

Flaming Darfur

A review of: “Darfur Peacekeepers: The African Union peacekeeping mission in Darfur (AMIS) from the perspective of a Hungarian military advisor” by János Besenyo¹²

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Some leaders of human rights and aid organizations have repeatedly stated that peace has been restored in Darfur and fighting has ceased. Nevertheless, it is a strange peace where every day there are more and more deadly victims of the tribal wars. Two weeks after the United Nations had withdrawn its peacekeepers from the Darfur region in January 2021 after 13 years, the fighting between local tribes in Al Geneina District, West Darfur, left 84 people dead and 160 wounded. A couple of days later the death toll have reached 129 people, including women and children. The residence of the provincial Governor of West Darfur was under an attempted attack by unidentified gunmen. By the end of January, the UN refugee agency revealed that since the outbreak of tribal clashes in Darfur in January, at least 250 people have lost their lives. Three humanitarian workers were also killed. More than 100,000 people, mostly women and children have been displaced, fleeing into the neighboring Chad. The United Nations urged the Sudanese government to see to the de-escalation of violence in West Darfur and safeguard civilian lives. The government put a curfew in place and announced a state of emergency in Sudan’s West Darfur region. In spite of that, in April, fresh tribal clashes erupted in El Geneina, which led to the death of at least 40 people and about 58 people were injured. The decision to declare a state of emergency in the region and to deploy security forces to the region was welcomed by the UN who urged the government to hold all perpetrators of the violence responsible, to ensure the protection of humanitarian organizations and to provide services to the victims of the violence. Though Sudan’s government-initiated talks with the Arab Rizeigat and the non-Arab Masalit tribes, some groups expressed their refusal to accept the result of the mediation. In June, clashes between the Arab Taisha and ethnic African Fallata tribes in South Darfur claimed the lives of 40 people, with 37 others wounded. The clash erupted as a result of a land dispute between the two conflicting parties. This is the balance of the first six months of 2021, only.

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Dr. János Besenyő is former colonel of the Hungarian Defense Forces and practical peacekeeper, later leader of the Military Staff's Scientific Research Center. After finishing his military career, he has devoted himself to scientific work. Today he is associated professor and leader of the Africa Research Institute at the Óbuda University. He participated in several peacekeeping missions in different positions, e.g., in the MINURSO mission in Western Sahara.⁴ He served six months in Darfur in the most dangerous period of this region as a logistics consultant delegated by the European Union to the AMIS peacekeeping mission. In his new book published in English by L'Harmattan, Paris he presents the background to the events in Darfur, his own experiences and points out certain contexts that make the conflict easier to understand even for those who do not deal deeper with happenings on the African continent. He describes the region, then the conflict, the parties involved and the African Union (AU) peace operation, as well as the Hungarian experience gained there. He gives a literally multidisciplinary study into the reader's hands.

In his preface the Author states that he aims to provide a comprehensive overview of the Darfur crisis and genocide and the African Union's attempts to combat the crisis in order to refresh the international interest. Regrettably the Darfur conflict slid back into international obscurity in the last 10 years despite ongoing violence against civilians and the continued risk of conflict escalation. The described mission was not simply a multinational operation, but an engagement on the basis of cooperation between several international organizations. Hungary's involvement in the mission was difficult due to a combination of factors, including the specificities of international and European Union crisis management, as well as of the situation in Hungary. The African Union (newly established in 2001), the European Union, and the NATO – including forces from the US, Great Britain, Germany, France, Belgium, Italy, Denmark, Finland, the Netherlands and Sweden - were involved in the operation following the UN's call on the basis of UN resolutions and UN support. Hungary that had no previous experience in the region participated in the operation under the umbrella of the EU. Also humanitarian and other organizations participated in the mission however their presence imposed a greater task on the leading organizations because of the security situation than the benefits of their activities were. This type of coordination and integrated crisis management, including the unified chain of command and communications, as well as the unified logistics and civil-military coordination represented a major challenge. The EU's engagement was providing assistance in building up the construction and operational capacity of the African Union and establishing a framework for cooperation and organizing the first joint crisis management operation.

