (see [www.sudanbombing.org](http://www.sudanbombing.org)).

"But why has it disappeared?" is the typical follow-up question. "What about the vigorous advocacy movement at the beginning of the genocide? Why don't we read about Darfur in the news any longer?" This is a harder set of questions, but there are at least some obvious answers:

[1] Khartoum allows no journalists into Darfur, except under tightly controlled circumstances; and such control can produce egregiously inaccurate reporting by even talented journalists; see my [April 15, 2012 account](#) of a deeply misleading *New York Times* dispatch from West Darfur).

[2] Independent human rights reporting has not been permitted in Darfur for many years, and most of the various UN human rights "reporters" have done exceedingly little. The former UN Panel of Experts on Darfur did some excellent work, but its well-researched findings did not have a large audience; and by 2010, the Panel had become badly politicized and its reporting deeply inadequate (see *Sudan Tribune*, [April 28, 2013](#)). For example, September 2010—the month of the [large-scale and utterly savage slaughter of non-Arab civilians by an Arab militia force in Tabarat, North Darfur](#)—was carefully elided from the calendar of both the outgoing Panel and the incoming Panel, which began with October 2010, even as the previous Panel had covered only through August 2010. We still have no UN account of the ethnic slaughter at Tabarat, even as it was [reported contemporaneously—in detail—by Reuters](#), which had actually taken the time to interview survivors.

[3] The UN, both in the Secretariat and in the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, has badly misrepresented the scale of the crisis in Darfur, indeed has gone so far as to lie about humanitarian access. The UN has also acquiesced before Khartoum's demand that humanitarian data and reports not be promulgated. UNAMID, which is also routinely denied access by Khartoum's officials, is a demoralized mission whose reporting has become slovenly and wildly incomplete.

I sense that many people not from Darfur have come to believe that the crisis has simply gone on too long to be a true crisis—a conclusion that is only etymologically correct. But attention has certainly drifted, and fatigue has settled in for many activists and advocates—mainly for the reasons outlined above.

But there is another less obvious reason that Darfur has become invisible. For the suffering and destruction have at various times been seriously misrepresented by those who claim to know the region best. Alex de Waal, who has repeatedly and stridently condemned civil advocacy in the U.S. and elsewhere—as ignorant, misguided, and finally destructive—seems the best exemplar here. After the debacle of the 2006 Darfur Peace Agreement (Abuja, Nigeria), de Waal went on to become the "Darfur expert" for the African Union Panel on Darfur (AUPD) that convened in 2009; the Panel was chaired by the politically ambitious Thabo Mbeki, former president of South Africa. The AUPD produced a lengthy, excruciatingly redundant report (without a single citation of work by others, including those upon whose work they obviously depended), and as conclusion offered a "Roadmap for Peace in Darfur."

Implementing the "roadmap" predictably transformed the AUPD into the (now geographically vague) "African Union High-Level Implementation Panel" (AUHIP), with Mbeki again chair. Many will recall that it

was Mbeki who refused to accept well-established scientific evidence concerning HIV/AIDS, and subjected South Africans to a brutal epidemic that still ravages the country. And it was Mbeki as well who threw a crucial diplomatic lifeline to Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe; there is no crueller or more destructive one-man tyranny in Africa than Mugabe's. All too predictably—given their flawed means of proceeding and even more flawed leadership—the AUHIP failed badly in Darfur. They have subsequently migrated to other Sudanese issues, with the same vaguely exalted title of "African Union High-Level Implementation Panel"; their inadequacies have been similarly manifest elsewhere in greater Sudan.

So what sort of advice was Mbeki receiving from de Waal? What view of Darfur shaped the AU's? For someone so critical of the purported ignorance of advocates for Darfur, de Waal in 2009—the year the AU panel convened—offered a rather remarkable view of Darfur. Speaking of the village of Ain Siro in Kutum Locality, North Darfur, de Waal declares rapturously:

"A few days in Ain Siro is a reminder of what life used to be like in Darfur. The village is nestled in the spine of hills that runs due north from Jebel Marra into the desert. Protected by the mountains, the SLA has controlled the area for the last four years, and for many of the people in the vicinity, allowed an element of normality to return. Villages have been rebuilt, a rudimentary health service set up—and the school re-opened."

