

## Fur

### Profile

Fur are a people of the Darfur region in western Sudan and the former Islamic Sultanate of Darfur. 'Darfur' means 'home of the Fur' in Arabic. As sedentary farmers, Fur rely mainly on the cultivation of millet during the rainy seasons. They are Muslim and long ago adopted Arab names and, to some extent, dress. Fur communities are matrifocal, so Fur elders are surrounded by daughters and their daughters' husbands.

### Historical context

By the middle of the twentieth century, the traditional hierarchy of the Fur chiefs had been integrated into the Sudanese administrative system. The population of the Darfur region, like most people in Sudan, live geographically isolated from and neglected by the Khartoum government. Environmental degradation threatened the relatively peaceful equilibrium between the region's ethnic groups, which has since been destroyed by the divide-and-rule tactics of the central government and an influx of modern weaponry.

Earlier conflicts were predominantly clashes between nomadic groups over access to pasture and water or theft of animals, or between nomadic and settled groups. From the 1980s attempts were made by nomadic groups to occupy land in the central Jebel Marra with entire villages wiped out and thousands of lives lost on both sides.

While drought-stricken livestock herders attempted to survive by encroaching on the fertile central zone, Fur struggled to retain their land. Racial prejudice became entwined with the environmental roots of the conflict in the mid-1980s with the formation of an alliance of 27 Arab nomad groups into Janjaweed militias and their declaration of war against the 'black' and non-Arab groups of Darfur.

The response of the Fur was to form their own militias. By 1989, 5,000 Fur and 400 Arabs had been killed, tens of thousands displaced and 40,000 homes destroyed. The conflict simmered throughout the 1990s, but erupted again in 2003.

In early 2003, the predominantly Fur and Masalit Sudan Liberation Movement (SLM), initially called the Darfur Liberation Front, and predominantly Zaghawa Justice and Equality Movement (JEM) attacked government forces, including El Fasher airport.

The government turned to the Janjaweed, which supported devastating assaults against the opposing militias over the course of 2003 and 2004. Complicating matters, the SLM and JEM fought between themselves in late 2003.

Meanwhile the Sudanese government and Janjaweed targeted Fur and other African farming groups, killing tens of thousands and displacing millions within Darfur and across the Sudanese border to Chad.

## Current issues

In October 2005 the Sudan Liberation Army (SLA) split into a mostly Fur faction led by original leader Abdel Wahid al Nur and a group headed by Minni Arkou Minawi that drew support mostly from his Zaghawa tribe.

The international community touted as a major breakthrough a peace agreement for Darfur brokered by the African Union (AU) and signed in Abuja, Nigeria in May 2006. But only Minawi's faction signed – after coming under strong pressure from the US and UK to do so.

The two other main rebel groups – most closely aligned with the Fur and Masalit peoples – refused to sign. Without the agreement of these factions, and encouraged by the ruling party in Khartoum, violence intensified in the weeks following the agreement.

In the intervening months, the rebel groups have split further – and, according to reports, tribalism has intensified. Aid camps are in danger of becoming recruiting grounds for a new generation of rebels.

During the conflict, Fur civilians have been particularly targeted by government and Janjaweed forces. The scorched-earth policy was supposed to flush out the rebels, and destroy local havens of support for them: there is no indication that this brutal strategy has succeeded.

Human Rights Watch ('Targeting the Fur', 2005) examined the impact of the war on the Fur tribe in southern and western Darfur in the early stages of the war in 2003. It documented attacks on Fur villages, which led to the mass displacement of Fur civilians. It also recorded the suspected summary executions of Fur men who had been rounded up by Sudanese and Arab militias. According to Human Rights Watch, hundreds were killed in this way.

The most notorious incident was that at Kailek, where Arab militias – with the collusion of the local authorities – effectively besieged the town, which was home to the displaced from surrounding areas, and the local population. When humanitarian workers eventually got access in 2004, they discovered many people had starved to death, or succumbed to disease.

Human Rights Watch records that during the siege of Kailek, women were repeatedly raped in front of their children and husbands. Children had been abducted, or thrown into fires. There were many other atrocities, amounting to crimes against humanity, according to Human Rights Watch.

One of the long-term effects of the conflict has been to change the pattern of land distribution. Fields formerly held by Fur farming communities are now held by Arab nomads. In any long-term settlement of the dispute, redistribution of land will be a key issue, enabling families to leave refugee camps, and return to their traditional occupations of farming.