Markets, Minerals and Mayhem in Darfur

Anne Bartlett

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The crisis in Darfur has been called the first genocide of the 21st century. There have been many explanations offered for this human tragedy. But what is often overlooked is the economic value of violence for the Sudanese State and the way that politics and resources have been connected to it across time.

Intractable conflicts and mono-causal explanations seldom make good bedfellows. Never is this more the case than in Darfur, Sudan, which over the last 15 years has witnessed death and suffering, 2.5 million people displaced and a descent into chaos, aided and abetted by complex, shifting internal dynamics and a large number of uninformed and all too often, unprincipled outside interests.

Described as the first genocide of the 21st century, early explanations for the conflict were attributed to longstanding tensions between "Arabs" and " Africans" – a sort of stereotypical farmer versus nomad binary, which created violence backed by militias from both sides. Tribal divisions were also used to create ideas about innate differences, with Sudanese Government ministers such as Dr. Mustafa Osman Ismail, claiming that death and displacement could be attributed to "tribal fightings" between "rebels who belong to specific tribes, fighting a militia who also belongs to specific tribes" (sic.) Others claimed that the war was environmental in nature, with tensions emanating from the loss of nomad livelihoods due to desertification and the creep of the Sahara to the south. Finally, writers such as Mahmood Mamdani argued that the conflict should be attributed to colonial center-periphery relations and the propensity of administrators to write "race into history" through administrative tribalism and the creation of hierarchies of power and privilege.

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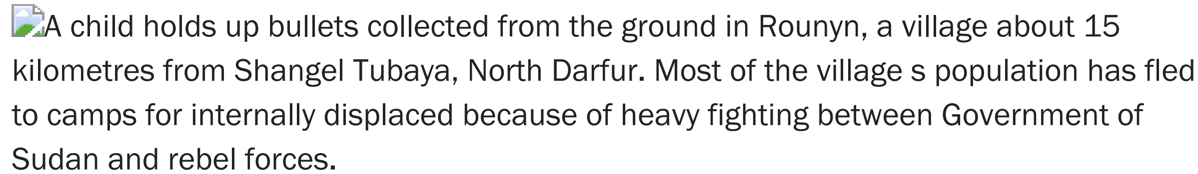
A child holds up bullets collected from the ground in Rounyn, a village about 15 kilometres from Shangel Tubaya, North Darfur. Most of the village s population has fled to camps for internally displaced because of heavy fighting between Government of Sudan and rebel forces.

Image by UN Photo via Flickr.

In the search for an answer to the crisis in Darfur, all of these explanations emphasized clear distinctions between the characteristics and behavior of parties to the conflict, while paying less attention the larger context around the violence. That larger context relates to the economic value of violence for the Sudanese State and the way that politics and resources have been connected to it across time. Throughout Sudan's history, whether in colonial times during the Anglo-Egyptian Condominium (when cotton production and gum arabic became key commodities for export to the West), or in the post-colonial period where land, oil and minerals have played central roles, it is the need for people, labor and resources embedded in contested tracts of land, that has galvanized the political elite and driven their behavior forward. Darfur has played a key role in this regard, supplying labor to Aba Island, White Nile for cotton picking and votes of allegiance to Sudan's Umma Party. The region has also supplied bright, but otherwise disenfranchised young men for Hassan al-Turabi's brand of Political Islam, premised on the reward of inclusion and moral salvation. Over time, a landscape of difference has emerged which is connected to resources and that is driven by political or religious ideology, backed up by violence. Those who are outside the centers of power and who attempt to claim their rights or their own share of resources have typically been viewed as a threat and as a result, have been subjected to disproportionate levels of violence in order to protect elite interests.

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In Darfur, the extreme violence that accompanied the start of the crisis in 2003, emanated from fears that the region would join forces with the South and take up arms against the ruling political class. However, rather than seeking a political solution to this problem, the people were subjected to horrific violence which included murder, rape, the burning of villages, land dispossession and enclosure of the remaining population in camps. As part of the effort to quash dissent, the Government used tried and tested methods of deploying proxy militia groups to take on the dirty work of clearance and control. Viewed from the ground, these developments created an over-simplified understanding of the crisis on the part of media, policymakers and NGOs that what was going on in Darfur was in fact a race war – an age-old conflict between "Africans" who cultivated crops in villages and "Arabs" who lived as nomads on the edge of the Sahara. Yet this convenient subterfuge of a "racial war" belied the actual reality on the ground, where racialized identities were often blurred and where most groups farmed and moved animals as part of everyday life. It also camouflaged a central strategy of the political elites which has been called "*aktul al 'Abid bil 'abid*" (kill the slave by the slave) and which has been deployed over and over again in Sudan to clear territories – particularly those that might have resources that the government can use.

Across the life of the conflict, activists have advocated for all kinds of strategies to thwart the violence: publicity campaigns, diplomacy, ICC warrants and divestment, to name but a few. However, most of these approaches have failed to appreciate the way that violence is linked to economics in Sudan and how this creates pressure for the State to maintain a large patronage network and a military and intelligence infrastructure in order to survive. Resources mean power, but to stay in power requires feeding the insatiable demands of

supporters who are part of this network; it also requires rewarding those who are part of informal networks such as proxy militias, with either money or loot.

