



Lea Lisa (AFP)

Darfur :

An investigation into a tragedy's forgotten actors

April 2007

Reporters Without Borders - Africa Desk
5, rue Geoffroy Marie - 75009 Paris - France
Tél : (33) 1 44 83 84 84 - Fax : (33) 1 45 23 11 51
E-mail : africa@rsf.org
Web : www.rsf.org

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The prevailing media image of Sudan is a land of massacres, a *terra incognita* in which the 21st century's first genocide is unfolding in Darfur, out of sight, without foreigners reporting what is happening, without any Sudanese voicing criticism. In fact, the reality is much more complicated. It is certainly not easy for a foreign journalist to go to Sudan, and even more so to Darfur. This supports the image of a country that is closed to the outside world, one where all kinds of massacres can take place secretly. The usual red-tape is complicated by the Sudanese government's arbitrary measures and by the dangers inherent in any war zone.

But the press freedom situation in Sudan is not just about these difficulties. Like Sudanese society as a whole, the Khartoum press is active and diverse. Even in Darfur, there is a very real civil society, one that is conscious of the challenges it must face, one that is trying to take Sudan down a different road from that of autism, hatred and repression that has resulted in the death of some 200,000 Darfurians in the past four years. But few listen to them, either in the government in Khartoum or abroad. A Reporters Without Borders team went to Khartoum and El-Fasher from 17 to 22 March to meet Sudan's forgotten actors and to contribute information to the debate about how to resolve the tragedy in Darfur. This report presents the result of the team's investigation.

Obstacles, obstruction and danger

The international media turned its attention to Darfur because of the insurrection that began in February 2003. From the start of the rebellion, many security and administrative obstacles prevented foreign reporters from freely reporting on



the situation in western Sudan, a region as big as France. Even when not completely blocking access to Sudanese territory, this "bureaucratic fence" often suffices to deter the international press, especially the broadcast media, which are particularly susceptible to the dictates of time and money and the "no pictures, no story" principle. Enclosing a vast country, Africa's biggest, a country that is having to cope with several crises at the same time and with considerable international pressure, this "fence" is based on several provisions.

To start with, the Sudanese government issues visas on a case-by-case basis as it mistrusts international public opinion and assumes it to be hostile. News media and individual journalists are blacklisted if they are deemed to have crossed the red lines it has laid down, although it is not always clear what criteria determine the choice. It is impossible to get exact figures for visa refusals, especially as embassies often just ignore requests from journalists considered undesirable. The issuing of visas is a discretionary prerogative and in this sense, Sudan is no different from other countries.

The refusal to let a UN Human Rights Council special mission led by Jody Williams enter the country at the start of 2007 was just the tip of the iceberg. And it is no secret. Sudanese officials are often open about it, both in embassies and in Khartoum. A government source acknowledged to Reporters Without Borders that keeping a blacklist could be counter-productive but it was attributed to the fact that "many media had proved to be insulting towards the Sudanese government." In other words, it is portrayed as legitimate self-defence by the government in reac-

tion to criticism in the US and European press since the start of the civil war in Darfur and, before that, to the 21 years of fighting between government troops and the southern rebels, especially John Garang's SPLA¹.

Many journalists who are denied entry to Sudan or access to Darfur (which requires a special travel permit) cover the crisis in western Sudan from refugee camps in neighbouring Chad or illegally enter Sudan across the border, risking arrest and trial. Anticipating the difficulties of getting a visa and travel permit, foreign journalists have often taken the easier option of "covering" Darfur's tragedy from eastern Chad, solely on the basis of what refugees there tell them.

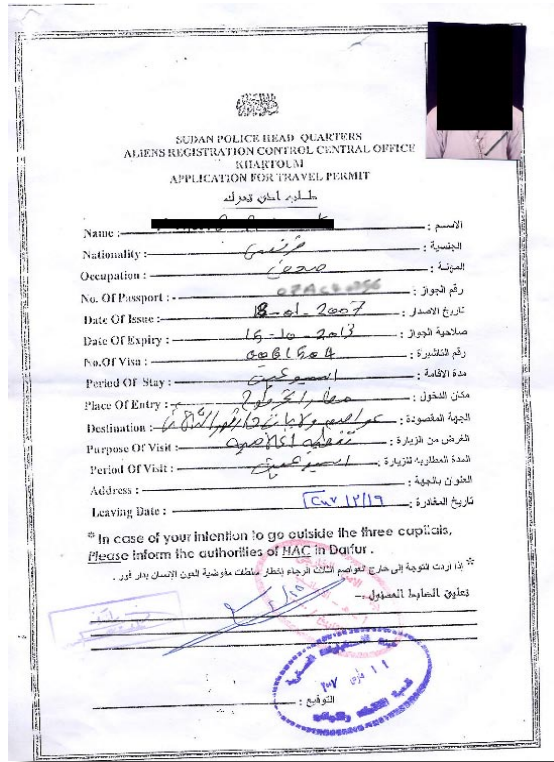
Whatever the reasons for this, any report on Darfur from refugee camps in Chad is inevitably incomplete. It can even misrepresent the reality if, for example, refugees who fled at the height of the

newspaper who had an assignment from *National Geographic* magazine to report on the Sahel, was arrested together with his Chadian driver and interpreter on 6 August 2006 in North Darfur by members of the Sudan Liberation Army led by Minni Minawi (SLA-Minawi), a Darfurian rebel group allied with the government since May 2006.

