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sudan: treatment of the masalit ethnic group in darfur by government authorities and armed militias, including incidents of violence (2002-2013)
research directorate, immigration and refugee board of canada, ottawa

1. overview

the masalit ethnic group [also known as the massalit, massaleit, masaleet; masaalit] is described by various sources as one of the indigenous "african" ethnic groups of darfur (drdc n.d.a, 3; us 15 june 2011, 23; iwpr 15 feb. 2010). the african ethnic groups of darfur, which also include the fur and the zaghawa groups, are traditionally farming communities (us 15 june 2011, 23-24; cultural survival july 2008; phr n.d.), whereas "arab" ethnic groups of darfur are traditionally nomadic (us 15 june 2011, 24; phr n.d.).

sources indicate that the masalit, along with the fur and the zaghawa, have been targets of violence since the beginning of the war in darfur in 2003 (cultural survival july 2008; drdc 21 july 2004, 8; human rights watch may 2004, 7). the sudanese regime under president omar al-bashir and affiliated militias have been deemed responsible for the targeted violence against the masalit and other ethnic groups (human rights watch may 2004, 5; un 25 jan. 2005, 3). the violence has been described as:

• "ethnic cleansing" by human rights groups (human rights watch may 2004, 39; drdc 21 july 2004, 2; enough project aug. 2013, 8);
• "crimes against humanity" by amnesty international (ai) (july 2004, 3) and the united nations (un 25 jan. 2005, 4); and
• "genocide" by the us government (us 15 june 2011, 25).

2. demographics

cultural survival, a us-based organization founded in 1972 that advocates for the rights of indigenous peoples around the world (n.d.), estimated in a 2008 article that there were 145,000 masalit people living in sudan (july 2008). ethnologue: languages of the world, a "comprehensive reference work cataloguing all of the world's known living languages" published by sil international, a non-profit organization focusing on ethnolinguistic minority communities around the world (ethnologue 2013b), estimates that there were 350,000 speakers of masalit [the language of the masalit people, also known as kana masaraka, massalit] in sudan in 2011 (ibid. 2013a).

according to a 2004 human rights watch report, the masalit and the fur are the predominant ethnic groups of the state of west darfur, where they make up the majority the of the population (may 2004, 5). in west darfur, the masalit have a significantly significant presence in the geneina and habila districts (ethnologue 2013a; human rights watch may 2004, 5), where they have traditionally represented 60 percent of the population (ibid.). they also reside in the territory known as dar masalit (cultural survival july 2008;
Human Rights Watch May 2004, 5). Dar Masalit, the traditional homeland of the Masalit, is located around Geneina (ibid.; 6; UN 25 Jan. 2005, 20) and "north and south along the border" (Human Rights Watch May 2004, 6).

Sources also indicate that the Masalit live:

- scattered throughout South Darfur state (*Ethnologue* 2013a);
- in the Nyala district [of South Darfur state] (Cultural Survival July 2008); and
- in Gedaref state [eastern Sudan] (*Ethnologue* 2013a).

A 2011 report on the situation in Sudan published by the US Congressional Research Service (CRS) notes that African and Arab ethnic groups in Darfur are all Muslim and that "years of intermarriages have made racial distinctions difficult, if not impossible" (US 15 June 2011, 24). Similarly, Minority Rights Group International (MRG) writes that "the descriptions of Arab and African in Sudan are completely misleading - technically, all Sudanese are African, and, practically, inter-marriage has dissolved ethnic boundaries" (May 2009).

### 3. Summary of Conflict

#### 3.1 Background

Sources suggest that political roots of the conflict in Darfur lie in the "marginalization" of Darfur by the government of Sudan (Cultural Survival July 2008; DRDC n.d.a, 1), reportedly enforced by successive governments in Khartoum (ibid.; US 15 June 2011, 24). MRG explains that the "central dynamic" in the conflict is "the Khartoum elite's refusal to relinquish power and to share the proceeds of the nation's wealth with the regions" (May 2009). Some sources specify that the conflict was driven by the government's "marginalization" of Darfuris of African ethnicity in particular (Human Rights Watch June 2011, 9; Freedom House 2013; US 15 June 2011, 24).

