

**OUT OF THE BLUE:** George Clooney led Hollywood's leap onto the Save Darfur bandwagon – yet in their haste to fight the good fight, he and other celebrities seem to have failed to arm themselves with the facts.

# Selling the idea of a genocide in Sudan

## *An academic's contrarian view holds that the Save Darfur movement has paved a road to hell with good intentions, writes GARY CUMMISKEY*

### **SAVIOURS AND SURVIVORS: Darfur, Politics and the War on Terror**

Mahmood Mamdani  
HSRC Press

**T**HE conflict in Darfur has been in the forefront of the media for the past six years, with human rights organisations, politicians and celebrities calling for intervention in what has widely been regarded as an act of genocide.

But in his new book, *Saviours and Survivors: Darfur, Politics and the War on Terror*, published in SA by HSRC Press, academic and author Mahmood Mamdani offers a controversial insight into the workings of this demand for intervention, as well as providing a detailed account of historical factors that ultimately led to the conflict.

Uganda-born Mamdani is the Herbert Lehman professor of government in the departments of anthropology and political science at Columbia University in the US. He

is also the director of Columbia's Institute of African Studies.

He is in SA to promote his latest book, with a lecture tour, seminars and discussions around the country.

"The idea for the book arose when I started to question why the conflict in Darfur was being reported differently, and in more detail, than conflicts in other African countries, such as the Democratic Republic of Congo and Rwanda," Mamdani says. "The conflict there exploded into the

news quite early and so I started looking for the reasons."

In his book, Mamdani says reporting from Africa is a low-risk job: "Not only are mistakes expected and tolerated, but often they are not even noticed.

"When it comes to mainstream media, there are no Africa specialists."

When he asked himself what made Darfur different, he realised that this was

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# The dangers of a little learning

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not the fault of the media, but rather of a US advocacy group, the Save Darfur coalition, "which had 'packaged' Darfur, very much like an off-shoot of advertising".

"There was little concern for the realities on the ground, little regard for accuracy, but there was an appeal — but whom or what was it appealing to? When I discussed the situation in Iraq with my students in the US, they had a strong sense that Iraq was political, that it had a geography, that there was history. But with Darfur, there was no sense of history, it was as if Darfur had just emerged from nowhere. Darfur was just about atrocities, with no room for history, politics. There seemed to be no need to contextualise.

"And when asked why they believed genocide was taking place in Darfur, it was because they had been told so."

In his book, Mamdani writes: "Only those possessed of disproportionate power can afford to assume that knowing is irrelevant, thereby caring little about the consequences of their actions.

"Not only is this mind-set the driving force behind the War on Terror ... it is this shared mind-set that has turned the Save Darfur movement into the humanitarian face of the War on Terror."

He does, however, emphasise that this sharing of mind-set is not necessarily intentional. "I don't believe that there is a conspiracy here, it is simply the sharing of a view that sees causes of conflict to lie with the perpetrators.

