Chapter 5

Warnings
February 2003–February 2004

5.1 Situation in Darfur: the Start of the Rebellion

The precise date of the start of the conflict in Darfur is debated, with some authors dating it back to 21 July 2001. It is generally accepted that the emergence of the Darfur Liberation Front (DLF) in claiming responsibility for an attack on a military garrison in Golo in the Jebel Marrah region marked the de facto beginning of the rebellion. The attack, on 26 February 2003, was mounted against a backdrop of smaller attacks in the years preceding 2003, but with the death of nearly 200 soldiers it was a clear change of pattern and style of resistance against the central government.

Yet, providing an early indication of what was later to become commonplace, the government’s response was somewhat contradictory. On the one hand a spokesman dismissed the reports as “exaggerated,” but then on the other proceeded to claim that the attackers “are not rebels but bandits,” accusing them of having targeted civilians. According to Prunier, by simultaneously sending a mission to negotiate with the rebels, the government “implicitly disowned [this] version,” perturbed by the “level of organization” of the attacks. However the attacks were classified, they were a prelude to the March violence in Darfur.

On 25 March 2003 the rebels attacked and took control of Tine on the Chadian border, inflicting severe casualties and loss of life on government troops according to reports. At the same time the Darfur Liberation Army, changed its name to the Sudan Liberation Movement/Army (SLM/A), in a

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3 IRIN, 27 February 2003, “Sudan: government denies existence of new rebel group.”
5 Agence France Presse, 27 March 2003, “Rebels in west Sudan say they captured town on Chad border.” AFP claimed to have received a statement by Minni Minawi stating that “government forces fled in disarray leaving 56 bodies behind them” and saying that they captured two armed vehicles.
clear reference to the Southern rebel movement SPLM, which helped them with the provision of arms and creating a bigger political vision. The next major attacks by the rebel forces of the SLM/A and JEM on April 25 2003 proved to be a turning point in the entire Darfur crisis, inflicting severe losses on the government and its proxy forces. SLM/A and JEM rebels simultaneously attacked Nyala in South Darfur and the main Darfur airbase of Al-Fashir from which government forces had launched its own attacks to support Janjaweed militias. The operation was devastatingly successful. According to Flint and de Waal (2008), in addition to occupying the base at Al-Fashir, more than 70 government troops, pilots and technicians were killed, all of the military aircraft were destroyed, massive stocks of weapons and ammunition were taken, and the base commander was captured. The rebels had now demonstrated their formidable force.

And yet the rebel attacks continued. An SLM/A assault on a battalion north of Kutum towards the end of May killed 500 government soldiers with a further 300 imprisoned.6 Retaliation by Khartoum was prompt and calculated; a state of emergency was declared in Darfur, with hundreds of suspected rebel sympathizers arrested and the governors of North and West Darfur dismissed from their posts. A Special Task Force on Darfur was assembled, and the government’s plan to initiate further military action to crush the rebels became apparent. Recruitment and arming of Arab militias (non-Arab potential recruits were turned away) began in earnest as the government began to harness the Janjaweed as part of its conventional efforts in Darfur under the guise of its Special Task Force. A notorious Arab tribal leader, Musa Hilal, was released from house arrest in Khartoum and appointed overall captain of this Janjaweed force. Darfur was on the verge of exploding, with the government ready to increase the intensity of its forces’ attacks and transform their very character.

For the remainder of the first semester of 2003 attacks by the rebels continued against designated targets, killing and injuring civilians during their course. The government and its militias retaliated by specifically targeting civilians. In one reported incident on 14 June, civilians including children were killed and women raped in front of their husbands by the Janjaweed, who then left with around 400 cattle. Indeed as Daly noted, “[as] JEM and SLA strategy had consisted of surprise attacks on army posts, so the Janjawid would make surprise attacks on civilians in their towns and villages.”7 Daly also described

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