Handed over to the multinational forces of the African (Union) Mission in Sudan (AMIS) and then to the police in El-Fasher, North Darfur's capital, they were charged with "spying" and "entering the country illegally." Aside from not having a visa, Salopek was specifically accused of carrying two US passports as well as satellite photos of the region (which can be downloaded from the Internet). After intense negotiations by Governor Bill Richardson of New Mexico (Salopek's home state) with President Omar Al Bashir, he and his two assistants were finally released on 9 September. They had been held for just over a month.

A week before, President Bashir had acceded to a request by a special envoy from his Slovenian counterpart and had pardoned Tomo Kriznar, a writer, photographer, human rights activist and editor of a website dedicated to the causes he defends, who had been detained in El-Fasher since 20 July on charges of "spying," "disseminating news illegally" and "entering the country illegally." He had been sentenced on 14 August to two years in prison and a fine of 500,000 Sudanese dinars (2,000 euros).

Kriznar said he had gone to Darfur at the behest of his president, Janez Drnovsek, to promote the peace proposals which Slovenia had submitted to the belligerents in February, to everyone's surprise. The Slovenian initiative had been rejected by the African Union, which was



atrocities in 2003-2004 describe a situation that has evolved since their forced departure. (The violence has spent itself in a land razed and emptied of its inhabitants, while the two initial rebel movements have split into many factions and, since the peace accord some of them signed with the government in May 2006 in Abuja, are fighting among themselves and are also carrying out atrocities on the civilian population.)

In 2006, two incidents highlighted how risky it had become for the international press to enter Darfur clandestinely. Paul Salopek, an American journalist with the *Chicago Tribune* daily

1 - A "cynical" government is waging a "terrorist campaign" ("Death and Deception in Darfur," op-ed by lawyer Daniel Wolf in the *Washington Post* on 31 July 2004). Many western editorialists blame the government for "genocidal massacres" carried out by its "murderous militias" ("Darfur Showdown," an editorial in the 15 March 2007 issue of the *San Francisco Chronicle*). After a period of relative indifference, the French press ran a number of reports and columns about Darfur in early 2007, criticising the "international community's indifference," and the Sudanese government's "unacceptable obstruction" while unnamed massacres took place. "Villages and crops are torched by the *janjaweed*, savage, unprincipled bands sponsored by the Islamist government in Khartoum" ("Protest, and keep protesting," a column by Jacques Julliard in the 15 March 2007 issue of *Le Nouvel Observateur*.) Before the war in Darfur, the Sudanese army was accused by the rebels in the south of using "genocide techniques," and these claims were picked up by the international press.

Darfur:
An investigation into a tragedy's forgotten actors

at the time negotiating a peace accord in Nigeria between the Sudanese government and Darfur's main rebel groups. Because of his outspoken position on the crisis in western Sudan (which he had publicly described as "genocide"), Kriznar had been refused a visa by the Sudanese embassy in Austria, so he had chosen to enter Darfur by one of the many clandestine border crossings along the extensive border between Chad and Sudan – crossings used by rebels whose bases are in Chad.

Khartoum, crossroads for special envoys

One should not get the wrong impression from the Salopek and Kriznar cases and Sudan's "bureaucratic fence." In fact, many journalists do get in, even if they have to spend days negotiating an obstacle course. According to the External Information Council (EIC), an information ministry offshoot that handles foreign press accreditation, Sudan received around 4,000 foreign journalists in 2006. Most of them came – often as part of official delegations – for three international summits (the African Union summit in January 2006, which was covered by 800 visiting journalists, the Arab League summit, which drew 1,200 journalists, and the Asia-Caribbean-Pacific summit, which was covered by 460 reporters). But another 1,500 foreign journalists also legally visited Sudan, according to Bakri Awad Al-Karim Mulah, the head of the EIC, who said they "nearly all went to Darfur or the south." He added that he was amazed by the "bad image of Sudan portrayed in the international press."

Most of the leading international media that cover Africa or the Arab countries, such as *Al-Jazeera* or *Reuters*, have a correspondent or a bureau in Khartoum. The Gulf-based satellite TV stations used to be punished for the least offence¹, because of their weight in the Muslim world, but now they benefit from a steadily expanding room for manoeuvre which the Sudanese authorities have also accorded to the national print media since the signing of an accord with the south². All the publishers and editors interviewed by Reporters Without Borders acknowledged enjoying a "degree of freedom" – the accepted term in Khartoum – that was unknown before 2005.

But visiting foreign correspondents have to meet many administrative requirements if they want to travel outside Khartoum. Permits to visit the Darfur region's three capitals, El-Fasher, Nyala and El-Geneina, have to be approved by the security services. To get through the checkpoints at the airports of each of these three cities, foreigners must provide photocopies of the travel permit is-

sued by an interior ministry office that controls the registration of foreigners. The permit is a sort of internal visa without which it is impossible to move about the country legally. The application form clearly states that it is forbidden to go outside of the Darfur region's three capitals without prior permission from the Humanitarian Aid Commission (HAC).