Yet as the financial needs have grown, the government's coffers have gone into terminal decline. In particular, since the Comprehensive Peace Agreement in 2005 and the decision of the South to secede from Sudan in 2011, the resource base of the Sudanese government has shrunk dramatically. Over this time, unsustainable foreign debt, international sanctions,the loss of 75% of oil reserves to the South, the loss of half of Sudan's fiscal reserves and the loss of two thirds of Sudan's international payments capacity has crippled the state's ability to function. These problems have made borrowing impossible and left its strategy to stay in power increasingly untenable. Faced with extreme financial pressure and limited capacity to deliver, resource extraction has become *the* central plank of Sudanese policy, precisely because it is one of the few ways to realize cash quickly in an economy whose other sectors have atrophied due to war. Darfur has proved to be an irresistible draw in this regard because it has substantial gold deposits, land use policies that are conducive to dispossession and a population that has been traumatized due to war.

Gold Mining on the Cheap

In what some might consider an unlucky coincidence, the downsizing of government coffers coincided with the discovery of gold in Northern Darfur at the end of 2011, in an area called Jebel Amer. Once virgin territory, and home to the Beni Hussein people, it didn't take long for the ground to be pockmarked with thousands of tiny "artisanal" mine-shafts as the efforts to produce gold ramped up. Mining permits, which should have been sanctioned by the Sultan of the Beni Hussein, have instead been passed into the hands of government sponsored militias to administer, while locals have simply been refused access

to their land. In 2013, 70,000 people were displaced in a short period of time in the area, and according to Amnesty International hundreds more were killed (Insert links). Strangely reminiscent of colonial tactics *of terra nullius*, land that was once full of people living their daily lives has been miraculously declared "empty". This "empty" land is now open to gold speculators and mining agents to go about their business instead.

Casualties from land clearance are one part of the story, but another part concerns the dangers of the mining process itself. In Jebel Amer where the search for gold has turned the area into something reminiscent of the Wild West, the drive for profit has superseded the need to pay attention to geology. "Artisinal" mining, while sounding quaint, is anything but: it is dirty, dangerous, with few safeguards to protect those involved. In one area of Jebel Amer where 95 miners were trapped, it was revealed that a main shaft of 60 meters had been dug with 22 smaller shafts radiating off the bottom. Not surprisingly, its stability had been compromised leading to implosion from within. Similar problems occurred at Kori and Abdulshakur mines with 37 lives lost, although in remote areas devastated by conflict, information is in scarce supply.

Sustainability in these areas is hardly a concern of mining supporters. If deaths from unsafe mining have impacted the local population, then another major issue is environmental toxicity and the use of mercury, cyanide and other poisonous chemicals to extract the gold. These chemicals have played havoc with the local environment and led to the loss of farmland for years to come. Those whose ancestral lands have been affected have noted cases of soil erosion, sinkholes and land and groundwater contamination. Noting the bad taste of the local water, locals have also pointed to the growth of diseases and skin complaints that were never seen before.

Those who stand to gain from these practices, have no interest in stopping them. In particular the notorious *Janjaweed* Leader Musa Hilal, has taken personal charge of the gold mining operations as a way to augment his earnings and his political clout *vis a vis* the government in Khartoum. Embroiled in a heated argument with the government in 2013 over his compensation for militia activities, he has now installed himself in the gold mining areas of Jebel ‘Amer and is reputed to be personally earning $54 million per year for his efforts. This astounding sum of money would appear to be corroborated by a recent UN Security Council Panel of Experts’ Report in April 2016, which claims that $123million from gold extraction is now fueling the violence in Darfur, despite all efforts to institute sanctions, travel bans and asset friezes.

If expecting Musa Hilal to mend his ways is a stretch too far, then at least we might expect the international community to take action. Yet here too, the Security Council is involved in a heavy bout of geopolitics with Russia and China lining up on one side, and the UN Panel of Experts on the other. Demands that Russia be allowed to “edit” the UN Experts’ report and remove critical paragraphs are hardly that surprising given their deep involvement in gold mining activities both in Darfur and elsewhere in Sudan, where they have been awarded large blocks for exploration. Close friends such as the Government of Qatar have also provided support with the supply of equipment for gold mining, and according to locals, with the purchase of ore from local producers so that it can be disguised later once it has left Sudan.

Creating sustainable security in this context requires a multi-faceted approach, which on one hand stands up to the perpetrators of violence and on the other, rejects ill-gotten gains filtered through external markets so that they come up clean. It also requires pressure for land reform, so that speculators cannot so

easily make a play to grab land that is not theirs. It is not enough to sign peace agreements in lavish hotels in Doha, Qatar, when the situation calls for a much deeper analysis of why Darfur has been entrapped in a spiral of violence for so long. As history has shown, the international community's penchant for quick fix peace agreements is worthless without the fundamentals to govern peace over the long term. Perhaps it is now time to look below the surface of the violence in Darfur and make the effort to understand the social and political landscape from which these problems first took root.

Dr. Anne Bartlett is Associate Professor in the School for Humanities and Languages at UNSW (Australia). She has worked on Darfur and Sudan for over 15 years, during which time she has undertaken research on armed groups and also the effect of humanitarian intervention on the cities and population of the region. Bartlett has published extensively on the Darfur crisis and has given numerous talks on the subject worldwide. She is currently President of the Sudan Studies Association.

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