"Ain Siro shows how people on all sides are tired of war and, when given the chance, can make their own small but significant steps towards peace and normality. When Julie Flint first wrote about Ain Siro "saving itself" in 2007, most were sceptical that it represented anything significant. Two years on, not only has Ain Siro survived, but its model of self-help is less exceptional than it was."

**(May 29, 2009 at his SSRC blog: <http://blogs.ssrc.org/darfur/2009/05/28/a-taste-of-normality-in-ain-siro/>)**

Ain Siro and its surroundings are presently caught in the middle of the vast maelstrom of violence surging in all three Darfur states—violence that has been surging for many months, even as it has ebbed and flowed for the past ten years. The village lies approximately 30 miles from Kassab camp in Kutum Locality, where some of the worst violence of the past year has been focused. But even at the time de Waal was writing, violence in Darfur had by no means ceased; human displacement had certainly not abated, indeed was continuing at terrifying levels (see <http://www.sudanreeves.org/?p=3970>); and Khartoum's intention to crush the Darfur insurgency by genocidal means remained just as clear under new [direction by the notoriously brutal senior presidential advisor Nafie Ali Nafie](#) (this following the death of his predecessor, Majzoub al-Khalifa, in June 2007). Methods certainly had changed from the most violent period of the genocide (2003 – 2005/2006), but large-scale, ethnically-targeted violence remained very much a fact of life for the people of Darfur. The previously noted example of Tabarat (September 2010)—close to de Waal's Ain Siro in North Darfur—is all too revealing (<http://www.reuters.com/article/2010/09/17/ozatp-sudan-darfur-survivors-idAFJOE68G0BJ20100917>).

Moreover, in May 2009 most of Darfur was still reeling from Khartoum's catastrophic expulsion of thirteen international relief organizations in March 2009, and the shutting down of three Sudanese national humanitarian organizations. Senior relief officials within the humanitarian community consistently estimated that this represented approximately half the total relief capacity for all of Darfur. Did de Waal somehow think—two months after this event—that there would be no serious consequences? In fact, these consequences have become steadily more apparent in the following years. Humanitarian conditions, already poor, continue to deteriorate badly; humanitarian capacity and access continue to shrink. Indeed, the people of Ain Siro may well be beyond the reach of relief assistance; Khartoum continues to engage in the systematic denial of humanitarian assistance to areas where specific ethnic groups are concentrated; and some 100,000 Darfuris have been displaced from this part of North Darfur alone over the past year.

Strongly encouraged as I have been for almost ten years now, by a great many Darfuris, I have continued to write about the realities of the region as reported to me by the people of Darfur themselves and increasingly by Radio Dabanga, an extraordinary journalistic collaboration of Darfuris, based in The Netherlands. Radio Dabanga has done far more than the UN or international journalism it making

Darfur's realities visible (and is increasingly cited by other news sources, including the UN's Integrated Region Information Networks, IRIN). I have also benefitted from confidential humanitarian sources who have reported from the ground in Darfur, and from within UN OCHA, as well as from a range of other confidential sources. I have also read all the literature on Darfur from INGOs, human rights groups (typically using Sudanese national sources), policy organizations, and others; even in 2009 and subsequently these reports and accounts continued to be voluminous and time-consuming, if often fragmentary and incomplete. But I was certainly not alone in seeing something other than the idyllic scene at Ain Siro that de Waal reports, and which presumably informed his advice to the AU high-level panel then assembling.

What I heard and read was reflected in my running commentary (most of it published in the *Sudan Tribune*, a venue dismissed by de Waal as "biased") on the humanitarian and security crises in Darfur. Here I should frankly acknowledge that de Waal has recently written dismissively of these efforts: "Those who have hardly been [to Sudan] have no difficulty in writing reams of text..." (AllAfrica.com, [May 9, 2013](#)). What one would not surmise from this characterization is how much in these "reams" is citation and quotation, frequent and substantial citation and quotation from the widest possible range of reliable sources. It is in one sense an effort at archiving what is in great danger of being lost or forgotten or simply ignored, as it has clearly been by de Waal.

It may be useful, then, to compare de Waal's rapturous account of May 2009 with my own more expansive accounts from the periods before and after this moment. I offer no summary overview; the catastrophe in Darfur is neither simply nor easily rendered—and it is continually evolving. Understanding how deeply, perversely wrong-headed de Waal has been requires, indeed, some substantial reading. Better this than the glibness for which de Waal has become so well known.

