Date : June, 26 , 2009 Publication : Mail & Guardian - Friday Page Number: 4

'

Revisiting

i
«w - -.,.„

Darfur "• ^b

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

A

bout 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 pro-
fessor Mahmood Mamdani, had come
out then, perhaps I would have gone
on the guided tour; if 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 Survi-
vors. 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 fart, 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 lit-
tle 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 Interna-
tional Crimi-
I nal Court (ICC)
r for the atrocities
that have taken
place. The Darfur
war has had the
[American lobby
' machine whirring
wildly. Mamdani
derisively calls these
Mj\ ton*. I lobbyists "human
U^H I m- rights entrepreneurs"
who have no qualms
about inflating the
numbers of the dead.
The powerful lobby group, the Save
Darfur Campaign, has attracted oth-
erwise 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 particu-
lar responsibility.
The response to Darfur is infused
with moral, not political rage. Mam-
dani 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 respon-
sible 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". If s

easy to identify the bad guys: in Dar-
fur we can say Arabs are committing
genocide by killing Africans.
One of the book's triumphs is its rig-
orous 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 lan-
dless are fleeing the southward expan-
sion 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. Dar-
fur 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. If s a province that has a
seemingly endless supply of arms from
Muammar Gadaffi's Libya, Eritrea,
Idris Deb/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-Bashifs govern-
ment for the crisis. The crisis had been
brewing since the mid-1980s. When
Brigadier al-Bashir and other Islam-
ists 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 hor-
rible crimes committed by govern-
ment-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-
Bashifs government became a protag-
onist in the conflict only after 1989. If s
not helpful to accuse the Arab of kill-
ing the African, especially in a region
in which identities have for centuries
been in flux. Some of the people iden-
tified as Arabs today have been some-
thing else before.
A displaced Darfurian 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 gov-
ernment," 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 dif-
ferently 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 comprehen-
sive 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 7\mes takes Mamdani to
task for his account that makes "Brit-
ish colonialism more responsible for
the mass deaths in Darfur today than
Khartoum".

I didnt get that sense, but definitely
more could have been written about
al-Bashifs 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 isnt in
dispute; it raises germane questions
about the world's international rela-
tions. It manages to be serious without
being staid, informative while remain-
ing 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 coun-
tries I have visited.

Page 1 / 1 Size=389X288mm Circulation: 48000 Readership: 367000