In the first chapter the reader receives a detailed picture on geography, history, infrastructure, economy, ethnic, social and cultural stratification of Darfur, this western region of Sudan with a territory of almost 1,900,000 km² bordered by South Sudan, Chad, the Central

⁴ More on his experience in Western Sahara: Besenyő, János: Magyarország és a nyugat-szaharai válság, [Hungary and the crisis in Weester-Sahara], Budapest, publ. by Monarchia Kiadó, 2020 (ISBN: 978-615-80864-1-7). To the topic of the Hungarian peacekeeping missions in Africa see: Besenyő, János: Participation of Hungary in African Operations between 1989-2019, Óbuda University, Doctoral School for Safety and Security Sciences, Budapest, 2019. (ISBN: 978-963-449-121-7)

African Republic, and Libya. Its population of 7.4 million is divided in 12 language communities, and respectively ethnic groups. In its poorly documented history Darfur belonged to different multiethnic states. Due to the political instability and conflicts little is known about its early history. In the period 1600 to 1916 Darfur functioned as a sovereign territory independently from the states established in the Nile Valley but in 1916 it was forced to integrate into Sudan and consequently became part of the British colonial empire. In 1956 Sudan became independent and Darfur received partial autonomy. The central government initiated only minimal developments in the region and eliminated Darfur's partial autonomy in 1972. At the turn of the 1980s and 1990s as a side-effect of the civil war in Chad, more and more firearms were taken into Darfur and low-intensity violence increased significantly between the ethnic groups, particularly between the native tribes and the Arab population who settled down in Darfur between 1960-1980, only, as a result of the civil war in Chad. The desertification made the major part of North-Darfur uninhabitable and resulted in mass emigration. The natives' weight continued to decline. Moreover, pogroms by Janjaweds, the so-called self-defense military units of Arab volunteers were initiated against the natives with the support of the government that recruited specifically among the local and rootless Arab nomads. These actions against civilians obviously aimed for expulsion of the native black population.

Finally, it led to the insurgency of the Fur, Zaghawa and Masalit ethnics against the Khartoum regime in February 2003. The Sudan Liberation Movement/Army (SLMA) and its ally, the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM) considered themselves the representatives of the Darfurian population's majority. The government has responded with military strikes. The Sudanese government forces and Janjaweed units burned down and destroyed hundreds of villages, causing the death of tens of thousands of citizens, chased away millions of people and systematically raped thousands of women and girls. The US Congress has named these events genocide. A congressman visited the region and reported that Khartoum supports the Arab militias. An EU civilian and military expert mission visited the region in August 2004 and came to similar findings. US Secretary of State Colin Powell arrived in Khartoum on 30 June 2004, where discussions were held with Sudan's president, Omar al-Bashir. The UN Secretary General Kofi Annan also became involved in the consultations. The Americans threatened with embargo measures if Khartoum did not bring the Janjaweds under control. With the help of the African Union, the UN, the EU and the US, negotiations were held in Addis Ababa. Finally the Darfur rebels and the Sudanese government signed a cease-fire agreement. The agreement was supervised by the African Union with the support of the USA and the EU. The agreement allowed the deployment of military observers to Darfur. This is how AMIS, i.e. the African Mission in Sudan started its operation.

The ceasefire agreement was violated from the beginning, giving continuous tasks to the observers. The work of the AMIS was extraordinarily difficult, the establishment of its camps was exceedingly slow, the African unit had no unified leadership, no adequate equipment and weapons, no unified communication system, and the internet did not operate properly. Albeit the African peacekeepers were unable to prevent the spread of violence, the AU wanted to



