

Darfur crisis: a view from the inside

Jan Pronk, senior Dutch politician and statesman who is a Professor at the Institute of Social Studies, The Hague, was head of the U.N. Mission in Sudan. He had to leave the mission and Sudan following his differences with the regime in power in Khartoum in January 2007. In this interview, he speaks with deep insight into a problem that threatens to become one of the greatest humanitarian tragedies of our time – the Darfur crisis. He is now in the running for the leadership of the Dutch Labour party – PvdA (Partij van de Arbeid). Party elections are scheduled for end-September. He has been a senior Minister in several Dutch Cabinets – his political career spans nearly 35 years.

A. Rangarajan

In January this year, your prominent diplomatic role as the head of the United Nations Mission in Sudan came to a rather dramatic end when President Omar Al Basheer's government declared you *persona non grata* and asked you to leave the country in a matter of days. Do share with us the circumstances that led to this queer ending.

Sure. You know I had been heading the U.N. Mission in Sudan since mid-2004 as the Special Representative of the then Secretary-General, Kofi Annan. The mission in Sudan (UNMIS) had a much larger mandate in the form of overseeing the peace agreements within the ambit of the CPA [the Comprehensive Peace Agreement] signed by the rebel movements of the south – the SPLA/M led by the charismatic late John Garang and the largely Arab Northerners. This led to the formation of a government of national unity in Khartoum, thus ending decades of civil war in Sudan.

The UNMIS was, of course, a large mission with an annual budget of about \$3 billion, and managing the conflict in Darfur fell within the Mission's responsibility.

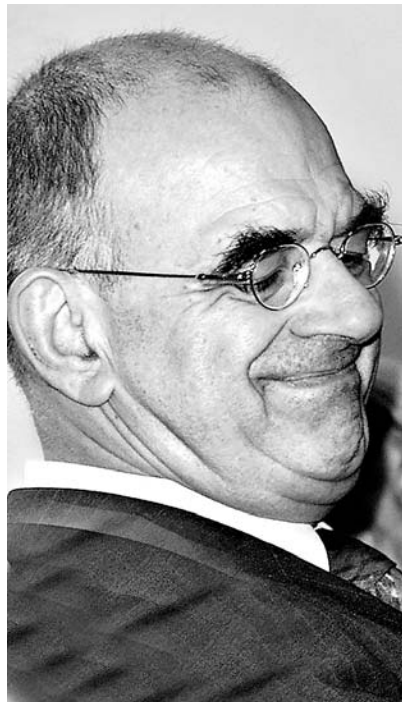
While we could discuss the history of the Darfur conflict later, the actual events that led to my expulsion followed a meeting I had with rebel commanders in October 2006, wherein I had got them to consent to a policy of not attacking government targets. And before I could get this message to Khartoum, government forces bombed the areas where I had met the rebel leaders. I saw this as a betrayal and indifference to a peace process and I said so. The government did not like this and shortly after that they declared me *persona non grata*.

The External Affairs Ministry cited an entry in your blog as the official reason for their action.

Yes. What I wrote in the blog was commonplace knowledge. I did discuss the weaknesses in the Sudanese military and I did not write anything that was not in the papers, but then it was used to have me out of the way.

Essentially, they did not like my questioning their commitment to peace in Darfur. It is a complex situation with a number of power structures exerting pressures in myriad forms in Sudan.

Looking back, I think I gave them an opportunity by making those entries in my weblog and I do blame myself for



Jan Pronk: "All parties concerned should work out a fresh peace and rehabilitation treaty with renewed commitment."

– PHOTO: AP

that! And the strange part is that what followed was even queerer. The U.N. Security Council could not even agree on a response to the letter from the Sudanese Foreign Affairs Ministry informing the U.N. of my expulsion; the bureaucratic U.N. and the indifference of the international community and the West, in particular, to the whole humanitarian tragedy in Darfur is yet another sordid aspect of this sad situation.

And now to a brief history of the conflict in Darfur ...