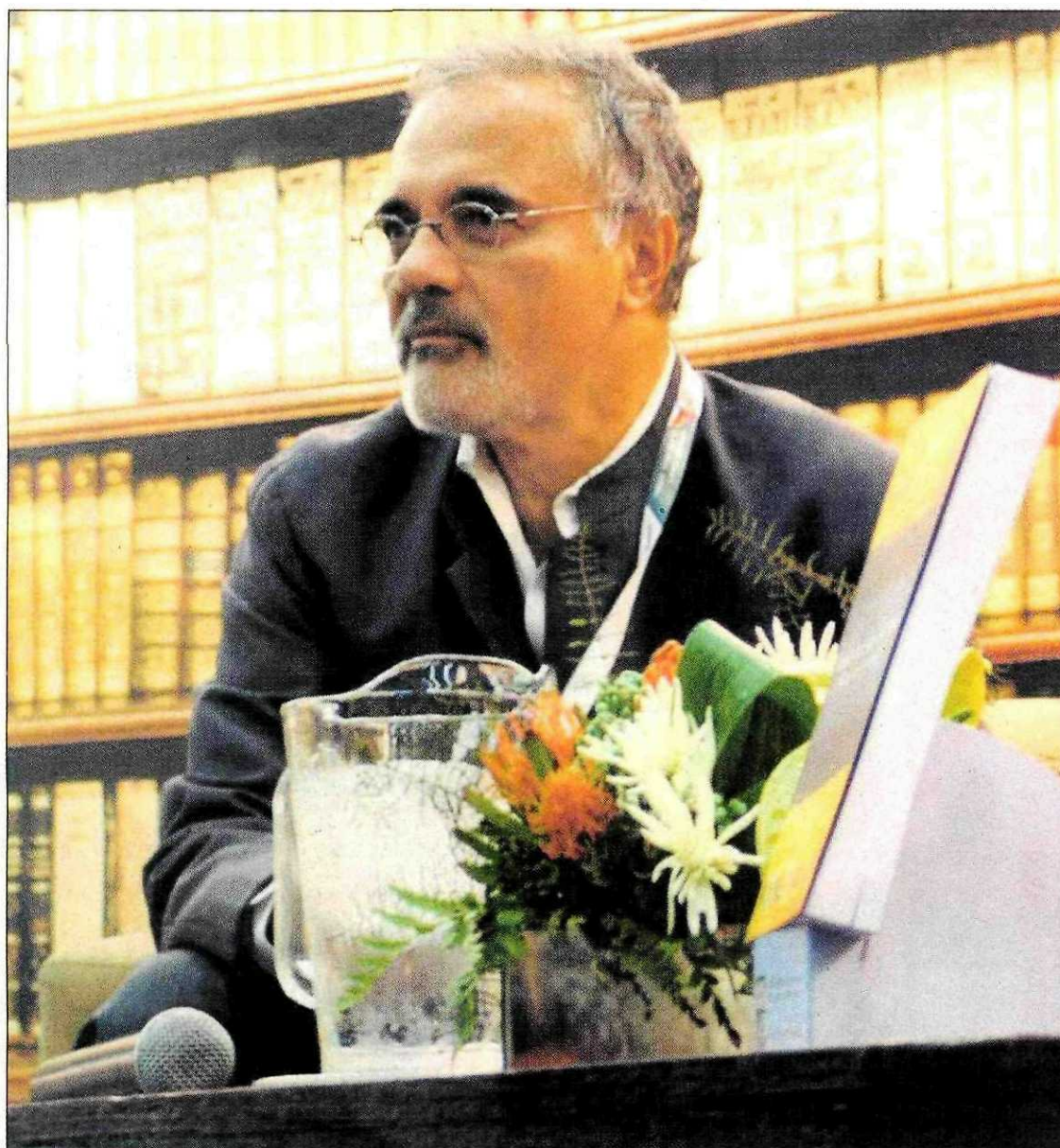
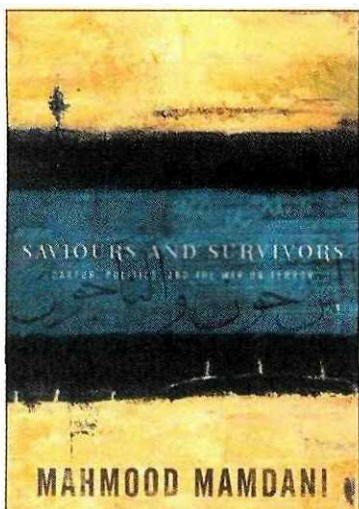
"Violence is seen to be its own explanation. This emerged particularly after September 11 2001, where there was a refusal to look at issues, at reasons for violence.

"I have looked at human rights organisations' reports on Darfur. There is little about the history of the region, just details of atrocities and calls for punishment against the perpetrators.

"Again, there is no attempt to look at issues. This is different to responses to conflicts elsewhere in Africa, where there has been a drive towards reform, not to criminalise people. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission in SA is an example."

In his book, Mamdani refers to a 2004 World Health Organisation report that put fatalities in Darfur at 70 000 and found that most deaths were not the result of direct violence. Death due to direct violence had been restricted to "adults between 15 and 49 years of age", but not across all age groups.

This finding alone, Mamdani says, challenged the hypothesis of genocide. The report had found



**HARD FACTS:** Mahmood Mamdani says the atrocities in Darfur are not genocide, and the label has been counterproductive.

that the main cause of death reported during the period of the survey was diarrhoea, as a result of poor environmental sanitation. There was also the issue of severe drought in the region.

Mamdani also points out that the Save Darfur coalition was created through the joint efforts of the Committee on Conscience at the US Holocaust Memorial Museum and the American Jewish World Service. "I don't think that the fact that these organisations are Jewish is important in itself, but what is notable is that they are religious organisations. The thrust of the campaign was a moral one, not political. It worked as an inter-religious coalition, and offered 'faith action packs' which were divided according to religious grouping — Christian, Jewish, interfaith and general faith.