This government agency, which officially coordinates all humanitarian activities (as well as the surveillance of foreigners' movements), is widely criticised by NGOs and journalists. As manager of the gigantic camps for displaced persons around Darfur's main cities, it controls interviews with victims, which form the core of news reporting in the region. "The HAC will sometimes take three days to deliver permits that have already expired," Reporters Without Borders was told by a foreign observer. His criticisms echoed those of the US state department, which on 20 March



complained of "imprecise legislation, intrusive inspection of humanitarian vehicles, exorbitant administrative taxes and delays in the delivery of travel permits" by the HAC, all of which jeopardise the delivery of aid. "Foreign journalists' freedom of movement is determined by the nature of the visa," said Mulah, the head of the EIC.

1 - The police closed *Al-Jazeera's* Khartoum bureau by force in December 2003.

2 - The final peace accord for southern Sudan, known as the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA), was signed in January 2005 in the Kenyan capital of Nairobi by Sudanese Vice-President Ali Osman Taha and John Garang, the head of the southern rebel group, the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA). The war had begun in 1983 when the mainly Christian and animist south rebelled against the Arab and Muslim north. Referring to this historic accord in the presence of the UN secretary-general, several African presidents, and many senior European and US officials on 11 July 2005, President Bashir undertook to support democratisation, the rule of law and freedoms. The lifting of censorship was one of the measures that resulted from the repeal of the state of emergency laws that had been in effect since a 1989 coup.

Darfur :

An investigation into a tragedy's forgotten actors

Administrative requirements and restraints do not normally prevent journalists from moving about Darfur altogether but they render such movements complex and unpredictable and they function as a slip-knot ready to tighten as soon as the situation deteriorates. On 7 November 2006, for example, the Sudanese government officially ceased to issue travel permits to foreign journalists after a resumption of fighting. A week after a decree to this effect was issued, the Sudanese air force violated the Abuja accords by bombing Birmaza, in North Darfur, in support of pro-government troops on the ground. The Darfur travel ban and resulting news blackout lasted three months.

The official reason for imposing the ban was a desire to "relax procedures" governing the movements of foreign journalists at a time of increasing incidents in Darfur. Among the reasons given by police at El-Fasher airport for confiscating the London-based *Sunday Times* correspondent's passport in early November was the fact that she was wearing a cap with another news organisation's logo. The previous month, police detained a foreign TV crew for several hours because, they said, they did not recognise the interior ministry's stamp on their visa extension. At the same time, the visiting correspondent of a western newspaper was detained for a day because of a typing mistake in his travel permit.

Once they are in the government's sights, foreign journalists accredited in Khartoum are liable to be blacklisted. "I suppose they did not like my stories," Reporters Without Borders was told by a Khartoum-based journalist who was suddenly facing expulsion because his residence permit had

not been renewed. "But I really don't know if I am being personally targeted or if it is my employer," he added, highlighting the unpredictable nature of relations between the Sudanese government and the foreign press.

"You can work despite all the hassles," said Opheera McDoom, the *Reuters* correspondent in Sudan, who has made many visits to the country's troubled areas¹. "Like me, most of the journalists I know have been able to travel to Darfur and work there with relative freedom," she said, adding that there were "one or two foreign journalists full-time" in the region. Discretion, patience and prudence are all needed, while familiarity with Sudan and the national language significantly increase a foreigner's chances of not being caught by the many kinds of traps set by the Sudanese civil service and police.

For a long time, McDoom was the only foreign correspondent in Sudan to speak Arabic and she stresses the usefulness of this skill. "It is essential to be able to communicate with the security forces at a checkpoint, understand their questions and know how to negotiate your way out of a problem," she stressed. Quick to see political motives behind every action, journalists and humanitarian workers who do not speak the national language often make things worse by being tactless. In a country like Sudan where the first few words spoken between host and guest can determine how the relationship proceeds, McDoom is probably right when she says: "It is conceivable that some visa refusals have due to the fact that the applicants did not know how to introduce themselves to the authorities."

Finally, some foreign reporters have a limited grasp of local reality. "Foreign journalists come here for just two days and are insistent on going to one of the camps for displaced persons surrounding the city," said Mohammed Badawi, the North Darfur director of the Amel Centre, a local NGO that concerns itself with torture victims. "Getting all the permits entails lots of problems," adds this young Darfuri, who often functions as a guide or fixer for foreign journalists in their relations with the authorities and displaced persons. A foreign correspondent complained: "Some arrive in Sudan, and ask to see the rebels without really knowing who they are talking about. And then they leave."



Opheera McDoom (Reuters)

1 - A British journalist, Opheera McDoom joined *Reuters* in September 2003 and worked in London for almost a year before being sent in July 2004 to Cairo, from where she covered both Egypt and Sudan. The agency finally asked her to open a bureau in Khartoum, where there had been no *Reuters* presence for the previous 15 years. The bureau now consists of two full-time journalists, two TV crews and a stringer.

Free or embedded

With no front line, Darfur is dotted with the targets of raids, a vast, France-sized territory of mountains and sand that the civilian population has been forced to abandon. A dozen armed groups of uncertain loyalties and enmities roam across a war zone that is hard to control, while a suspicious government mans the legal access points. Policemen, soldiers, "border-guards" (a pro-government militia) and former SLM-Minawi rebels who have made peace with the government all vie for authority on the streets of El-Fasher in Toyota pickups. If foreign journalists can negotiate the "bureaucratic fence" and its complex traps, they can access the urban areas where combatants cohabit. But leaving the cities and seeing the fighting poses a different kind of challenge altogether.

