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Darfur: analysing the humanitarian crisis

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As a general rule, EUISS seminar reports are drafted by Research Fellows. Due to the recent departure of two Research Fellows (Pierre-Antoine Braud, who worked on Africa, and Martin Ortega, who organised this seminar), the Institute asked Sami Makki, of the Ecole de Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, Paris, to prepare this seminar's report.

With the aim of maintaining crisis management in Africa as one of its research priorities, the EUISS organised a brainstorming seminar entitled 'Darfur: analysing the humanitarian crisis' on 9 July 2007 in Paris. Participants included experts from think tanks of various EU member states as well as representatives of EU institutions, the Portuguese Presidency and Member States' Foreign Ministries. This brainstorming session on Darfur is part of a larger project, which will include both publications and a seminar early next year. This first seminar was convened in order to understand the humanitarian crisis in all its complexity but also to determine how the European Union can act effectively in such circumstances. It is not enough to speak of genocide; there is an urgent need for action. The idea was also to try and ascertain what could be done in the future to prevent such humanitarian disasters from happening again.

Can Europeans do more to alleviate or indeed resolve the crisis? To understand some basic elements of the debate, one needs to go back to the 1990s. After the tragedy of Rwanda in 1994, there was a wide international consensus on the imperative to prevent such catastrophes from happening again. But, unfortunately, the international community (IC) has not learned the right lessons. The time has come to ascertain whether we have dealt with the humanitarian crisis in Darfur adequately.

The programme of this seminar focused mainly on three issues: firstly, the local and regional parameters; secondly, the global dimension and the role of international actors. Finally, participants sought to extrapolate the lessons learned from Darfur in order to think ahead for genocide prevention.

1st session – The internal and regional dimensions of the crisis

There was a general agreement among participants that the complexity of the crisis in Darfur can be partially explained by overlapping circles created by the deterioration of the crisis. The security, human rights and security situation in Darfur has worsened since Sudan's government and one of three rebel factions signed the Darfur Peace Agreement (DPA) in May 2006. Conflict has intensified, with further government reliance on aerial bombardment and on its allied re-supplied and rearmed Janjaweed militia. Representatives of aid agencies warned that attacks by armed groups had destabilised the region further in December 2006 and forced the evacuation of over 400 staff. With support from Chad and Eritrea, elements of the rebel groups that did not sign the DPA have regrouped as the National Redemption Front and have launched a series of attacks since June 2006. The lone rebel signatory of the DPA – the Sudan Liberation Army faction of Minni Minnawi (SLA/MM) – increasingly acts as a paramilitary wing of the Sudanese army.

With regard to the security and military aspects, one needs to recognize that the region has never been truly pacified, with the situation complicated by a lot of contentious factors such as control over oil and mineral resources. Counterinsurgency actions were organised in response to a series of attacks on Sudanese administrative positions by rebel groups. Although everybody agreed that there was no military solution, the role and place of the Sudanese Armed Forces have to be considered. The impact of the Darfur conflict on Khartoum politics tends to be underestimated by external analysts. Factional struggle is usually ignored. Area specialists stressed that the mapping of the groups involved in the conflict has never been done properly. There is also a tendency to refer to specific groups such as the Janjaweed without properly understanding their role. Currently, tribal militias and highway bandits are responsible for an increase of violence in Southern Darfur. 'Deconstructing' the reality is crucial to understand the complexity of the fighting between tribes. Now Arab militias are fighting among themselves. One should not overlook the part played by the ethnic factor in analysing the conflict.

On the ground, the growing number of violent militias creates real risks of widespread fragmentation and deterioration. The worrying trend is the proliferation of rebel groups as there are approximately 17 to 22 rebel groups that are trying to position themselves for negotiations. Looking for a true unity of interlocutors, using clear benchmarks, was seen as a way to create "win-win formulas" without encouraging more splitting up of rebel groups. By denying the magnitude of the crisis and refusing to consider the ongoing splits within the rebel groups, there is a growing gap between the complexity of the reality on the ground and the under-representation of rebel groups during negotiations. The 2006 Abuja peace agreement was weakened by the absence of many rebel groups and Darfurians. The 2005 Comprehensive Agreement will continue to remain intact as it ensures, from Khartoum's point of view, the integrity of Sudanese sovereignty which is considered a high priority.