The seeds of this conflict lie in the historic, tribal, economic, ethnic and ecological dimensions of the problem that had been slowly unfolding over the years in Darfur.

Historically speaking, the borders of Sudan were drawn in the Berlin conference of 1892 at the behest of the colonial powers, with nobody from Sudan being even present there. Subsequently, the north of the country was administered differently and the south in another manner. And before that, the slave trade, dominated by the Arab constituents

within the tribal identities, had created their own imbalances.

The baggage and legacy of all this laid the foundations for mistrust and power struggles, leading to the conflicts of the present day. And then progressive desertification, resulting in resource scarcity and economic hardships had been leading to tensions between the nomadic Arab pastoral tribes and the settled agricultural black African communities in the region.

The disgruntled rebels, representing the farming villagers, after continued inaction by the government to act on their behalf, attacked the Al Fasher airport in April 2003. This was the spark that led to unspeakable violence.

The Janjaweed militia, with the tacit and covert support of the government, retaliated and unleashed terror that borders on ethnic cleansing and even genocide. Villagers had to flee their homes to refugee camps, running away from rape, murder, torture, poisoned wells and burnt farmlands. There are now roughly two million displaced people in the camps and another 2,00,000 refugees in neighbouring Chad. The people in the refugee camps now live off international donations, whose continued inflow is not guaranteed within any legal framework. Conditions are difficult in these camps, and there is the risk of a whole generation losing out.

It is imperative that these people are restored to their homes and lands if they are to see meaningful lives again. The world has a great crisis on its hands.

Does not the south have enough political representation in the Sudanese government to lobby and wrest a solution for Darfur – or have the people of Darfur been truly forsaken by everybody?

You know, the people of southern Sudan have big issues of their own at stake. The CPA, after all, brought to an end the longest running civil war in Africa, in the largest country of the continent – Sudan. In a few years time, they have to decide if they wish to secede [a right mutually agreed and enshrined in the CPA] and form their own country or not. With such huge preoccupations of their own, they would not want to burn up their political capital on Darfur. It is hard reality!

While President Basheer and his allies allowed international mediation for the fashioning of the CPA, they strictly regard Darfur as an internal matter and thus invoking Chapters 6 or 7 of the U.N.

Charter is a non-starter as far as the Darfur crisis goes. In fact, President Basheer threatens to resign and lead a jihad if these chapters are invoked!

Then, of course, you have the coalition of the willing that are going it on their own in Iraq and Afghanistan in gross violation of the international legal framework and U.N. mandates! I remain a strong critic of these coalitions, and they have no room as well in such conflict zones.

In fact, when the killings in Darfur were in full sway in 2003, the prominent actors in the coalition of the willing did not even put it on the agenda of the Security Council. It took more than one year of merciless killings to even bring it on the Security Council agenda. The European Union, of course, is even more bureaucratic with respect to foreign affairs and they invariably have only points of view and rarely any points of action!

All the dismay and shock the international community puts on now in the face of the Darfur crisis is too little, too late and even a bit hypocritical. They did not act when it made the most sense. Sadly, even Darfur's rebel leaders get carried away at times in their pursuit of power and jockeying for it that they put the very people they represent out of their focus. In a way, these people have been forsaken by all.

How do you see a route to resolution? Can anything be done at all?

Oh! I definitely I see some movements in the desired direction, if not at the desired pace, after my departure from Sudan. A hybrid force, comprising African Union troops and U.N. peacekeeping components, is being thought of and is being put together. The African Union forces on their own cannot do it – they need international support. This hybrid composition may be more acceptable to the government in Khartoum as compared to a 100 per cent U.N. peacekeeping force.

All parties concerned should work out a fresh peace and rehabilitation treaty with renewed commitment. I see movements in that direction as well. The earlier agreements were good to the letter but not beyond. The international community should keep up the vigil and use all good offices and possibilities at its disposal to bring life back to the people in those camps, for whom the prospects look bleak as of today. Such a coordinated approach may herald in the much-needed relief in Darfur.