

Desert Rose:

Hope Amidst Horror

for the Peoples of Darfur

Susan Sutton

When God planted His gardens around the world, He chose thorn trees and rocks for the Darfur region of Sudan and neighboring Chad. Painted in various shades of yellows and browns, the landscape of this sun-baked region just below the Sahara has its own kind of harsh beauty. The peoples who live here deserve the world's respect. Life is hard, yet they eke out a living from thin and unpromising soil.

Welcome to the transition zone between northern and southern Africa. Most people are subsistence farmers who sell their produce on straw mats in the daily markets, or merchants who hawk their wares from rickety tables or cluttered shops. Years are remembered by a good rain or a devastating drought. Hopes are for a good harvest and for children to live and, if Allah wills, to get a good education.

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That is, if Allah wills *and* the evil spirits don't get their way. The peoples of the sub-Saharan straddling Chad and Sudan are Muslim, but theirs is a folk Islam in which superstition compromises religious orthodoxy. Small leather pouches con-



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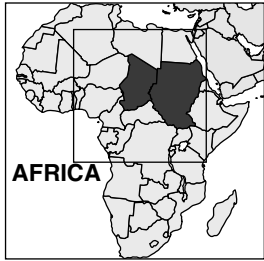
taining Qur'anic verses are draped on the necks of children and animals, soldiers and

young brides – their protection from evil. Muslim holy men write verses from the Qur'an on wooden boards, wash the ink into a bowl, and then sell the "drink" as a potion to guarantee anything from getting a wife to keeping bullets from penetrating the body. Pakistani teachers may travel throughout the region preaching a purer Islam, but they have a hard time rooting out the deeply embedded African way of viewing the world.

Nine months of *assef* (dry weather) and three months of *alharif* (rains) make up the rhythm of life, and laughter is found in them all. Women meet and gossip at local wells. Children giggle over games played with stones or dried goat pellets in the streets. Celebrations abound: births and marriages, circumcisions, and the return of friends after long journeys.

But laughter has died in Darfur, a region of western Sudan roughly the size of Texas. For two years, instead of gossiping, women have whispered tales of rape and murdered husbands and sons. Instead of playing in the streets, children have fled from aerial bombing and mysterious horsemen with guns. Nearly two million homeless, hungry, and traumatized people now wander or huddle in Darfur and the neighboring provinces of Chad.

The world has taken notice, thanks largely to concerned Christians who persisted in bringing Darfur to the attention of influential politicians. No one wants another Rwanda. In fact, before the tsunami struck Asia on December



26, the United Nations had identified Darfur as “the world’s worst humanitarian crisis.” In July 2004 the U.S. Congress passed a resolution declaring the Darfur situation to be “genocide.” Though the Asia tsunami crisis surpasses Darfur in the reported loss of life and the destruction of property – meriting the tremendous response of aid – the Darfur crisis is dominated by a heart-wrenching difference:

the enormous destruction comes from human hands rather than nature.

Making Sense of the Headlines

Many questions persist for outsiders trying to make sense of the news headlines emerging from this region. What exactly is going on? Are the accusations of “genocide” and “ethnic cleansing” true? Is the conflict religious or tribal or political? Are any disciples of Jesus resident in the region and acting as salt and light toward long-term solutions? Is Darfur merely a black hole of chaos, or do we see any signs of hope?

The answers are numerous and as complex as Africa itself. To live and work in sub-Saharan Africa is to understand that woven through the fabric of daily life are threads that reinforce its complexity, including *ethnic threads* (Arab vs. African), *economic threads* (herder vs. sedentary farmer), and *political threads* (traditional leaders vs. appointed civil government officials).

Ethnic threads. The peoples of western Sudan and northeastern Chad are rich in an ethnic

diversity. Tribal names roll off the tongue: *Abu Charib, Mimi, Maba, Masmaje, Assangori* in Chad, and *Fur, Zane, Mondari, Moru, Murie, Midob* in Sudan. Some people groups spill across the porous border as if there were no border at

all: Sudanese make weekly trips to Chad to buy and sell in the markets, while Chadians walk or ride donkeys and horses to attend mosques or visit relatives in Sudan. Five predominant ethnic groups claim eastern Chad and western Sudan as their common home: the Masalit, Zaghawa, Tama, Daju, and Arabs with their sub-clans. The Fur, a group distinctive to Sudan (Darfur literally means “country of the Fur”), could well join the list if the present crisis causes refugees to settle permanently among their neighbors in Chad.