If the regional dimension of the current conflict transformation is not taken into account, there are risks of failure in resolving the Sudanese conflict and in preventing the deterioration of the current crisis in Chad. While focusing attention on Darfur and eastern Chad, the IC also needs to monitor the situation in Eastern Sudan very closely. There is also a need to better understand the roles and strategies of Libya and Eritrea.

As in 2004, allegations of genocide, warnings regarding a major humanitarian crisis and calls for military intervention have been advocated by a wide range of players with various interests (from humanitarian and human rights NGOs to American religious networks and figures from show business). There have been numerous misperceptions in understanding the specificities of the conflict. The US administration was the only one to use the term “genocide”. However, despite this reference to genocide, the US administration did not consider that it was compelled to intervene.

The reality of the complex humanitarian crisis has to be analysed with a clear understanding of the ongoing simultaneous crisis in Darfur, Eastern Chad and the Central Republic of Africa. The response in each country and local areas varies from early humanitarian aid to rehabilitation projects. But the security of the population remains a key point that needs to be addressed. The conflict is seen as a “protection crisis” with intense developments in eastern Chad. On 1 April 2007, there were 304,000 more Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) than a year before. The total number of the affected population is more than 4.5 million people. Since last year, security conditions have deteriorated rapidly for humanitarian workers with continued harassment, increased bureaucratic obstacles and delays, detention and intimidation of national staff, and random denial of access to affected areas and IDP camps. NGOs do not rely on HQ security agreements. At the local level, random targeted attacks on humanitarian workers and their assets are reported. Although the humanitarian presence in Darfur continues to decline, it remains substantial with more than 12,000 aid workers. Some 80 major NGOs, the Red Cross/Crescent Movement and 15 UN agencies continue to support the affected populations in Darfur. Some of the difficulties reside in logistics. Also, there have been instances of relocation of humanitarian staff with detrimental effects on humanitarian access to the populations in need.

In this context, the mandate of the UNHCR is central in ensuring the safe return of different categories of displaced populations. There is a tendency to focus on the emergency situation but the return of displaced populations in very bad conditions also has to be tackled. A plan is under preparation for greater coordination and protection of camps in the whole region of Darfur. The militarization of humanitarian camps is a worrying tendency. Some representatives warned that better role and resource-sharing between civilian and military actors will be asked for again, not only for preplanning objectives. The creation of “international humanitarian protectorates” was presented as a possible solution. However, many participants felt that this cannot be the appropriate response. One participant stressed the urgent need to consider practical solutions for better protection of women and children. How long will the IC tolerate the impunity of military and paramilitary forces involved in rapes?

As underlined by many participants, the war has changed. Therefore, the West has to be extremely careful not to start a new crisis while putting out the current fire in Darfur. It was suggested that it would be worthwhile analysing the economy of the armed groups and the conflict, so as to be able to cut off the resources fuelling the conflict while encouraging political and peace processes. Many questions have not been raised yet and it is already too late for any immediate and simple solution. Therefore, avoiding “deadline diplomacy” is a priority as imposing a dangerously artificial timeline doesn’t make sense in the Sudanese context. There is still a complete misunderstanding of the Sudanese perception of deadlines. African Union (AU) troops have to be better used and equipped on the ground during the transition period. Other issues such as the terms of reference of the protection mandate and the nationalities in the military contingent need to be addressed. Moreover, for a successful

interim period, greater help is needed to support AU forces. Past protection missions of AU forces show that they can make a real difference in protecting civilians if well-prepared and equipped.

The multifaceted crisis of Darfur has not been fully looked at. No actions have been taken to act simultaneously on Darfur and Chad. The international capacity to influence various regional stockholders remains a missing instrument in conflict management. However, the global perspective is important and relevant in order to have a full picture of the current dynamics of the conflict. A consensus emerged on the need for the IC to present a united front.