In addition, sources indicate that, historically, conflicts between nomadic Arab groups and African farming communities in Darfur periodically broke out over water sources and grazing rights when nomads entered areas settled by farmers (DRDC n.d.a, 1-2; US 15 June 2011, 23-24). The Darfur Relief and Documentation Center (DRDC), a Geneva-based independent, apolitical not-for-profit NGO that conducts advocacy, lobbying, research and documentation of events in Darfur (n.d.c), indicates that the Sudanese government's "overt support of nomad groups against indigenous Africans" was one of several factors contributing to the breakout of war (n.d.a, 2). In the same report, the DRDC notes that the territory of Dar Masalit, traditionally settled and governed by the Masalit and other aboriginal African groups, was re-drawn by the government in 1995 and divided into 13 new emirates, 6 of which were granted to nomad tribes (n.d.a, 3). Similarly, the Institute for War and Peace Reporting (IWPR) reports claims that the government annulled African groups' customary land ownership rights and encouraged Arabs from Darfur and other countries to settle on Masalit, Zaghawa and Fur land (15 Feb. 2010).

Amnesty International explains that, historically, "[d]ifferences between groups of Darfur were not given so much weight" but that "the manipulation of race and ethnicity by all sides [of the conflict] has led to the "entrenchment" of an ethnic and racial ideology that emphasizes the differences between African and Arab ethnic groups (July 2004, 22). The International Commission of Inquiry on Darfur, convened by the UN Security Council, made a similar assessment in its report to the UN Secretary-General in 2005, stating that "the perception of differences has heightened and extended distinctions that were earlier not the predominant basis for identity" (25 Jan. 2005, 130). MRG writes, for its part, that "there is a strong ethnic dimension [in the conflicts] - partly because the [ruling National Congress Party (NCP) led by Omar al-Bashir] has adroitly manipulated ethnic identity in the war against its enemies, pitting Sudanese from nominally Arabic descent, against those from African communities" (May 2009).

#### 3.2 The Conflict Since 2003

In 2003, members of the Masalit, Zaghawa and Fur ethnic groups formed rebel groups and took up arms against the government, citing the "marginalization" of Darfur by the government and the lack of protection for indigenous populations against nomads as motivations (Cultural Survival July 2008; AI July 2004, 6). In response, according to the US CRS, the government of Sudan "and its allied militias began what is widely characterized as a campaign of terror against civilians in an effort to crush the rebellion and to punish the core constituencies of the rebels" (15 June 2011, 24). Similarly, Human Rights Watch writes that, since 2003, "the government of Sudan has pursued a military strategy that has deliberately targeted civilians from the same ethnic groups as the rebels" (May 2004, 7).

The Janjaweed (also spelled Janjawid, Janjawad, Jingaweit, Jinjaweed), an Arab militia, has been used to target members of African ethnic groups (Cultural Survival July 2008; MRG May 2009; DRDC 21 July 2004; 3), including, notably, the Masalit, Zaghawa and Fur (ibid., 8; Cultural Survival July 2008; Human Rights Watch...
The Janjaweed have been reported to target civilians (Cultural Survival July 2008; DRDC 21 July 2004, 3; US 15 June 2011, 28). They are known to employ "scorched-earth" tactics (Cultural Survival July 2008; DRDC n.d.b; Human Rights Watch May 2004, 7), which involves making villages uninhabitable by destroying vegetation, seizing livestock, burning buildings to the ground, and contaminating drinking water with human and animal carcasses (Cultural Survival July 2008). Information published by the US Department of State's Humanitarian Information Unit (HIU) indicates that the US government had confirmed evidence of the complete destruction of 2,964 villages in Darfur between February 2003 and December 2009 (5 Apr. 2010).