Ethnic identities remain strong, but often the various people groups mingle as good neighbors in marketplaces, mosques, and homes. They often intermarry.

Farmers and merchants in rural villages may speak different ethnic languages, but they share the common trade language of Arabic. Less sedentary nomads wander up and down the borders living in convenient portable “tents” of woven mats and wood that can be dismantled and transported on the back of a camel. Some, however, settle in bush towns and plant fields of their own, blurring the ethnic lines even further.

In northeastern Chad the diversity normally works. Sudan, however, has chosen to write a different story. Over the last decades the central



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government of Sudan, located in Khartoum, has increasingly emphasized an ethnic line of distinction between the black African peoples (Masalit, Zaghawa, and Fur) and their lighter-skinned Arab neighbors (collectively termed Baggara). Local Arabs have been politically favored over black Africans, even though the latter are more representative of the population. Grievances voiced by ethnic Africans against Arab neighbors have not been addressed adequately, if at all. The message received from an Arab-dominated government is clear: all may be Muslim in Darfur, but not all are considered equal.

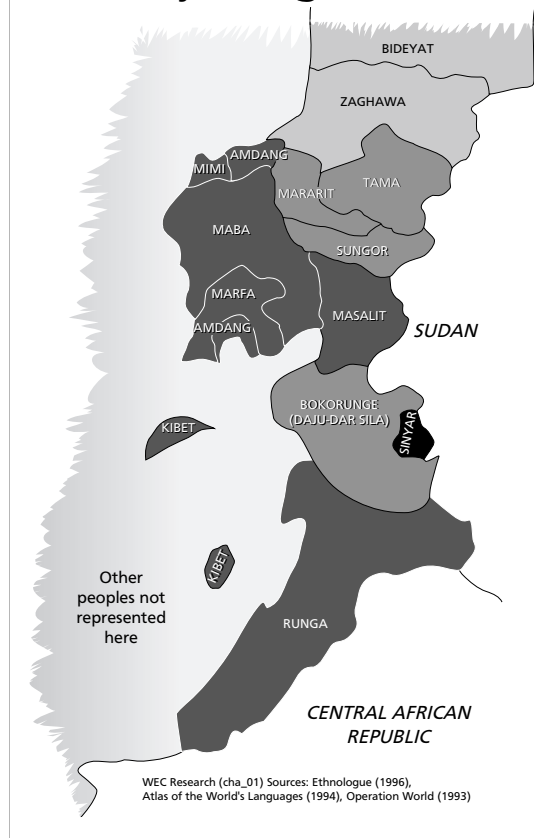
Economic threads. The age-old conflict over land has intensified. Fur farmers resent camel-riding Arabs who trample fields as they search for pastureland. But it is not just the herders versus the farmers. Arab nomads resent Zaghawa

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herdsmen who make seasonal forays into Arab-occupied grazing areas. Regular droughts and increasing desertification heighten the conflict, as herdsmen must push further south to find land suitable for grazing, competing with each other and with farmers for what they need to survive. Tribes who share the same religion find it hard to share the same land.

Political threads. Sudan's government has done a poor job of handling these conflicts, leaving grievances to simmer, then boil, then explode.

CHAD: Eastern Peoples Adjoining Sudan



While Sudan recently inched towards a resolution of its (separate) civil war between the north and south, two new rebel groups formed in western Darfur: the Sudanese Liberation Army (SLA) and the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM). Not wanting these new rebel groups to inspire other regions of the country, Khartoum has struck back in force with the *janjawid*. These “demon horsemen” or “armed horsemen,” depending on who is translating, were originally recruited and sent south to attack regions held by the southern rebel army. Khartoum then armed more of them to help counter the rebels in Darfur. In the guise of subduing rebel soldiers, the government began

a campaign of bombing villages from the air while the *janjawid* have run a ground campaign of burning and pillaging villages, murdering men and boys, and raping women and young girls. Government response to armed rebels has morphed into a systematic terrorization and slaughter of innocent civilians.