2nd session – The global dimension of the crisis

The second session was an opportunity to discuss various international parameters of the crisis. Because of oil and mineral resources, Darfur has become the indirect battlefield to emerging powers. Multilateralism is therefore essential. We must consider the role of external actors such as Saudi Arabia, China or Russia in fuelling, passively or actively, the conflict and mass killings.

The global dimension of the conflict in Darfur is also an important indication of a renewed interest in Africa in recent years. This continent was marginalized in the early 1990s. The situation has changed very rapidly as now international priority is turning to Africa. According to one speaker, this renewed interest is partially the result of the positive impact of the expansion of democracy thanks to economic and political reforms through democratic and fair elections. Although the energy factor explains the ongoing transformation of the whole region, one needs to consider the importance of capacity-building efforts by African countries through regional integration, with the notable influence of Libya. This political transformation at a regional level cannot be dismissed. However, these long-term reforms do not mean that Europeans do not have a duty to protect civilian populations when human rights are violated. Another participant felt that the positive discourse about the democratic transformation of Africa did not reflect reality on the ground. As a matter of fact, fake elections, violations of human rights and civil liberties are still a grave cause of concern. Thus, the question was asked, should Europeans continue to support these contentious electoral processes as positive signs of good governance for “cheap geopolitical” reasons?

Statements referring to international principles have been constant, but have not been matched or backed up by actual practices. Both N’Djamena and Khartoum have benefited from ambiguous international support. The US administration has referred to a genocidal situation in Darfur, but cooperation between the intelligence services has remained significant regarding the War on Terror. Paris has provided military support to the Deby regime, while long-standing relations between French and Sudanese intelligence services have been maintained.

A majority of participants recognized the more constructive role of China recently, thanks to a united international effort to put greater pressure on China. This has made a difference in changing some elements of Chinese diplomacy and its relations with the Sudanese government. However, some participants disagreed and refused to acknowledge

the changing role of China since this country remains the largest arms supplier. Nevertheless, there was a large consensus that, although we are reacting too late, multilateralism is a key concept. Some opportunities opened by China were lost as the IC didn't use all the resources available. However, on 17 June, thanks to Chinese diplomatic pressures, Khartoum agreed to the final phase of the deployment of a hybrid UN-AU peacekeeping force in Darfur. Because an eventual break-up in Sudan would have very negative effects on foreign investments, political views within the Chinese top leadership evolved rapidly. The recent China/EU dialogue on Africa was a promising development and EU engagement with China is vital for the future. Also, in order to have the full picture of the crisis and to exert some leverage on local, regional and international actors, the role and influence of three major economic actors - Japan, India and Malaysia - should not be ignored with a view to the resolution of the conflict. Therefore, how should countries work collaboratively to build capabilities and legitimacy for the future?

UN Secretary-General Special Envoy for Darfur, Jan Eliasson, and his AU counterpart, Salim Ahmed Salim, have developed a road map for negotiations, with the objective of restarting peace talks by the end of the summer. The United Nations is maintaining its focus on four tracks: the political process, peacekeeping, humanitarian assistance, and reconstruction and development in Darfur. The role of the mediators was perceived as problematic since they do not seem to be fully involved on the ground, according to area specialists. As noted by different experts, there is indeed a shocking contrast between the level of involvement of media celebrities and Hollywood stars in publicising the issue and the discreet activities of UN/AU representatives. Beyond any wishful thinking, there is an urgent need for the mediators to be more proactive and to consider entering a dialogue with rebel groups. According to Africa specialists, one needs to recognize the important problem with mediation. The conflict remains unresolved after 4 years and it was reported that the teams of the UN and AU special envoys are sometimes competing on the ground, which could be instrumental in Khartoum's strategy to undermine mediation efforts. To create a positive dynamic of conflict resolution, concrete proposals should be put forward to solve internal problems within the mediation teams.

Another debated topic was the use of sanctions and their deterrent impacts. One participant stressed that a proper assessment of their use and effects has to look at the long-term perspective instead of focusing on immediate impacts only. In that sense, targeted sanctions can have an effect when properly used. But years of misuse of this mechanism has damaged the credibility of the West.

