Sudan: Contemporary Issues

The crisis in Darfur
Long-simmering ethnic tensions in Sudan's western region of Darfur exploded in 2003, when the Sudanese government organized and sponsored a massive ethnic cleansing campaign in retaliation for attacks on government installations by Darfur's rebel Sudan Liberation Army (SLA). The government-led militias, composed primarily of Arabic-speaking Darfurian nomads, have largely targeted the agriculturalist Darfurian ethnic groups from which the SLA draws the majority of its members, among them the Fur, Masalit, and Zaghawa peoples. The vast majority of victims in the conflict, however, have been civilians, not rebels, and the tactics of the government-sponsored militias include atrocities ranging from rape and torture to the outright razing of entire towns. Since the outbreak of the conflict in 2003, it has claimed the lives of at least 300,000 Darfurians and displaced some 2.5 million people, many into neighboring Chad.

Many prominent international figures and bodies have defined the ongoing violence in Darfur as genocide, among them former U.S. president George W. Bush, current president Barack Obama, and the U.S. Congress. The United Nations (UN), however, has determined that the crisis does not qualify as genocide under the UN Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide due to the indiscriminate nature of the violence and a lack of evidence that it was motivated by "genocidal intent." Regardless, the UN has been actively involved in attempting to end the crisis, and the UN Security Council passed a historic resolution in 2005 giving the International Criminal Court (ICC) the authority to investigate and prosecute war crimes and crimes against humanity that have taken place in Darfur. Sudan is not a party to the Rome Statute, which established the ICC, and the Security Council's decision marks the first case referred to the court involving a state that does not recognize the ICC's jurisdiction. The ICC issued its first arrest warrants for war crimes suspects in May 2007, though Sudan has ignored them. It also ignored a March 2009 ICC arrest warrant for President Omar Hassan Ahmad al-Bashir on charges of war crimes and crimes against humanity in Darfur.

Peacekeeping efforts led by the African Union (AU) began in 2004. However, the 7,000-member AU force proved unable to prevent the further escalation of violence. Sudan agreed in June 2007 to allow a limited UN peacekeeping presence in Darfur, and a 26,000-member hybrid UN-AU peacekeeping force, called UNAMID, deployed in 2008.

South Sudan's reconstruction
Sudan's Darfur crisis erupted just as another conflict, a decades-long civil war in South Sudan, was beginning to wind down. Straddling the cultural regions of the Middle East and Sub-Saharan Africa, Sudan has long been a hotbed of ethnic tensions. During the colonial era, the United Kingdom's so-called "Southern Policy" deepened an existing cultural divide between the south and the Muslim, Arabic-speaking north. The British essentially administered the south as a separate entity, establishing English as the administrative language, expelling Arabs, and encouraging Christian missionaries and native-language primary education. Viewing themselves as a separate and distinct nation, southerners began fighting against political domination by the north even prior to the
granting of independence in 1956.

The 2005 peace accords between the rebel Sudan People's Liberation Movement and the central government affirmed South Sudan's right to autonomy within Sudan, set in motion a vote on independence scheduled for 2011, and guaranteed the region's autonomous government a 50% share of the country's oil revenue. Peace and newfound oil wealth have led to rapid growth in South Sudan; however, recovery and reconciliation efforts are only beginning.

By mid-2007, more than 155,000 refugees from the civil war had already returned home to South Sudan. On returning home, however, these refugees face the task of rebuilding a region with an economy, environment, and infrastructure completely decimated by war. Many young returnees report regretting having come back to their homeland, feeling that more opportunities, particularly schooling and employment, were available in the cities where they lived as refugees. Another difficulty facing South Sudan during its reconstruction is reconciliation between southern ethnic groups. The majority Dinka, who dominate the Sudan People's Liberation Movement, victimized many smaller groups during the civil war, particularly those associated with government-sponsored militias. As a result, tensions between groups continue to simmer.

Source: ABC-CLIO