Muslims are shocked and angered that other Muslims are threatening them. One worker in the region reports, “Probably the greatest seismic upheaval from this conflict ... is the worldview/paradigm shift of these black African tribes being attacked by their



The Peoples of Darfur

One worker in the region offers the following survey of Darfur's peoples. For supplemental information on these peoples, see sources such as www.worldchristiandatabase.com and www.joshuaproject.net.

People Group	Estimated Population	Known Believers
Baggara	215,000	1
Bargo	1,400	1-3
Barno	unknown	0
Bederia	503,000	0
Beni Amir	unknown	0
Beni Helba	15,000	0
Berti	171,000	0
Bideyat	44,000	0
Birged	95,000	0
Daju	134,000	0
Falata	418,000	1
Fulani	131,000	0
Fur	710,000	4-8
Gimr	100,000	0
Habania	unknown	0
Hawara (Jalaba)	unknown	0
Humir	55,000	0
Khuzam	16,000	0
Maba	191,000	5
Massalit	168,000	2-3
Meidob	62,000	0
Mima	75,000	0
Rizeigat	249,000	0
Sara (=Sinyar)	21,000	0
Songar	21,000	0
Taelba	unknown	0
Tama	88,000	0
Tarjam	5,000	0
Tunjur	163,000	0
Zaghawa	155,000	20-30
Ziadia	unknown	0
Total	6,000,000	34-51

Muslim brothers/government.... We hear story after story of these persecuted tribes scratching their heads and asking, "What have our Muslim brothers ever done for us? What has our Muslim government ever done for us?" As a result, some are questioning Islam.

Darfur Today

In just a few years, Darfur has evolved from a typical sub-Saharan region of Africa – where diverse ethnic groups may squabble but generally live together in peace – to what it has now become: a region where fear reigns. The statistics are appalling. The World Health Organization estimates that 70,000 have died in 22 months, either from fighting or from starvation and disease; another survey suggests that the death toll may be closer to 200,000. Nearly two million people have fled villages under attack; they are officially "Internally Displaced Peoples", living in their own country but unable to go home and dependent on aid groups. Another 200,000 have fled across the border into Chad, where other aid workers have massed.

"The solution is to pray, pray, and pray again."

Patrick Johnstone, author of the acclaimed prayer guide, *Operation World*, has characterized Darfur as one of the least evangelized areas on earth. Less than 50 disciples of Jesus are known among all Darfur's peoples. Yet a millennium ago many Sudanese, including the Fur, were Christians – possibly spiritual heirs of the Ethiopian eunuch of Acts 8. (Some historians claim that the eunuch was Sudanese.) Is there hope for today?

Yet God Is At Work!

Yes, out of the pain and chaos, hope is emerging in Darfur.

- Humanitarian organizations are responding with courage and determination to what Franklin Graham of Samaritan's Purse has rightly called "a very difficult and dangerous mission." Christian aid organizations and churches have the opportunity to express the love of Christ by their presence and compassion.
- Some Sudanese Christians are reaching out to the region, working with Christian aid organizations and sometimes working

alongside concerned Muslims. The Sudan Council of Churches (SCC), a partner of the Mennonite Central Committee, has a presence in Nyala, the capital of South Darfur. An American branch, SCC-USA, is actively involved in helping Sudanese churches reach out to this region.

God is also at work across the border! Chad offers an open door to reach the peoples of this region.

- WEC International, Mission Protestante Franco-Suisse au Tchad (MPFST), and other agencies have been working in eastern Chad for decades, offering health, educational, development and social programs. Although workers from these agencies cannot openly evangelize, God is using their presence to impart truth and catalyze an increasing interest in the gospel. Many believe that God's time has come for northeastern Chad.
- In the last ten years small groups of Muslim-background believers in Jesus have gathered in different towns.
- Bible translation is underway in four languages in the region.

Missionaries must be willing to persevere in hard conditions. A call to this region can't be taken lightly.

The southern Chadian church is growing in mission vision. In the past, southerners who worked in the north as civil servants saw their government transfer as "exile," only to be endured until they could return south. Now many are recognizing God's hand behind their assignment and want to be active witnesses for Christ.

Persevere in Prayer

There is a saying in Darfur: "The solution to the crisis requires three things: security, secu-

rity, and more security." The Church can just as strongly respond: "The solution is to pray, pray, and pray again." Those who do not grow weary in prayer will open doors for the gospel in Darfur, and hearts in Chad, and will usher in God's time to move among the peoples of this region.

