

Sudan's Peace Process and the Darfur Armed Movements

Meeting Note

Wednesday, 16 September 2009

On 4 March 2009, the Geneva Peacebuilding Platform (GPP) provided a forum for the Geneva peacebuilding community to interact and exchange views with Ms Julie Flint on the topic of Sudan peace processes and the Darfur armed movements. An independent journalist, Ms Julie Flint has carried out extensive field research and has a long record of consultant work on the Inter-Sudanese Peace Talks in Abuja. Ms's Flint rich field experience was further complemented by insights from the mediation sector represented by Mr Theodore Murphy, an Expert Advisor for the African Union/United Nations Darfur Peace Process from the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue. The event brought together a very diverse audience, ranging from field practitioners and policy analysts, to senior academics and students, to UN representatives and NGO board members. The key theme of the discussion revolved around the perceived failure of various actors to understand the true complexities of the conflict in Darfur; as a result, such complexities make the possibilities of a lasting agreement from a track 1 level peace process remote.

Although initially highlighting the dire conflict dynamics that have rendered the Darfur peace process seemingly intractable, the discussion went on to draw attention to positive developments in Northern Darfur. North of Kutum, Darfuri (splinter SLA) rebels are now living in fragile peace with their nomadic (so called 'Janjaweed') Arab neighbours. The peace reached in this area was not a result of an organised formal process, but a localised realisation that the dividends of peace far outweighed the continuation of violent conflict. This stability is reflected in the absence of organised violence, the increasing number of internally displaced persons returning from camps in Kutum, and the widening practice of rebel groups releasing all prisoners of war. However, despite the success of these locally-driven initiatives, peacebuilding in Darfur remains essentially a top down process. Such track 1 processes have, to date, failed to produce results and to capitalize on the localised grassroots efforts which have been able to address common local needs in addition to wider political goals.

Participants expressed dissatisfaction with regard to international actors and Western civil society groups which have yet to truly grasp the reality on the ground. For those involved in track 1 level negotiations, even when aware of the splintered nature of both the Sudanese Liberation Army (SLA) and Justice and Equality Movement (JEM) rebel groups, there was a clear desire to consolidate the involving groups so as to minimise the number of actors engaged in peace talks. However, due to the political legitimacy gained from being labelled as part of the process and to the ensuing opportunities for individual enrichment, track 1 processes have in fact had the paradoxical effect of creating a barrier to peace. Firstly, groups previously seen as homogenous have now splintered, with new stakeholders seeking the additional benefits that come with recognition. Secondly, those who have not

participated in the process have been appeased and enticed, benefitting more than those who were cooperative to begin with. Thirdly, individuals identified by exterior actors as key stakeholders benefit from freezing the conflict, neither pushing for peace nor contributing to an escalation of violence. There was much agreement amongst participants in the conclusion that due to the internal divisions within these rebel groups, to the disconnect between command and control, and to the lack of strategic political will for peace, such a top down attempt to broker peace is ill-suited to the dynamics on the ground.

Furthermore, it was noted that there was an attempt by advocacy groups in the West to homogenise the conflict so as to ensure a simplified narrative of the conflict for their target audience. This narrative follows the line of a genocide committed by a combination of Khartoum government soldiers and homogenous 'Janjaweed' government-sponsored militias against a relatively defenceless and equally homogenous Darfuri civilian population. Not only does this create a binary conflict that reinforces the belief in the value of a mediated effort to broker peace at the national level, but it also creates a narrative whereby the level of violence is equally and continuously prevalent throughout the Darfur region. This has had diverse impacts that have affected the conflict at all levels. Internationally, this has shaped foreign policy and undermined efforts by Scott Gratian, US special envoy to Sudan, to broker peace through engagement. Mr. Gratian has come under increasing pressure to take a hard line against the Khartoum government and use 'genocidal' terminology. It was argued by many of those present that due to the existing influence of other states on the Khartoum government an incentive focused engagement with the conflict may yield more positive results than a punitive approach. This polarising view point has had a similar effect at the regional level, where by Chad and Libya now demand involvement in the process at the international level. In addition, this simplified narrative also ignores the Chadian dynamic to the conflict, with Chadian rebels based in Darfur attacking Chad and Darfuri rebels based in Chad attacking Sudan. At the national level, members of UNAMID (*African Union - United Nations Hybrid Operation in Darfur*) have similarly come under pressure to hold a public view that is reflective of this narrative. As a result, many UNAMID members are confined to their bases and do not grasp the complexities of the conflict as it is necessary if progress is to be achieved. Finally, at the community level, track 3 and track 2 level efforts to build peace are at best used as window dressing and at worst, in spite of some localised successes, are not given any credence at all. Ultimately, those who are seeking a peace process in Darfur do not seem to possess an understanding of the conflict sufficiently nuanced so as to formulate policy and action that seek to either break away from this narrative or to approach the conflict with a multi-level appreciation.

For this to happen, there is a clear need for evidence-based research that will map out the conflict dynamics and all the relevant actors. This would enable policy makers to identify the important stakeholders, who they represent, as well as the needs of those represented. In terms of Darfur, this may require some significant questioning and analysis of the currently pervasive simplified narrative. More precisely, do the rebels legitimately represent the various Darfuri peoples? How much command and control do track 1 actors have over their subordinates? Which groups are actually committing atrocities in Darfur and against whom are they committed; and, finally, can the emergent divisions between Darfuri Arabs and the Khartoum government be capitalised on? An evidence-based foundation can help formulate policy that seeks peace from a multi-level perspective and can deliver a more meaningful impact for those on the ground. Though track 1 level negotiations remain important they are not absolute nor should they hold back track 2 or track 3 processes.

Furthermore, such track 1 level negotiations should not be constrained by external factors or influences. Last but not least, although the geographical and political space for community peacebuilding remains limited, when opportunities arise it is essential that the impact of such efforts is evaluated. Peacebuilding must be conducted in a manner that takes into consideration wider conflict dynamics that may subsequently become destabilised.