Taking into consideration the gradual involvement of the UN through the future hybrid force, the quality and level of effectiveness of intervening African troops is an issue that needs to be tackled. Although the EU has been funding and sending military experts and police advisers, the AU chain of command's dysfunctions are quite worrying. According to various participants, in trying to imagine a more effective European support to the AU, one needs to realize that the gaps between European and African forces are getting bigger since on the African side traditional practices are still very strong. Although very difficult, building a dialogue with Sudanese society is necessary as top-level solutions are not enough. Besides, a political and security agreement with local authorities is the first part of the dialogue and no troops should be deployed before this has been achieved as the risks of failure are high. It is a strategic nonsense to have only a best-case scenario, with an underestimation of the deterioration of security conditions, in planning for an international deployment. April 2007 was the bloodiest month for AMIS since the 2004 deployment, with

seven soldiers killed. Therefore, a consistent exit strategy is crucial before mobilising our armed forces and civilian police capabilities.

Many participants commented on the way information was managed, from knowledge to intelligence and communication. The quality of the analysis has to be improved to avoid an oversimplification of the crisis in the international mass media. That explains partially why third-world countries are still very much divided on the issue of intervention. After Ivory Coast, there is a strong reluctance to accept foreign troops, which is part of the reality that decision-makers need to take into account. The lack of coherence at the policy level impacts negatively on public opinions' perceptions of neutrality, which is crucial for the management of security. In monitoring potential genocides, mass atrocities and mass violence, intelligence services have a role to play. However, field experts stated that Western powers lack credibility because they manipulated the figures for IDPs and victims of the ongoing conflict. Therefore, a more objective use of figures would allow the IC to regain credibility in the Arab media. Another participant agreed on the need to win back public opinions, as the battle was lost when the humanitarian agenda was used dishonestly or exploitatively.

The urgent need to prevent any further deterioration of the situation is not an excuse for the existing lack of a clear understanding of the evolving complexity of the conflict. Participants raised concerns about the lack of intelligence and continuous mismanagement of information which are undermining European efforts to support current deployments. For military activities, various participants underlined the urgent need for a centralized capability of intelligence and information to offer European military commanders an accurate picture of the situation on the ground. In forging future plans for deployments, the real issue is more than intelligence capabilities. It is about the quality of the initial assessment as well as a continuous willingness and ability to share information. Identifying the problem and the needs is crucial for successful long-term planning. Systematic comparison of existing operational plans, ready response options and best practices to prevent mass atrocities is a way to share generic information but also specific advanced knowledge. A lot has already been experienced, written and discussed. Thus, making information available is a necessary step to crystallize ideas for making prevention work.

3rd session – Lessons learned and the way forward

The formulation of concrete ideas to define a way forward is a priority for the Portuguese presidency of the EU. The role of European institutions comprises, on the one hand, political and security aspects through the Council of the EU, and on the other, humanitarian activities, through aid programmes and the rehabilitation of livelihoods, through the Commission. In working with the AU, building new capabilities is essential. However, African ownership cannot be an excuse for the European Union not to act.

According to one of the final speakers, in the current international context, considering the emerging balance of power with China having a leading role, isolated, unilateral interventions are no longer feasible and a multilateral approach is the only way forward. But the difficulty remains, in the case of Africa, since multilateralism is complex. African ownership is a key principle in developing the relations between the EU and the AU. In building up a more effective EU/AU coordination for a better partnership, long-term

investments, although very difficult to assess, will be more rewarding and efficient than short-term expectations. The risk is that the EU might lose its credibility in supporting ineffective AU actions. Concerning the AU involvement, Europeans need to continue supporting the regional organisation to help structure itself for greater efficiency. Although the sovereignty debate is one of the existing obstacles, organisational matters also impact on the final decision to act preventively.