The only conceivable way of getting out of the cities is to travel with the UN, the AMIS or non-governmental organisations. The UN and the AMIS sometimes take journalists with them to cover their activities. But the NGOs operating in the area (which with some 14,000 agents is the world's biggest theatre of humanitarian operations) are more and more reluctant to do this, or even to talk to the media. They have good reason to fear having the HAC's sights turned on them. During the Reporters Without Borders visit, 52 NGOs based in South Darfur were "provisionally closed" on the grounds that they existed "only in name." Jamal Youssef Idriss, a HAC official, said: "They have neither offices nor vehicles. They just have documents and stamps." He added that their permits would be "reexamined."

So the only way to get information about the real situation in the three regions in crisis is to travel on one's own, an adventure that tempts few foreign journalists. "As in all war zones, you have to be ready to face dangerous and unpredictable situations," says McDoom, who is the first foreign journalist to have met and photographed the Chadian rebels of the United Front for Change (FUC) in 2005. In the absence of organised political structures or even a clear chain of command, it is hard in Darfur to identify rebel groups, which keep splitting. Aside from the "historic" armed movements, many new guerrilla groups have emerged since the signing of the Abuja accords in May 2006.

"Fifty men with guns and two jeeps, that's what the new rebel groups typically come down to," said one western diplomat. A foreign journalist who has visited the region several times said: "I admit to not knowing if the rebel groups or pro-government militias still follow orders in the far west." He added: "The different rebel groups are capable



Mohammed Badawi (Amel Center, El-Fasher)

of killing each other¹, and those who are called the *janjaweed* are fighting more in the interests of their tribes than on instructions from the Sudanese high command.

For anyone expecting to find rebels with common goals, there is complete confusion on the ground because of the way political, tribal and individual interests intermingle. This is also true, individually, of the pro-government armed groups, with the *janjaweed* consisting of tribal militiamen and mercenaries who take what they are due from the civilian population. However, the government in Khartoum has a global strategy, in which some Arab militias fighting on its behalf have been incorporated into a corps of "border-guards" while at the same time it denies controlling the *janjaweed*, despite what the international media say. Foreign journalists are exposed to all kinds of dangers in this political and military maelstrom, including the possibility of being manipulated by those claiming to be their "protectors."

A living country

But the press freedom situation in Sudan is not just about these many obstacles. There are no longer any restrictions on the possession of satellite dishes and, like the rest of the Arab world, Sudanese viewers prefer to get their news from *Al-Jazeera* and *Al-Arabiya* than the state-owned *Sudan TV*. As for radio, *RMC Moyen-Orient* and the *BBC* have their own FM frequencies and are easy to tune into for most of the Khartoum

1 - A dissident faction of the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM) opened fire on members of their own original movement in October 2005 after kidnapping more than 30 civilian and military members of the AU mission and demanding a place at the Abuja negotiating table. Several members of the "historic" JEM rebels were killed. After an accord was reached putting an end to the incident, members of another rebel group, the National Movement for Reform and Development (NMRD), attacked a AU team sent to rescue the hostages.



Mahgoub Erwa (Al-Sudani)

public. *Radio France Internationale's* French-language programmes can be heard throughout the country on *RMC Moyen-Orient*, as can *Deutsche Welle's* Arabic, English and German-language programmes. At Nyala, the *BBC World Service Trust*, the British public broadcaster's humanitarian wing, has even created *Lifeline Darfur*, an Arabic-language programme employing Sudanese journalists broadcasting 30-minute programmes twice a week for Darfur, eastern Chad and the northeast of the Central African Republic. The sole gap in radio broadcasting – and it is significant one – is the fact that the only two privately-owned Sudanese stations whose broadcasts reach the entire country are essentially commercial and just carry back-to-back news bulletins. In all, there are seven privately-owned radio stations, all of them on the political sidelines.

With 35 dailies, six weeklies and three monthlies¹, Khartoum is a major city in which the independent press finally has a place after 10 years of slow progress and then sudden acceleration in the wake of the peace accord between the north and south in January 2005. The news stands along the capital's main avenues offer a diverse range of news of all tendencies in Arabic and English. All the newspaper editors that Reporters Without Borders met agreed that the Sudanese print media have enjoyed increasing freedom since the peace accord was signed with the south. "Censorship has been abolished and our room for manoeuvre is unquestionably more flexible than before," said Mahgoub Erwa, the editor of the independent daily *Al-Sudani*, which claims to have 100,000 readers. (No daily has a print run of more than 40,000.) "Newspapers like ours, which do not toe the government line, are nonetheless subject to frequent intimidation, on the least pretext," he added.

Arbitrary use of article 130 of the code of criminal procedure, which punishes violations of the confidentiality of judicial investigations, has been

a favourite weapon of the authorities since 2005. This ambiguous provision, which is supposed to "prevent any influence on the procedures that are still before the investigative authorities," ensnared *Al-Sudani* in early 2007. The justice ministry suspended the newspaper "indefinitely" on 1 February for referring to last year's murder of *Al-Wifaq* editor Mohammed Taha in violation of a government-imposed news blackout on the case with the stated aim of "keeping the peace." The authorities backed down after 48 hours of protests from journalists and media organisations, and from the generally pro-government National Press Council, which questioned the legality of the move.