• **Humanitarian Efforts in Darfur Face Escalating War by Khartoum**, *Sudan Tribune*, October 29, 2008, <http://www.sudantribune.com/spip.php?article29073>

• **Darfur Enmeshed Within Sudan's Broadening National Crisis**, *Sudan Tribune*:

January 2, 2009, Part 1: <http://www.sudantribune.com/spip.php?article29742>

January 22, 2009, Part 2: <http://www.sudantribune.com/spip.php?article29948>

March 3, 2009, Part 3: <http://www.sudantribune.com/spip.php?article30389>

• **Khartoum's Expulsion of Humanitarian Organizations (March 4, 2009)**, *Sudan Tribune*, March 25, 2009, <http://www.sudantribune.com/spip.php?article30643>

• **Darfur Humanitarian Expulsions, Two Months On**, *Sudan Tribune*, May 14, 2009, <http://www.sudantribune.com/spip.php?article31163>

• **Redefining Darfur's Agony: A Shameless Betrayal**, *Sudan Tribune*, September 27, 2009, <http://www.sudantribune.com/spip.php?article32602>

• **Humanitarian Conditions in Darfur: An Overview (in two parts)**, *Sudan Tribune*:

June 23, 2010, Part 1: <http://www.sudantribune.com/spip.php?article35480>

July 5, 2010, Part 2: <http://www.sudantribune.com/Humanitarian-Conditions-in-Darfur.35569>

• **QUANTIFYING GENOCIDE: Darfur Mortality Update**, *Sudan Tribune*, August 10, 2010, <http://www.sudantribune.com/spip.php?article35911>

More recently, and giving an even fuller sense of how profoundly misguided de Waal's May 2009 assessment has proved to be:

• **Humanitarian Conditions in Darfur: The most recent reports reveal a relentless deterioration**, *Sudan Tribune*, February 12, 2013, <http://www.sudantribune.com/spip.php?article45480>

• **THE DARFUR GENOCIDE AT TEN YEARS: A Reckoning**, *Sudan Tribune*,

April 20, 2013, <http://www.sudantribune.com/spip.php?article46292>

• **A Key Report on Darfur by UN Panel of Experts Consigned to Oblivion**, *Sudan Tribune*, April 28, 2013, <http://www.sudantribune.com/spip.php?article46376>

Much of this and other work, including academic publications, is assembled in archival fashion in *Compromising With Evil: An archival history of greater Sudan, 2007 – 2012* ([www.CompromisingWithEvil.org](http://www.CompromisingWithEvil.org)).

Many generous words have been accorded this volume; none mean more to me than those of Dr. Mohamed Ahmed Eisa—former head of the Amal Center for Treatment of Victims of Torture and Rape (Nyala, South Darfur) and Robert F. Kennedy human rights award laureate for 2007. And his words, I have been convinced by frequent communications, represent the views of a great many Darfuris, who understandably express their bewilderment at the silence of an international community that seems to have taken de Waal's as the last word concerning the situation in Darfur:

"For the past few years, while the world has been stunningly silent, Eric Reeves has continued to write about the atrocities and immensely destructive policies of the Sudan government. His 2007 book, *A Long Day's Dying*, brought many of the atrocity crimes in Darfur to international attention. While some skeptics or deniers, such as Mahmood Mamdani, dismissed his writings, activists in Darfur and elsewhere continue to be sustained in their commitment by virtue of the research of *A Long Day's Dying*.

"His new and lengthy eBook [*Compromising With Evil*], representing much of his writing from 2007 to the present, makes a great deal more key information available concerning the evolving crises in Darfur, the Nuba Mountains, Blue Nile, and the border region between North and South Sudan. In recent years the international community has chosen to turn a blind eye to what is happening in Darfur and Sudan. For his part, Eric Reeves has continued relentlessly to expose the failure of the international community in bringing about peace to Sudan, whether through implementing the Comprehensive Peace Agreement of 2005 or the UNAMID mission in Darfur.

"Reeves's new eBook contains 14 annexes, each dealing with a specific topic of controversy that demands to be read. I strongly urge those concerned about Sudan to read this new publication, which offers a sobering view of the deteriorating situation in both North and South Sudan."

I have certainly not spent as much time "on the ground" in Sudan as Alex de Waal has; but sadly, as his words reveal in various ways, those who have spent a great deal of time on the ground may still be unable to look in the right places or see what is quite plainly, if inconveniently, before them.