Share Christ's Compassion for the Suffering

Churches and individuals can respond immediately by supporting Christian humanitarian organizations to enable the light of Christ to penetrate the area through compassionate care. Check the Internet to see what a variety of organizations – such as Samaritan's Purse, CARE, CORD, World Vision, the Mennonite Central Committee, and others you know – are doing in Darfur.



Commit for the Long Haul

Churches can adopt people groups of this region and begin praying for them. Contact mission agencies already at work long-term in the area and begin praying for them. The Leprosy Mission International has a presence in Darfur but has only two laborers. The Mission Protestante Franco-Suisse runs an orphanage, a pre-school, and several bush clinics. WEC International focuses on the Masalit, the Maba, the Tama, Assangori and Arabic-speaking nomads of the region, but there are not yet viable teams for all of these. Seek the Lord of the harvest to thrust out laborers into a region where the laborers are notably few and far between. One worker in the region comments, "Once the eye of the world is off the region and some of the non-governmental organizations pack up and move on to the next CNN crisis, then we can build the long-term relationships required to change lives."

Count the Cost of Pioneering

The door is open now in Chad for long-term commitment to developmental, social, educational and health projects in areas that border Sudan. Local authorities ask for missionaries to teach in their local schools, work in their hospitals, help them learn

How to Pray and How to Learn More

- Pray for aid organizations in Darfur to have access and freedom to do their work. Pray for their protection, for humanitarian efforts are subject to attack.
- Pray that God will awaken a mission vision in the Sudanese Church to reach their country for Christ. A history of oppressive dominance, fear, and hostility must be overcome, but God's Spirit can change hearts and give courage to reach out to Muslims in their own country.
- Pray for the Sudan Council of Churches to have an impact in Darfur as well as be a healing influence on a nation that now hopes to recover from civil war.
- Pray that God will open doors for the peoples of this region to encounter the truth of Christ through radio, the witness of Sudanese Christians, and Christian literature in Arabic.
- Plead with God to send out long-term laborers for both western Sudan and eastern Chad.
- Pray for effective, long-lasting solutions to the physical, emotional and spiritual needs of the displaced peoples and refugees. Pray also for open doors and open hearts in ministry to subgroups of these peoples now living in the U.S. and other countries.
- To obtain a 12-point "Darfur Prayer Focus" bulletin issued by the New Sudan Consultation, go to the *Mission Frontiers* Website (missionfrontiers.org) and look for the bulletin posted with other articles related to the March-April 2005 issue.
- Inquiries about service and requests for prayer information may be directed to WEC International's U.S. sending base (dirsec@compuserve.com, or www.wecusa.org), who will consult with cooperating agencies in determining replies.

English, and develop health and social programs.

But even apart from the Darfur crisis, this region is not an easy place to live. Conditions in refugee camps are not that different from normal life for many village peoples here. To reach them, missionaries must be willing to persevere in hard conditions. Temperatures can reach 120°F, *harmattan* winds blow dust everywhere, electricity is either erratic or non-existent, travel is difficult, and poverty lingers at the door every day. To work effectively in Chad requires learning at least French and Arabic, and potentially a third (ethnic) language. Sudan's government language is English, but to be effective in Darfur will require a knowledge of Arabic before going on to an ethnic language. A call to this region can't be taken lightly.

Finding Hope Amidst the Horror

There's more to the garden of Darfur and Chad than flinty soil, rocks, and thorn trees. God has placed a remarkable plant in this region – the desert rose, which blooms in unlikely places, emerging from clumps of rock and dirt. The desert rose also blooms at unlikely times; during the rains its branches remain bare, but at some point during the dry season, when all other plants wither or die, the desert rose blossoms. It sprouts a bouquet of delicate pink flowers, displaying its glory in stark contrast to the bleak surroundings.

The desert rose is a symbol of surprise and a sign of hope. "The desert and the parched land will be glad; the wilderness will rejoice and blossom," declares the prophet Isaiah (35:1). The parched land of Darfur and eastern Chad *will* bring forth fruit. But this will require faithful people committed to long-term praying. It will require persevering laborers who love these peoples with Christ's love and serve them with His strength. Look to the desert rose as a bright reminder that the Living God can bring astonishing beauty out of great suffering. 🌍