Such episodes, of which there were dozens until 2004, have now become rare even if use of article 130 is repeatedly condemned by all journalists in Khartoum, including those regarded as ruling party supporters. "Our position is clear," said Nation Press Council president Ali Shummu. "We think article 130 should not be applied to the press." The article's future seems settled, but it will continue to be a threat, one of several repressive tools available to the government, as long as a political decision is not taken to kill it off. The existing press law, the seventh since 1930, still makes defamation and the "publication of false news" punishable by imprisonment, as do press laws in many other African countries. This is why Adil Elbaz, the editor of the privately-owned Arabic-language daily *Al-Sahafa*, said, "the Suda-



Adil Elbaz (Al-Sahafa)

1 - Figures provided to Reporters Without Borders by the National Press Council, the body that regulates the Sudanese print media.

2 - The *Khartoum Monitor*, a pro-south English-language daily, was closed down seven times in 2003 under article 130.

nese press is not really free," adding, "but we are making progress."

The National Press Council insists that it is committed to improving the situation, even if the editors Reporters Without Borders met accuse it of being "weak" and "under the government's control." It has begun an overhaul of the press law that should see the light of day by the end of the year, and it boasts of only once taking action of its own accord against a newspaper. "We thought its way of addressing the president was not appropriate in a country such as Sudan, and the punishment was mild – one day's suspension," Shummu said. The council also boasts of the fact that in the space of a year, only three temporary suspension orders were issued against Khartoum-based newspapers, none of which was for longer than three days.

Lawsuits are nonetheless common and newspaper editors often have to go to the law courts. "That said, even if our judicial system is not perfect, it is relatively independent and anyway much better than in Iraq or Saudi Arabia, for example," Elbaz said. In the absence of harsher legal provisions or a political will to crack down hard on outspoken newspapers, a new way of punishing the press has emerged – fines. "The foreign ministry sued me and I was sentenced to pay a fine of 50,000 dollars," Elbaz said. "As I cannot pay, I could go to prison." William Ezechiel, former No. 2 at the Khartoum Monitor and now the editor a new pro-south, English-speaking daily, the Sudan Tribune, said: "I had to deal with two lawsuits this year. They are a way of making us censor ourselves."

Precarious but real freedom

From the viewpoint of newspaper editors subjected to both political and financial pressure, the overall climate for the Khartoum press may seem rather poor. But the outspoken style of the editorialists and columnists, especially those wri-



Khartoum newspapers

ting for the pro-south English-language dailies, is quite astonishing in a country that less than 10 years ago was a relentless dictatorship. A *Khartoum Monitor* editorial on 18 March about Sudan being caught "between a rock and a hard place" accused China and Russia of making a disastrous contribution toward the Darfur conflict. "They disregard human life and opt for quick and cheap gains," the editorial said. "It is not solely the government of Sudan that kills its own people, but it does so in collaboration with whoever helps it to reach these heinous levels of human rights violation."

A vitriolic editorial in the same day's issue of *The Citizen* condemned the use of the janjaweed by "a racist regime that is in many respects worse than the apartheid regime in South Africa, which at least had the dignity not to employ rape as a tactic of suppression." Three days later, John Lemi Stephen wrote a column in the *Sudan Tribune* warning the government against the brutality of its policies in Darfur: "Those who used the iron fist to impose hardship on the population in Darfur and other regions in Sudan will also have their own share one day; for it is written that the measure you give is the same you will receive from the people of this country."

Although these articles might seem quite scathing, they did not result in any lawsuits or prosecutions, perhaps because the English-language press has little impact in Khartoum. The Arabic-language media are monitored more closely. Easily irritated security services, which were not happy to have their responsibility for media regulation transferred to the National Press Council in 2003, are more likely to target the Arabic-language press, especially as its publishers and editors are often dissidents who come from the same Islamist movement that helped to establish President Bashir's National Congress Party as the ruling party.

Darfur : An investigation into a tragedy's forgotten actors



William Ezechiel (Sudan Tribune)

Four journalists with the privately-owned dailies *Al-Rai al-Shab*, *Alowan*, *Al-Adwaa* and *Al-Sudani* were, for example, arrested and held for several hours in the northern town of Marawi on 15 August 2006 while investigating the plight of Amri region residents who had been displaced by the building of a dam. A journalist with the privately-owned daily *Al-Ayam* was held overnight by police after being arrested on 16 August while investigating the expulsion of displaced people from land in Algazera province, south of Khartoum, that had been given to a foreign businessman. A reporter with the privately-owned daily *Al-Sahafa* spent 60 hours in detention in early January for allegedly "insulting the president." Such incidents, which were minor compared with what used to take place in the preceding years, stopped this year and promised press sector reforms have begun to be implemented.

Last year's murder of Mohammed Taha, the editor of the daily *Al-Wifaq*, also stirred up trouble within the media. Police found Taha's headless body in Kalakala, 20 km south of Khartoum, on 6 September 2006, a day after he was kidnapped by masked men from his home in the capital. A controversial intellectual, he had been prosecuted on a charge of blasphemy in a closely-guarded trial



Mohammed Taha (*Al-Wifaq*)

in 2005 as a result of a complaint brought by a fundamentalist group called Ansar al-Sunnah. A member of the Muslim Brothers community and often virulent in his criticism of the Darfurians, Taha referred in his newspaper in late 2004 to an Islamic manuscript more than 500 years old that raised doubts about the Prophet's genealogy¹. The article prompted Khartoum's imams to organise big rallies to demand that Taha be put to death. The newspaper was suspended for several months as a result of the street protests and the outrage about the article.

