

Meeting Note: Roundtable Meeting on Humanitarian Issues in the Context of the Darfur Crisis, 13 April 2004, Overseas Development Institute

Darfur has been described as the worst humanitarian crisis in the world today with an estimated one million people displaced since fighting intensified early in 2003. The Humanitarian Policy Group (HPG) facilitated a roundtable meeting on Tuesday 13 April of a small group of senior representatives from aid agencies, governments, multilateral organisations, human rights organisations, and academics to discuss key humanitarian policy issues in the context of Darfur. The aim was to allow a neutral space for a full and frank discussion of some of the difficult dilemmas raised by the Darfur crisis for international engagement and humanitarian response.

This meeting note summarises some of the main issues discussed. As such, it represents the views expressed by participants at the meeting, and not those of the Overseas Development Institute. HPG has also produced a Briefing Note which further discusses many of the issues raised in the meeting and highlights key resources. This can be found at <http://www.odi.org.uk/hpg/papers/HPGBriefingNote3.pdf>.

1. The scale of the problem and the nature of the crisis.

There was consensus among meeting participants that the situation in Darfur is the worst humanitarian crisis in the world, and a human rights catastrophe. The appropriateness of the use of the terms 'ethnic cleansing' and 'genocide' to describe the patterns of violence apparent in Darfur were discussed. These patterns include rape, the deliberate use of forced displacement, 'scorched earth' tactics and destruction of wells preventing hundreds of thousands of people from obtaining water and damaging their capacity to sustain their livelihoods. While this was clearly a human rights crisis, meeting participants were keen not to lose sight of the aspects of the crisis relating to people's access to subsistence needs, particularly in light of ongoing constrained access, the oncoming 'hungry season', and continuing violence which were combining to create a situation labelled by one participant as having the potential to escalate into a famine, 'four times as great as Bar el Ghazal in 1998'. The key issue at present was generally agreed to be civilian protection in the face of

massive levels of violence and human rights abuses. This could escalate quickly into a major crisis of access to food and other vital resources.

2. Analysis of the factors underlying the crisis, pressure points, and what type of engagement is likely to influence the Sudanese Government effectively.

The importance of understanding the factors that triggered and have sustained the crisis in Darfur was discussed, primarily in the context of designing efforts to achieve ongoing humanitarian access. There was, however, no consensus on precisely what was driving the crisis nor why levels of violence had escalated so dramatically in the region. The discussion and the literature indicated that there are multiple conflicts, and varying external interests, making immediate drivers difficult to pinpoint.

Participants agreed, however, that the Government of Sudan has responded before to massive media and international pressure, making the role of the media, the EU Troika (Britain, Norway and Italy), the US and the UN crucial. Sudan is keen, for instance, to normalise relations with the US, which could be used as leverage. Participants noted that the 'good humanitarian donorship' initiative highlighted the role of donor governments in working to promote humanitarian access and respect for international humanitarian law. All agreed too that there should be an international presence in Sudan monitoring the ceasefire and humanitarian access.

Humanitarian agencies acknowledged that they face a difficult dilemma in deciding how vocal to be in denouncing human rights and humanitarian abuses, as speaking out publicly might compromise the already limited humanitarian access that is enabling at least some critical needs to be met.

3. The interface between political processes and humanitarian response – should it be labelled as a 'humanitarian' ceasefire?

The ceasefire signed on 8 April between the Sudanese Government, the Sudan Liberation Movement/Army (SLA) and the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM) has been labelled a

'humanitarian' ceasefire. The point was made at the meeting that, linking the concepts of humanitarian action with politically achieved peace settlements could be unhelpful. Humanitarian access should not be dependent on securing a ceasefire, but should be insisted upon by all parties to a conflict, and all interested advocates, as required under international law. In the past there have been cases of belligerents to various conflicts in Sudan seeking to make access to humanitarian aid part of ceasefire negotiations. This has undermined populations' access to humanitarian aid, and should not be repeated.

Concerns were raised that the delivery of humanitarian aid should not cement civilian displacement and thereby contribute to current human rights abuses. Ongoing violence clearly precludes any immediate thoughts of return. This presents aid agencies with the difficult dilemma that meeting the immediate needs of the displaced could serve to legitimise and make permanent forcible displacement of populations of particular ethnic and racial groups. Aid agencies also reported difficulties in securing travel permits and access. . Participants were divided as to whether to hold out for sustained access or to accept ongoing limitations because of the immediate humanitarian imperative to act.

4. Discussions around the political process – should Naivasha be broadened; are we swapping peace in the south for war in the west?

The discussion confirmed analysis in the literature that international government mediators were focusing on the current IGAD peace talks in Naivasha process as the most practical and achievable means of engagement. From a humanitarian perspective, it will be important that success in the peace talks in the South do not overshadow the significance of the emerging conflict in the West of the country. There was discussion around the possibilities of broadening the peace process in Naivasha. There was general agreement that a narrow IGAD process would not produce peace for the whole country, and that Darfur and other conflicts have to be addressed.

5. Weak humanitarian response – capacity questions and criticism of the humanitarian system's engagement and the role of donors in facilitating access.

Concerns were raised in the meeting over the weakness of engagement at both the political and the humanitarian levels. Some of the participants felt that the capacity of the humanitarian system was still too low to deal with the scale of the crisis, that problems of coordination were continuing, and that the failure to respond more effectively could not only be blamed on the restriction imposed by the Government of Sudan or on lack of donor interest. The response to the crisis suggests more fundamental weaknesses within the broad humanitarian system particularly with regard to contingency planning and rapid response. There was disappointment that this should be the case given the level of international investment in this in recent years. It was noted that some donor governments were seeking to boost the capacity of humanitarian response, but that there were limits on the ways in which they could do this without being seen to compromise the independence of the overall humanitarian effort.

Political engagement to pressure the Government of Sudan into fulfilling its protection obligations under IHL had also been slow and relatively weak. Questions were raised regarding how donor governments could best use their leverage to ensure humanitarian outcomes.