A Background of Darfur

In this chapter we briefly sketch the historical, socio-economic and political context of Darfur. On the one hand, some of the aspects discussed here might be seen as the fundamental problems of the region of Darfur, which need to be addressed in any comprehensive peace settlement. On the other hand, these fundamental or root causes are less informative in explaining why the conflict emerges so violently in 2003, or how and when bystanders might act. Nevertheless, the location and history of Darfur does explain in part the actions of certain bystanders during the crisis starting 2003. Unlike in the later chapters we base ourselves here mainly on secondary sources. We limit ourselves to a brief overview of the background of Darfur, whereas more elaborate accounts can be found in other sources.1

4.1 Composition of Sudan and the Inhabitants of Darfur

Darfur is located in the west of Sudan bordering Chad, Central African Republic and South Sudan. The region of Darfur obtained its name from one of the main people living in the area, the Fur. Together with the Zaghawa and Masalit, as well as several smaller groups they form a population of Africans who have inhabited the area since before modern times. The Fur, the biggest among them, broadly live in and around the volcanic mountain range of the Jebel Mara, the Zaghawa live mostly to the west of this, towards and in Chad, while the Masalit are to be found in south-west Darfur.

Arab tribes are similarly found all over the region, although they dominate more towards the north and east of Darfur. Arabs are said to have arrived later to these lands than the African people, but were already present by the fourteenth century. From these times onwards, the people have mixed and lived

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together. Hence, what is currently called Arab and African is in reality not strongly based on 'objective' criteria such as race, ethnicity, language or otherwise. The African and Arab tribes have shared Islamic faith for at least two centuries. Denominations are for a large part based on how the people see themselves and others.

This diversity of the people across the region of Darfur has been attributed to its place on old trade routes between north–south and east–west Africa, as well as to the many nomadic people that travel around with their cattle. Estimates of the total population of Darfur ranged between a few hundred thousand to around one million by the end of the 19th century, while closer to six million 100 years later. Numbers have fluctuated heavily over time due to incoherent data and varying environmental-climatic conditions in the region. The share of the different peoples among the total population is similarly hard to gauge since no official census has been held since the 1950s. Broadly speaking, African people make up around half of the population.

4.2 A Long History

Not much of Darfur's early history is known for certain. Only when foreigners from Europe and the Ottoman Empire started to travel through and stay for extended periods in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century have more reliable records become available. These travellers recounted a kingdom or sultanate led by a royal Fur family. These Fur gained their sway over the region as trade partners to Egyptians in slaves and exotic products from further south in Africa. The state administration around this sultanate was formally organised with offices and titles, but was nevertheless primitive in comparison to rulers in more northern parts of Africa such as Egypt. Its protection from external harassment of other rulers was for a large part due to its geographically isolated location.

Nevertheless, Darfur came under foreign rule for a limited period of time at the final stage of the Ottoman-Egyptian expansion into Sudan. This expansion was undertaken in 1821 for the search of profitable trade and valuable minerals and agriculture. Only the trade in slaves was successful. The Nile area of what is now Sudan (and South-Sudan) was governed for much of the nineteenth century as an extension to the Egyptian province. Egyptian expansion into Darfur was much more limited and only marginally brought modernisation in life and governance. Once the power of the Ottoman Empire was weakening, Egypt lost control over the Sudan in 1882. The United Kingdom, as the new