"This was at a rally calling for military intervention in Darfur. Later, a Muslim faith action pack was added."

The Christian action packs spoke of "divine empowerment" and "the burden to save", while the Jewish pack highlighted "the special moral responsibility of Jews as 'quintessential victims' to identify genocide, wherever it occurs". The Muslim action pack dealt with, among other items, "how to avoid being oppressive, and intervene where other Muslims oppress".

"But why did these religious groupings come together, and why at that time, in 2004?" Mamdani asks. "Mainly because it was the 10th anniversary of the Rwandan genocide. The general feeling about Rwanda is that the west acted too late, that it first sought to understand — that is the lesson.

"There is also the lesson of Holocaust, of 'never again'.

"There is an absence of wanting to stop to ask why.

"The Save Darfur movement may have initially made a positive contribution, but eventually it became part of the problem. After there had been a dramatic drop in

fatalities in 2005, to the point where the United Nations no longer regarded the situation in Darfur as an emergency, the movement's rhetoric increased, with its call for action growing louder and louder. It was determined to go on with its campaign."

In his book, Mamdani writes: "The description of the violence as genocide — racial killing — has served to further racialise the conflict and give legitimacy to those who seek to punish rather than to reconcile. Thus, the movement, which initially had the salutary effect of drawing world attention to Darfur in 2003-04, must now bear some of the blame for delaying reconciliation by focusing on a single-minded pursuit of revenge as punishment."

Another factor in the Save Darfur movement was the involvement of celebrities, notably George Clooney and Mia Farrow.

In his book, Mamdani recounts

*"Not only is this mind-set the driving force behind the War on Terror ... it is this shared mind-set that has turned the Save Darfur movement into the humanitarian face of the War on Terror"*

that the footage of a trip Clooney made with his father to Darfur, and which he showed on The Oprah Winfrey Show, included images of Darfuri child refugees shouting "Hi, Oprah!"

Then Farrow, a Unicef goodwill ambassador who had visited Darfur in 2004 and 2006, branded the Beijing Olympics as "a genocide Olympics" because of China's links with Sudan.

This stance was followed by Steven Spielberg, who withdrew as artistic adviser to the Beijing Olympics.

"But by this stage," says Mamdani, "the death rate in Darfur had dropped considerably. These celebrities seemed ignorant of facts on the ground.

"This is another way in which the Save Darfur movement is different from other previous mass movements, such as the antiwar movement or the anti-apartheid movement. There was

no attempt to bring educators into the movement. In terms of seeking support, the movement also turned from colleges to schools, where children would be less likely to ask questions."

It is no doubt because of this "ignorance of facts on the ground" that the backbone of Mamdani's book focuses on placing "Darfur in context", tracing its history from precolonial times to the present. He explains how the conflict in Darfur began as a civil war in 1987-89 between nomadic and peasant tribes over fertile land in the south of the region, triggered by a drought that moved the southern perimeter of the Sahara out by more than 95km in 40 years.

There is also the effect of British colonial policy and the artificial tribalism of groups in Darfur, dividing its population into "native" and "settler" tribes and creating homelands for the "native" groups at the expense of the "settlers".

He looks at the rise of rebel movements and the insurgency of 2003, which led to the Sudanese government's brutal response.

He also examines regional influences, particularly how the Cold War prolonged the 20-year civil war in neighbouring Chad, which spilled over into Darfur.

Then there are also the contemporary superpowers at play, with US oil interests in Chad and Chinese oil interests in Sudan.

But despite the arguments about causes and history, ignorance of details and facts, disputes about numbers of fatalities, and well-intentioned but misinformed celebrities, the bottom line is that atrocities took place in Darfur.

The International Criminal Court has issued an arrest warrant for Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir for crimes against humanity, but has found no evidence of genocide.

"There is no doubt," says Mamdani, "that a mass slaughter occurred in Darfur in 2003-04 and that the Sudanese government of President Al-Bashir should be held accountable, though I suspect that if it went to trial some of the 'facts' on the charge sheet would be found to be exaggerations.

"But is the issue political or criminal? Is the court political?"

"Just as it is important to hold perpetrators of violence accountable, it is also important to ensure that enforcers of justice are held accountable. Any intervention in Darfur must be a regional one, by neighbouring countries with long-term interests in seeking a peaceful and stable solution.

"It should not be by other powers, intent on demonising perpetrators and advocating good violence against bad violence."