get greater international support for the AMIS. The EU sent eight and the United States sent five advisors to Darfur but the role, the activity and the review of the work of the foreign consultants significantly differed from each other. It became obvious very soon that the few dozens of observers and the few companies of their security units were unable to provide efficient work at the vast expanse of territory. In October 2004, the Military Staff Committee of the AU Peace and Security Council finalized the plan on the enlargement of the peacekeeping mission with a one-year mandate, the costs of which were USD 221 million. This covered the activities of the personnel of 3320: 2,341 soldiers, 815 police officers, 132 civilians as well as 32 other employees. The plans were grandiose, but the implementation had been less successful. A newer plan (AMIS II) would have increased the personnel to approximately 4,000 people until the beginning of 2005, but this did not come true. In May 2005 only 2,100 peacekeepers stayed in Darfur. Despite the extension of the AMIS mission, it was not able to guarantee the protection of the civilian population terrorized by the Sudanese army, the Janjaweed groups, various insurgent units, and also by other armed criminal gangs. As a reaction to the lack of success the mission AMIS III with its extended mandate to 20 December 2005 was designated to implement the tasks given to its predecessors. Also Canada, Britain, the Netherlands and Norway as well as Nigeria, Rwanda and Senegal sent larger units to Ruanda. The soldiers settled in 34 camps, the number of police stations was 65. For a while the extension of the mission had a positive impact on the security and humanitarian situation in Darfur. Humanitarian organizations began to return, refugees got aid, former epidemics disappeared but beyond other difficulties the Sudanese government posed continuous bureaucratic obstacles, and hampered the activities of the peacekeepers where it could. In some areas AMIS was yet unable to guarantee the safe operation of humanitarian organizations. The Africans significantly reduced the number of patrols and the soldiers became even more passive when for more than three months they did not receive a salary. The UN Security Council Resolution No. 1769 adopted on July 31, 2007 made a decision about starting a joint international mission together with the African Union called UNAMID (United Nations Hybrid Operation in Darfur) in order to maintain the achievements of 2004. Following the new and new requests by the AU to give more support and to send more and more professionals, the EU invested astronomic amounts into the support of the Darfur peacekeeping mission through the ATHENA mechanism and coordinated the activities of the European advisors. The strategic logistical tasks were coordinated and carried out by the NATO as it had the proper capacities and experiences in this field.

The participation of Europeans in the mission encountered a number of difficulties. European observers were not prepared for the conditions in Darfur, so they had to learn everything on the spot. Logistics supplies followed the deployment of observers only with a long delay, which meant that peacekeepers could not perform many tasks or only later than planned. They did not have the right equipment, they did not have enough vehicles, they were not fed enough, the patrols could not even communicate with each other. Outdated maps were given to patrols, so they got lost several times. In this chaos, it seemed a miracle that the camp was completed by the end of October, designed to accommodate and serve 70 people,

but had to provide for than a hundred people on a daily basis. The lack of water was a problem. Due to insufficient water supply, compliance with hygiene regulations was inadequate. Clashes between government forces and rebels were common, and even peacekeepers were often targeted by various armed groups who fired on AMIS camps and attacked patrols several times. In the first period the observers had neither adequate accommodation nor an office. They lived in a large tent where more than forty officers and non-commissioned officers were housed. Cultural and hygienic differences and political contradictions between the residents of the tent became quickly clear. For example, Rwandan officers categorically refused to live in a tent with Nigerian officers.

By 2004 Hungary sent one advisor to Darfur and contributed with an amount of EUR 95,000 and with high value medical equipment to the solution of the Darfur conflict. Shortly after the withdrawal of the first Hungarian observer, the Hungarian Army had to find an officer with a degree in logistics and African experience. This is how the Author landed in the mission. He arrived in Addis Ababa, the headquarters of the AU, on June 29, 2005. Although Hungary left the mission at the end of December of the same year, in order to focus more on its mission in Congo, this short period was enough for the Author to get a deep insight into the structure and work of the peacekeeping forces, and to document all relevant occurrences. János Besenyő's book is characterized by extreme accuracy, rich data and a very critical approach. The reader can learn about the strengths and weaknesses, structure, organization, territorial distribution and responsibilities of peacekeepers in Darfur.

The Author sadly states in his conclusion that the Darfur operation didn't bring a general and sufficient political solution and the security situation has only improved a little. The operation was increasingly losing the credence of locals. Due to the precarious situation and the weak mandate, the peacekeepers' activity was not very effective, and the understaffed mission was almost invisible. By the beginning of 2006, it became clear that the mission faced serious challenges having a negative impact on operational capability. The opposing sides could not agree at all, so chaos became steady and terror and massacres kept spreading in Darfur. The AU's and the world's three-year peace strategy failed. At this point, most African leaders were aware that, in Darfur, they were unable to handle "African problems with African methods" in Darfur.

According to the author, it is regrettable that the experience in Darfur was not discussed in Hungary at a systemic level. This was mainly because Hungary did not have a coherent Africa policy at that time, even though Hungarian foreign policy started to increasingly prioritize the continent. It would be necessary to thoroughly reflect on the Hungarian experience in African peace-keeping operations to date and capitalize on it not only in military but also government, economic and other circles.

The book is mainly recommended for military professionals, especially those preparing for peace missions. But the book is also suitable as an educational material for higher military and police institutions and civilian universities too.