There was a general consensus to consider that greater coordination and coherence at the UN and EU levels were essential. Many participants were also eager to better understand the role Europe was willing and able to play in preventing a deterioration of the situation in Darfur. Some participants felt that, beyond any institutional discourse and scientific explanations, more clarity was essential. The EU is building up a capacity to better manage current ESDP operations, improve the civilian crisis management capabilities while enhancing civil-military cooperation in strategic planning and in rapid reaction mechanisms. As a matter of fact, one needs to understand the practicalities of the European involvement. Greater coherence between bilateral, regional and international initiatives is necessary.

The Portuguese presidency has also launched an initiative on fragile states. Better coordination between development and defence ministers to promote greater coherence is seen as necessary. Emerging threats - non state actors, drug trafficking - will require moral, legal and political frameworks for interventions. The feeling was that since 2003, when the European Security Strategy was published, things have not changed enormously. There is now a need for coherence of instruments for short and long-term approaches. One expert saw positive complementarities between the security/defence instruments and the development activities although some NGOs might react strongly against this as they reject the idea of a security/development nexus. Also, the military is usually worried by increasing risks of mission creep when being asked to work together with NGOs. Besides, there is a consensus on the need to promote multilateral dialogues as well as contacts and initiatives at regional and sub-regional levels. Another participant added that the EU can be very influential by using bilateral strategic summits in a multilateral perspective.

Conclusion: crisis and genocide prevention

Numerous participants agreed that innovative ideas derive from the local level, although some ideas do not fit with existing frameworks. Hence, it is a prerequisite for the EU to adapt the instruments to the objectives rather than being limited by both new and existing instruments. The EU needs to find a consistent way to make a real difference in the region, in providing aid and support to the existing structures while thinking about the way its instruments can meet major challenges introduced by the “responsibility to protect”.

European institutions have to evolve in order to be able to take up the challenge of building true capabilities for crisis or genocide prevention. Early warning is necessary but it is not enough. The EU constitutes a large-scale conflict prevention system, allowing 27 democracies to work together and cooperate in a peaceful environment. A prevention centre could be an integral part of the EU as it could stimulate different elements of the EU and foster close cooperation. Indeed it is important to remember that conflict prevention is a core function of the EU. Quoting Solana’s “the European Union as a factor for peace”, one participant stressed the ongoing efforts to implement those values. The existing conflict and genocide prevention movements where different networks of experts, academics, NGOs and UN representatives have created a space for dialogue see the UN and the EU as main focal points for future institutional developments.

One participant pointed out that there are a number of shortcomings. What will be the place of the forgotten conflicts such as Somalia’s dirty war? The use of superlatives and big words to depict the seriousness of the situation do not achieve anything. Likewise, creating big bureaucracies is not the right answer to the emerging challenges. There is of course a need to target governments but public opinions cannot be ignored. In creating new instruments or networks of capabilities through collaborative arrangements aiming at helping regional organisations, are we encouraging unprofessional practices at the cost of innocent lives, thereby allowing mass killings?

It was felt that prevention needed to be discussed in a deeper way within the EUISS, both internally by encouraging the emergence of a network of networks to study future developments in the field of prevention, and externally by encouraging stronger ties between European and African think tanks. Continuous cooperation through strong institutional links can be an effective way to extend the scope of policy research in the field of genocide and conflict prevention, by learning from past difficulties and failures highlighted by the analysis of the multifaceted and complex crisis in Darfur. The IC has failed to prevent mass killings and the conflict is deteriorating rapidly. At the end of the brainstorming session, it was agreed to organise a follow-up as a number of issues remained to be discussed. There was a large consensus that further research would be necessary to explore the way forward in the field of prevention. Therefore, it is crucial to develop the right set of instruments for the EU to act effectively and there is a vital need to work on launching an initiative on crisis and genocide prevention.

List of participants

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João CRAVINHO – Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs and Cooperation, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Lisbon

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François GAUTIER – Chargé de Mission, Centre d'Analyse et de Prévision, Ministère des Affaires Etrangères, Paris

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David A. HAMBURG – President Emeritus, Carnegie Corporation of New York, DeWitt Wallace Distinguished Scholar, Weill Cornell Medical College, New York

Nadim HASBANI – Arab Media Officer, International Crisis Group, Brussels

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