Khartoum-based jihadists were initially suspected of Taha's kidnapping and murder but the police investigation quickly led to the arrest of about 20 members of the Darfurian community. The government meanwhile used article 39 of the provisional constitution and article 130 of the code of criminal procedure to ban the media from referring to the investigation on the grounds that they could jeopardise it. Journalists were interrogated in the course of the investigation and one, employed by the pro-government daily *Al-Rai al-Aam*, was held for two weeks at the end of October. A reporter with *Al-Sahafa* was held for 12 days at the start of December for similar reasons. *Al-Sudani* was suspended at the start of February simply for reporting that the trial of the presumed killers was about to start. Even if they accept that the murder was carried out by Darfurians, Khartoum-based journalists believe that there are aspects to the case that have not been explained. One said: "Those who carried out the murder have been arrested, that's a fact. But those behind it, that's another story."

Caught in the democratic transition's cross-winds, Khartoum's newspapers are increasing their room for manoeuvre a bit more every year. "Sudan today has more freedom of expression and the no-go areas for the press are shifting as developments take place," said Eltyeb Hag Ateya, the head of Khartoum university's Institute for Peace Research. "The newspapers are playing a significant role in society," he continued. "They are the ones that launch debates, analyse the news and question the government's behaviour. It is thanks to them that we argue about Darfur." Ateya has been working on new, democratic policies since 2003, as well as the legislative reforms currently under way, including the overhaul of the press law. He is a respected academic who has little patience with the regime's shortcomings. He believes the media must not only be freed of the laws that stifle them, but must also rid themselves of the habits acquired in a "totalitarian society." *Al-Ayam* editor Mahgoub Mohamed Salih makes the same point: "Our journalists have grown up under a dictatorial regime. They have got into the habit of censoring themselves."

"The Sudanese press has conquered its freedom on its own," Ateya nonetheless insists. *Al-Sudani's* editor proudly refers to a key moment when Darfur rebels attacked El-Fasher airport and the adjoining military base on 25

1 - Entitled "The Unknown in the Life of the Prophet" and written by Al-Maqrizi, a Muslim historian, the manuscript says Mohammed's father was not called Abdallah but Abdel Lat or "Lat's slave," an idol of the pre-Islamic era.

April 2003, and the Khartoum press announced a boycott on coverage of government activities in protest against the government's ban on referring to the raid "while it rid the area of the rebels, which it expected to take two weeks."¹

Forged in adversity, at a time when not a week went by without a newspaper being suspended and a journalist being arrested, the press has acquired a degree of freedom that will remain precarious "as long as the laws are not changed and anyone can easily get a newspaper closed down," said Ateya, who once ran the *Sudan News Agency* (*Suna*).

The job of drafting the press law reform that everyone wants has been entrusted to Future Trends, a Khartoum think-tank run by Mohammed Mahjoub Haroun, a Darfuri who is a former managing editor of the daily *Al-Sahafi Al-Dowali* and a ruling party member. "The CPA [the global peace accord signed between north and south in 2005] has obviously increased the media's room for manoeuvre but, because of the crisis that has emerged in Darfur, Sudanese society has still not received its peace dividend," Haroun said, voicing concern about the slowness of democratic reforms and the consequences this could have. "As a result, the media are being buffeted by Sudan's political instability," he added.

Free to analyse

All the same, taboos are becoming less common. Darfur? "I cover it as I think fit," says Mahgoub Erwa of *Al-Sudani*. The International Criminal Court controversy? "I have banned nothing," said William Ezechiel of the *Sudan Tribune*. "Our room for manoeuvre on Darfur is the same as the government's," said *Al-Ayam's* editor, veteran journalist Mahgoub Mohamed Salih. "Because not only are there different currents within the ruling party, with different views on the situation, but one also has to take account of the fact that the government of national union now includes people from the south and former Darfuri rebels," Salih said. "It is not a homogenous bloc. So it is subject to fluctuation according to circumstances."

The Sudanese print media in fact reflect all sorts of viewpoints in columns, op-ed pieces, readers' letters, analyses, reports and editorials on the issue of Darfur. Some articles blame the government for the "appalling crimes" committed by the *janjaweed*. Others criticise the president's obtuse behaviour towards the international community or maintain that, yes, the international community should try Sudanese. The editors that Reporters Without Borders met spoke with a great deal of



Al-Sudani, Khartoum

freedom about the war that has emptied Darfur of at least a third of its inhabitants.

Everyone – Arabic speakers, English speakers, journalists and academics – agrees in their analysis of the background to the tragedy. Erwa of *Al-Sudani* said: "When the clashes began in El-Fasher in 2003, the government made the mistake of not taking the Darfur question seriously. It opted for a purely security and military approach to the problem and disparaged the political aspect. The international community, for its part, uses the mistakes and the crimes for its own purposes and not to help us, the Sudanese, to put an end to this war." *Al-Sahafa's* Elbaz said: "Major crimes have been committed in Darfur by an irresponsible government. But the international community, obsessed by the terrifying image of the *janjaweed*, has not understood the crisis either and, as a result, proposes unrealistic solutions." *Al-Ayam's* Salih added: "The foreign press is blinded and forgets the environmental and economic aspects of the Darfur question."