A 2004 Amnesty International report outlines various ways in which rape was being used as a weapon of war by government and Janjaweed forces against women and girls of Masalit and other ethnicities with "full impunity" and "full knowledge" of the government (AI July 2004, 4, 11). Testimonies collected by Amnesty International described numerous incidents, including public rape as a form of humiliation, gang rapes, rape of pregnant women, torture and killings in the context of sexual violence, sexual slavery, rapes during attacks on villages, rapes during flight or at checkpoints, and rapes taking place in camps for internally-displaced persons (IDPs) in Darfur (ibid., 10-16). Similarly, Freedom House wrote in its 2005 report on Sudan that "[m]any independent refugee accounts described a systematic campaign of rape of women by Janjaweed and government soldiers" (2005). In an April 2008 report on sexual violence in Darfur, Human Rights Watch wrote that

five years into the armed conflict in Sudan's Darfur region, women and girls living in displaced persons camps, towns, and rural areas remain extremely vulnerable to sexual violence. Sexual violence continues to occur throughout the region, both in the context of continuing attacks on civilians, and during periods of relative calm. Those responsible are usually men from the Sudanese security forces, militias [including Janjaweed], rebel groups, and former rebel groups, who target women and girls predominantly (but not exclusively) from Fur, Zaghawa, Masalit, Berti, Tunjur, and other non-Arab ethnicities. (Apr. 2008, 1)

In 2004, the United States concluded that the Janjaweed and the Sudanese government were responsible for committing genocide against civilians in Darfur (US 15 June 2011, 27). In January 2005, the International Commission of Inquiry on Darfur stated in its report to the UN Secretary-General that,

based on a thorough analysis of the information gathered in the course of its investigations, the Commission established that the Government of the Sudan and the Janjaweed are responsible for serious violations of international human rights and humanitarian law amounting to crimes under international law. In particular, the Commission found that Government forces and militias conducted indiscriminate attacks, including killing of civilians, torture, enforced disappearances, destruction of villages, rape and other forms of sexual violence, pillaging and forced displacement, throughout Darfur. These acts were conducted on a widespread and systematic basis, and therefore may amount to crimes against humanity. The extensive destruction and displacement have resulted in a loss of livelihood and means of survival for countless women, men and children. In addition to the large scale attacks, many people have been arrested and detained, and many have been held incommunicado for prolonged periods and tortured. The vast majority of the victims of all of these violations have been from the Fur, Zaghawa, Massalit, Jebel, Aranga and other so-called 'African' tribes. (25 Jan. 2005, 3)

The International Criminal Court (ICC) issued an arrest warrant in 2009 for President Omar al-Bashir for war crimes and crimes against humanity, and a second warrant in 2010 for genocide (Thomson Reuters Foundation 13 June 2013; AI 20 Sept. 2013). The ICC has also issued arrest warrants for Sudanese defence minister Abdelrahim Mohamed Hussein, for crimes against humanity and war crimes committed in Darfur (UN 1 Mar. 2012; Enough Project 2 Dec. 2011; US 19 Apr. 2013, 13). A senior Janjaweed leader was also indicted by the ICC (Enough Project Aug. 2013, 3; AI 20 Sept. 2013; Thomson Reuters Foundation 13 June 2013, 3).

In a 2007 report, International Crisis Group observed that "[n]ew links" were growing between Arabs and the Fur and Masalit ethnic groups that suggested the possibility of reconciliation in some local cases, noting that some Arab groups had recognized the long-term interdependence of their livelihoods with those of
sedentary African groups (International Crisis Group 26 Nov. 2007, 4-6). International Crisis Group asserted, however, that the NCP government has sought to "dilute these efforts" and "strongly resisted the attempts at alliances" (ibid., 4, 5). It also stated that the NCP was resettling Arabs in Massalit and Fur areas "where a demographic change is essential for it to manipulate elections" (ibid., 10). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

In June 2011, Human Rights Watch reported

an upsurge in abuses by government security forces, including assault, sexual violence, looting and arbitrary arrests, often based on ethnicity .... The patterns of attack show that the Darfur continues to play on ethnic divisions, with government forces targeting the communities associated with rebels. (11)

Information corroborating the ethnic dimension of the violence could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

The Enough Project, a Washington-based organization that "works with concerned citizens, advocates, and policy makers to prevent, mitigate, and resolve crises of genocide and crimes against humanity" (n.d.), wrote the following in a 2013 report entitled the Economics of Ethnic Cleansing in Darfur:

The Janjaweed militias are back. The Sudanese government's notorious paramilitary force and favorite instrument of counterinsurgency - which earned infamy at the height of Darfur's genocide in the mid-2000s - has unleashed several scorched-earth campaigns in 2013 that have ethnically cleansed communities off their land, displacing hundreds of thousands of Darfuris. (Aug. 2013, 15)

The report indicated that, in 2013, Janjaweed groups were continuing to attack Masalit communities as well as other non-Arab groups, and Arab groups that were previously aligned with the government (Enough Project Aug. 2013, 1). Information corroborating the ethnic dimension of the violence could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

3.3 Involvement of Masalit Fighters in Rebel Groups

The International Commission of Inquiry on Darfur wrote in its 2005 report that the "vast majority" of members of the two armed groups that initiated the rebel movement in 2003 - namely, the Sudan Liberation Army [SLA; also known as the Sudan Liberation Movement, SLM, SLM/A, SLA/M] and the Justice and Equality movement (JEM) - came from the Massalit, the Fur, and the Zaghawa (UN 25 Jan. 2005, 23). MRG wrote in 2009 that SLM/A was dominated by the Fur and the Masalit (May 2009).

Cultural Survival explains that

[m]any Masalit whose lands were destroyed by the Janjaweed were former soldiers and policemen of the Sudanese government. Knowing that the government work in conjunction with the Arab militias, many of these men have quit their jobs and joined the SLA and the JEM. (July 2008)

According to a Thomson Reuters Foundation article, the SLA originally included fighters from the Massalit, Fur and Zaghawa ethnic groups but became increasingly divided along ethnic lines after 2006, when one faction of the SLA, under the leadership of a Zaghawa leader, Minni Minawi (SLA-MM), signed a peace accord with the government that was rejected by JEM and other factions of the SLA (13 June 2013).

The Human Security Baseline Assessment for Sudan and South Sudan (HSBA), a research project focusing on weapons and armed groups that is administered by the Small Arms Survey (SAS), an independent research project of the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies [Geneva] (HSBA n.d.), indicates that a prominent Masalit leader, Khamis Abaker, joined the Darfur rebels in 2003 and became the vice-chairman of the SLA (HSBA July 2010a). Khamis Abaker subsequently allied with the SLA faction led by Abdul Wahid (SLA-AW) before forming his own minority faction [SLA-Khamis Abaker (SLA-KA)] (ibid. July 2012, 78; ibid. July 2010a; International Crisis Group 26 Nov. 2007, 13). His predecessor in the vice-chairmanship of the SLA, Mansour Arbab Younis, reportedly joined JEM in 2009 and recruited a "significant" number of Masalit fighters, particularly among the Masalit refugees in Chad (HSBA July 2012, 78-79). There is also a Masalit offshoot of SLA-KA, known as the Sudan Liberation Army-Mainstream (SLA-Mainstream; also known as "General Line") (ibid. July 2010b). The HSBA wrote in July 2010 that the Masalit were "[d]ivided and displaced" and lacked leadership, therefore posing "no military threat" (July 2010a).

The HSBA indicates that, in 2010, some Masalit rebels joined the Liberation and Justice Movement (LJM), a negotiating umbrella uniting two coalitions of rebel factions (8 Oct. 2012). The LJM signed a peace agreement with the Sudanese government in 2011 (Christian Science Monitor 19 July 2011; Thomson Reuters Foundation 13 June 2013). The agreement, known as the Doha Document for Peace in Darfur, did not include JEM and two main SLA factions, SLA-MM and SLA-AW (ibid.; BBC 29 Apr. 2013; Christian Science Monitor 19 July 2011).
This Response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research Directorate within time constraints. This Response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim for refugee protection. Please find below the list of sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

References


Additional Sources Consulted


Internet sites, including: AllAfrica; ecoi.net; The Guardian; Human Rights First; Institute for the Study of Genocide; International Criminal Court; International Refugee Rights Initiative; Minorities at Risk; Radio Dabanga; Society for Threatened Peoples; Sudan Consortium; Sudan Tribune; SudanGem.com; United Nations – Integrated Regional Information Networks, Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs; United Human Rights Council; United States – United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

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