

Revisiting Darfur

Mamdani looks at the bigger picture in Sudan, writes **PERCY ZVOMUYA**

About two years ago the telephone on my desk rang. That is not unusual; phones ring all the time. At the other end of the line was a man calling from Sudan's embassy in Pretoria. In uncertain tones, in a voice carrying heavy traces of Arabic, the person invited me to go on a trip to Sudan as a guest of his government.

I turned down the offer then and again when the proposal was repeated several months later. To my naive mind going on a trip paid for by Sudan's vast petroleum bounty was colluding in the government's genocidal actions against Darfurians. The facts were clear: Arabs were killing Africans.

If *Saviours and Survivors* (HSRC Press), the new book by Ugandan scholar and Columbia University professor Mahmood Mamdani, had come out then, perhaps I would have gone on the guided tour; it's not likely that I would have come back wiser.

Mamdani visited Johannesburg, Durban and Cape Town to give talks and to launch *Saviours and Survivors*. His homily at the Cape Town Book Fair on June 16, Youth Day, was attended by throngs of visitors.



Mahmood Mamdani says Darfur has been neatly integrated into the War on Terror but it is, in fact, a clash over resources. Photo: David Harrison

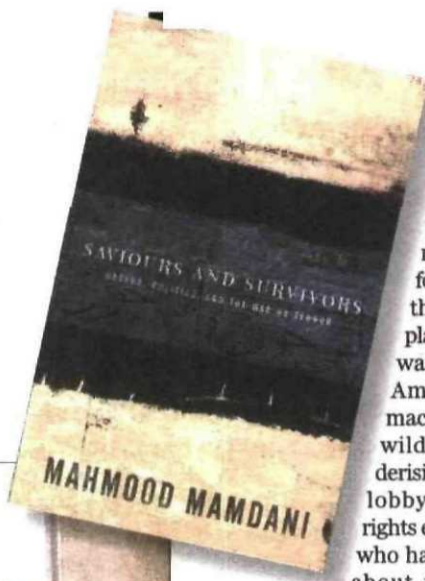
When I interviewed him, an hour or so after his talk, he was eating at Marimba restaurant, an outlet housed within the Cape Town International Convention Centre.

"We need to be cautious about the figures of the dead," he said when the figure of the four million who have supposedly died in the conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo came up. Chatty and amiable, Mamdani believes that the inflated estimates are provided by non-governmental organi-

sations that stand to benefit the most from inflated figures when they seek funds from donors. "We have to be a little wary of who is doing the estimates."

His 400-page book begins with the age-old indictment that "reportage on African wars [in the West] is more superficial than in-depth". Mamdani explains, with incredible success, the reason the war in Darfur has been "invested with epic significance".

The war in the DRC has resulted in more dead civilians yet no sitting



president has been indicted by the International Criminal Court (ICC) for the atrocities that have taken place. The Darfur war has had the American lobby machine whirring wildly. Mamdani derisively calls these lobbyists "human rights entrepreneurs" who have no qualms about inflating the numbers of the dead.

The powerful lobby group, the Save Darfur Campaign, has attracted otherwise nobly intentioned but naive players such as Matt Damon, George Clooney, Don Cheadle, Meryl Streep and U2's Bono.

Mamdani asks why Americans have warmly embraced Darfur in the way they have and not Iraq, where, as an occupying power, they carry a particular responsibility.

The response to Darfur is infused with moral, not political rage. Mamdani says that those who are being asked to "march and mobilise for Darfur are being asked to do so not as American citizens but as humans".

Mamdani seems to be saying that Darfur has come to serve as the site where Americans can feel good about themselves. It is "a place [where] Americans do not need to feel responsible but choose to take responsibility".

Always watching out for the bigger picture, Mamdani says in his book that the crisis in Darfur has been "neatly integrated into the War on Terror". It's

easy to identify the bad guys: in Darfur we can say Arabs are committing genocide by killing Africans.

One of the book's triumphs is its rigorous anthropological survey of the shifting identities of the Arab. He says that the Arabs of Sudan are "as native to Sudan as most of its inhabitants".

The crisis in Darfur, he says, is the result of a clash between those who have land and those without. The landless are fleeing the southward expansion of the Sahara desert and laying claim to the grazing lands of those they find in their way.

In 1986, for instance, 384 000 people migrated south from north Darfur. Darfur has been the site of immigration for centuries. West Africans (Hausas and Fulanis and other groups), Arabs and southerners have settled in the area.

Mamdani links the restiveness of the province to the Cold War forces at play in the region. It's a province that has a seemingly endless supply of arms from Muammar Gaddafi's Libya, Eritrea, Idris Deby's Chad, Ronald Reagan's United States and the French who, to this day, have troops in Chad's capital, N'djamena.

Mamdani says that it's simplistic to blame only Omar al-Bashir's government for the crisis. The crisis had been brewing since the mid-1980s. When Brigadier al-Bashir and other Islamists seized power in 1989 "they cited the previous government's failure to stop the fighting in Darfur as one of several reasons for their actions".

I don't mean to exonerate the horrible crimes committed by government-sponsored militia (including the Janjaweed), the country's military intelligence, the Sudanese air force and mercenaries Khartoum recruited from as far away as West Africa.

But it's important to note that al-Bashir's government became a protagonist in the conflict only after 1989. It's not helpful to accuse the Arab of killing the African, especially in a region in which identities have for centuries been in flux. Some of the people identified as Arabs today have been something else before.

A displaced Darfuri quoted in the book places blame not on the Arab but on the government. "Our problem is not with the Arab, it is with the government," he says.

The conclusion of the book makes the point that an effective solution to the crisis may not lie with the ICC — it recently indicted al-Bashir for war crimes and crimes against humanity.

Former president Thabo Mbeki's recent overtures, on behalf of the African Union, to the ICC to deal differently with al-Bashir begin to make sense. Mbeki might not be trying to serve yet another African dictator. He recognises that a lasting solution to the crisis is not legal but political.

The Sudanese, aided by the African Union and the United Nations, should take the leading role in a comprehensive tackling of the crisis.

I don't assume this is going to be a universally popular read. A columnist in the *Guardian* described it as "re-writing history"; another columnist in the *Financial Times* takes Mamdani to task for his account that makes "British colonialism more responsible for the mass deaths in Darfur today than Khartoum".

I didn't get that sense, but definitely more could have been written about al-Bashir's role in the massacres. As it is, at times it feels as though al-Bashir is a passive actor in the crisis. As head of the government, he is a player, but not the only one.

The importance of the book isn't in dispute; it raises germane questions about the world's international relations. It manages to be serious without being staid, informative while remaining accessible to a lay reader.

It's a pity this gripping book came two years too late, for I would be including Sudan as one of the countries I have visited.