There is one criticism of the international community and its news media that is repeatedly heard from Sudanese journalists and academics – that their take on Sudan's crises is superficial. "The crisis in Darfur has its origin above all in a

1 - The National Security Agency telephoned newspaper editors on 26 April and ordered them not to publish any reports about the clashes, on pain of having their issues seized. The Sudanese press complied until 3 May. Then, on 3 and 4 May, *As Sharie Al-Siassi* and *Al-Sahafa* published reports on the subject. The punishment was not long in coming. All copies were seized on 6 and 7 May.

serious deterioration in the region's environment that encompasses the entire Sahel strip," said Khartoum university's Ateya. "Successive droughts and the growing shortage of water and pastures, combined with a demographic explosion that has doubled the region's population in 20 years has transformed a range of tribal conflicts into a political and ethnic confrontation," Ateya continued. "All these factors have destabilized life in Darfur. Losing sight of this perspective prevents one from understanding what is happening here and prevents a just peace from being concluded."

In his view, the international press should not, for example, ignore the famine of the 1980s, the earlier war between agrarian and pastoral Fur tribes and nomadic, camel-raising, Arabic-speaking tribes at the height of the drought from 1985 to 1989. The foreign media should also bear in mind that there was a war in the west at the end of the 1990s between Masalit and "Arab" peasants, and that the Sudanese army already used "Arab" tribes to fight John Garang's SPLA in the south, and then the Zaghawas, whose territory straddles the Sudan-Chad border. "Darfur's recent past is a series of small, forgotten wars," Ateya said.

In Darfur, this viewpoint is defended at El-Fasher university, which has 10,000 students. There Reporters Without Borders met Abu Elshir Abdel Raharman Yousif, a young Darfurian professor who proudly showed his faculty's library, where a handful of students were studying, and two rooms equipped with computers by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). "The environmental and demographic crisis in the three regions and the competition between pastoral and agricultural tribes underlies what has become an international crisis," he said. "The rebels and the Sudanese government have played a poisonous role in the region, exploiting ethnic and tribal conflicts and, above all, the poverty of this people." After the drought upset the existing equilibriums, the region's people began leaving their ancestral lands in search of an alternative means of survival. "With firearms circulating easily, Darfur had a score



Isam Garad (Sudan TV) and Khalid Abu-Waraga (Sudan Radio)



Mahgoub Mohamed Salih (Al-Ayam)

of wars in the 1980s, pushing the tribes to create militias to defend their interests," Yousif said, adding: "Solve the problem of access to water in Darfur and the fighting will stop."

"Bit by bit, the accumulation of disasters may lead to a bigger disaster which, over and above the Darfur tragedy, would be Sudan's destruction," says Khartoum university's Ateya. There is a real risk that, if the government of national unity resulting from the peace accord with the south were to fall, it would lead to the collapse of all the efforts undertaken in recent years to bring peace to Sudan and extend civil liberties, all this because of those who tried to put an end to the continent's longest war.

"The current situation is creating major problems in the south, while implementation of the peace accord has ground to a halt," said the *Sudan Tribune's* Ezechiel, whose newspaper's motto is "CPA and the unity of Sudan." The war in Darfur is not a forgotten war, despite what the western press may sometimes say, he said. "If the international community continues to focus solely on the Darfur tragedy, without taking account of the Sudan problem in its entirety, we are heading for failure in the south and the west," Ezechiel added. El-Fasher university's Yousif said: "Bearing in mind, too, the extreme fragmentation of the rebel groups, any solution to the Darfur conflict that is not based on the prior unification of the rebel groups is completely unrealistic and counterproductive." Khartoum university's Ateya asked: "An international force would come and position itself between which groups, and to ensure implementation of what?"

In the absence of a serious statistical study, Yousif says "no one is able to know the exact

figure for victims." But he says he is convinced the figure of 450,000 dead used by some of the western media, especially the US media, is exaggerated. "The number of direct victims of the war is probably between 80,000 and 100,000 dead," he suggests on the basis of data that and his colleagues have managed to gather despite the many obstacles.

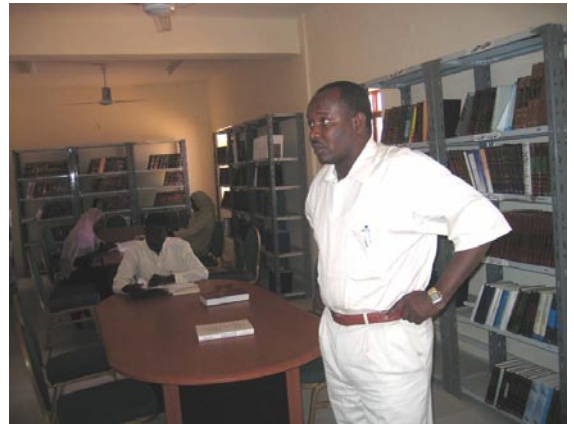
Six national correspondents

The Sudanese print media are rich in viewpoints. Coverage of the Darfur crisis consists above all of commentary. There is hardly any reporting of facts obtained in the field. This is partly due to a lack of money and training, but also to a lack of will and to "apathy," a word that often crops up in discussions. "I can write what I want on this question in my newspaper, but it is hard for me to send a journalist into the field," said Ezechiel. "On the one hand, the security situation is not good, and on the other, I cannot afford it."

Some newspapers such as *Al-Sudani* and *Al-Sahafa* boast of having correspondents in Nyala, the capital of South Darfur. Unlike their foreign counterparts, Sudanese journalists can in theory go to Darfur without obtaining travel permits in advance. But they encounter the same dangers and restrictions when they are there. And regardless of how poorly trained or paid they may be, they are not going to venture into a terra incognita where their origin, their media's political loyalties or a particular armed group's fleeting interests could turn them into suspects or, worse still, into choice targets. For this reason, most Sudanese correspondents in Nyala and El-Fasher limit themselves to covering the activities of officials and if they leave the cities, they do so only in the company of African Union troops.

Despite all these limitations, Darfur's three state capitals are not news "black holes." At least six Sudanese public media correspondents are permanently based in El-Fasher even if opposition supporters refer to them as being "in the service of the government." During a meeting with five of them at the information ministry's local office, they above all complained of a lack of resources. "I send my articles by phone or fax, which costs me five Sudanese pounds a page, and I rarely go out because it costs me too much," said the correspondent of the pro-government daily *Al-Rai al-Amm*. Even the local correspondent of *Sudan TV*, the national television station, said the personnel he worked with "lack training" and "still use VHS cassettes in absence of additional resources."

Aside from the extreme mistrust they inspire in humanitarian aid NGOs, public media correspondents also have to cope with the fact that the international missions with a presence in Darfur are heavily centralised in Khartoum. "The UN and African Union spokespersons are in the capital whereas the news is here," the national radio correspondent said. Like journalists with the Arab media, Sudanese journalists are also viewed with suspicion by displaced persons, who often regard them as hostile and as sympathetic to the armed groups who forced them to flee. "All we have are our own resources and modest salary, and yet we are in one of the country's most troubled regions," the *Al-Rai al-Amm* correspondent said. The others



Abu Elshir Abdel Raharman (El-Fasher University)

agreed when the *Suna* news agency correspondent summed up their situation as being "caught between the rock of the rebels and the hard place of the government."

Amel Centre director Badawi, a young human rights activist who visits the camps every day and takes statements from victims with the help of lawyers affiliated to the organisation, acknowledged that displaced persons "mistrust Sudanese journalists and, more generally, those from the Arab world" unless they are accompanied by trusted people. In his view, news and information circulates poorly in Darfur, especially in the camps, "while you can see Al-Jazeera in the city." His organisation plans to set up "listener clubs" for population groups that have been the victims of violence. "Sudanese correspondents are not trained to cover war zones," he said. "For lack of training and money, they stick to covering the activities of institutions, seminars, and sports and cultural events."

Conclusions and recommendations

Like many wars around the world, Darfur's crisis poses complex coverage problems for both the national and international media. The intrinsic problems – the large number of armed factions, the absence of a "front line," the hostile nature of the terrain and lack of a distinction between combatants and civilians – are deliberately compounded by the "bureaucratic fence" which the government in Khartoum has erected around the war zone to try to "regulate" and influence the work of the press. To this end, an entire panoply of administrative and security obstacles has been put in place, ranging from the need to obtain an entry visa and a special travel permit for Darfur to the ban on access to the camps for internally displaced persons.

The international media react to these obstructions by approaching their coverage of Darfur in a spirit of "resistance." But their opposition to a "hostile" government and, in some cases, their ignorance of the Sudanese context may lead them to break such basic rules of journalism as corroboration of facts, use of contrasting sources, impartiality and objectivity. When reporting the worst atrocities, foreign journalists may sometimes offer a stereotyped image of Sudan focused solely on the suffering in Darfur. In these accounts, the "evil" that is the cause of this suffering embraces not only a supposedly monolithic government in Khartoum but also a civil society whose existence, diversity and involvement are unknown. This is why this report has stressed the Sudanese print media, which are diverse and reflect the views of Sudanese human rights activists, university researchers and the local NGO world – views that find it hard to make themselves heard outside Sudan.

Conscious of the fact that the tragically abused peoples of Darfur are the first victims of everything that obstructs free and independent reporting in Sudan, Reporters Without Borders recommends that:

The Sudanese government should facilitate the issuing of visas to the foreign press and should relax procedures so that coverage of the war zones is as free as the security constraints allow. The authorities should stop blacklisting journalists regarded as undesirable and make it easier for both Sudanese and foreign journalists to access Darfur's different regions. Mechanisms must be found for supporting the independent media, so that they do not have to depend on mainly state advertising (which the government can use to practise covert

editorial censorship) and so that national newspapers can extend their distribution network and increase their coverage of provincial news. Finally, broadcasting should be extended and frequencies covering the entire country should be assigned transparently without political interference. *Radio Miraya*, the UN radio station, should be the first station to benefit from such an opening-up of the airwaves.

International organisations such as the UN and African Union should establish communications programmes aimed at national actors (journalists and NGOs) in El-Fasher, Nyala and El-Geneina, as well as procedures for making it easier and safer for journalists to move about the Darfur region's three states. They should systematically provide the international press with more information, including statistics. And their programmes for supporting and cooperating with the national media should take account of Sudanese journalists' limited funding and lack of training.

The international media covering the Darfur crisis should not neglect Sudan's civil society and its media, should give them the chance to express their viewpoint outside of Sudan and should portray this vast, crisis-torn country in all its diversity and with all its internal contradictions. ■