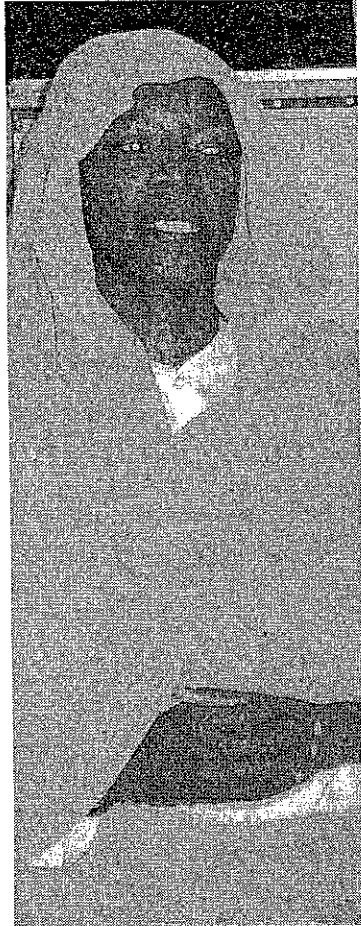


# Darfur activist fights for justice, sees hope



Safaa Adam Ayoub

By A CORRESPONDENT

*Safaa Adam is the latest in our series on Africa's peace builders, nominated by the UN-affiliated University for Peace (UPEACE).*

For Safaa Adam Ayoub, peace and gender activist and nobel laureate nominee, her early days in Geneina in the far east of Darfur, close to the border with Chad, were happy and carefree. Coming from a typically large Sudanese family with six sisters and two brothers, her father was a merchant while her mother ran a small dairy business.

"We lived peacefully then," she says. "People co-existed without conflict. And if there was an occasional tribal dispute, the problem was settled through traditional mediation systems. The Arab people bought milk and cheese from us and brought goods for my mother, such as ochre and flour. In fact, nobody even talked about tribes in those days."

Personal tragedy came to their family when Safaa's mother died when she was only eleven. It helped to make her resilient and self-sustaining — qualities she would need in the future. In those days there was free primary and secondary education in Sudan so she took the opportunity, studied hard and was accepted to the University of Khartoum in 1985.

But everything changed with the

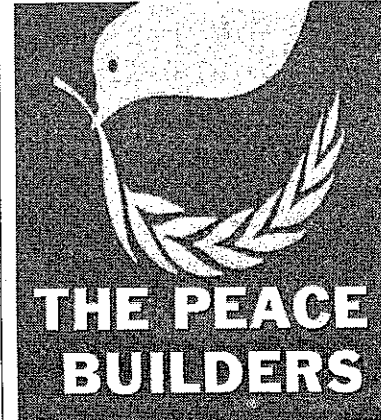
devastating drought which hit the region — particularly Darfur — in the early 1980s. It speeded up the desertification process in northern and central Darfur which had led to pressure on water and grazing resources as the camel nomads were forced to move southwards and become farmers.

Conflicts over wells, that in earlier times were settled with spears or, hopefully, mediation by elders or religious figures, became intractable in an area awash with guns brought in from Chad and Libya.

## Put into Jail

"The drought was a disaster," says Safaa. "People died in their thousands or fled the region as refugees to live in camps around Khartoum and Omdurman. It had a great impact on us as students. What could we do to draw attention to the problems? The government would not admit that there were problems — and, as the students agitated, people were put into jail. I became involved and joined the Students' Association of Darfur as an activist."

Graduating with her degree in Economics and Social Sciences in 1986, Safaa moved from Geneina to Nyala, in Darfur, to work as head of information for the British charity, Save the Children, which was involved in food relief functions. A year later she transferred to Port Sudan, in the east, with Oxfam as a food monitoring coordinator, and the deputy relief co-



ordinator. Her work brought home to her the sheer size of the problems of her native Darfur.

"It was a case of chronic underdevelopment," she says. "There was no infrastructure for the delivery of food aid, which had to come in via the air bridge from Europe or was air lifted from Khartoum. There were virtually no roads, so in the rainy season huge areas were cut off and inaccessible. There were no hospitals and no help for the old and the sick."

Political changes also had a highly adverse effect and helped to fuel the current crisis. Darfur had a history of being the most indirectly-ruled province of Sudan. But successive Sudanese governments, building political support at all costs, undermined the indigenous institutions and practices which had contributed so much

to peaceful co-existence over generations.

Then, in 1986, with the region still wracked by drought, the democratically elected Sadiq el Mahdi armed tribal militias, ostensibly to defend themselves against inroads by the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) fighting northern forces in southern Sudan. The guns were turned instead on the settled farming communities and the militias, called *janjawid*, began to get out of control.

## Rising Tension

"We saw rising tension amongst the tribes," says Safaa, "as the central government played political games and made deals with different groups. The current government abolished regional government and brought in a system of states. Darfur was divided into three states. Traditional boundaries between the tribes broke down — with tribes claiming land which did not belong to them. It became a battle for desperately scarce resources."

Safaa Adam could see the crisis coming. Working for the Friedrich Ebert Foundation and then for German Development Services, she knew that there was a vacuum at grassroots level in Darfur — that the men with guns were taking over and local communities had no voice. She could see from her own experience at the University of Khartoum that while, in her student days, there

# for peace in women, not men with guns

was room at the university for people like her — from rural and traditional backgrounds — that fees were freezing out poorer people and denying them educational opportunities. In effect, the poor — not least in Darfur — were being disenfranchised.

So she helped to form the Community Development Association in the 1990s, to work with communities, initially in West Darfur, and raise awareness of their problems. "But with our meagre resources we could not do much," she says.

As her reputation as an activist grew, she became a founder member and co-ordinator of the Women's Forum for Sudan for the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995. It was a defining moment. Sudanese women, for so long marginalised in their society, began to realise their collective power.

On her return she became involved in setting up the Sudanese Women Empowerment for Peace which kept the contacts and the momentum going.

Nothing could have prepared her for the horrors to come and the impact they would have on Darfuri women.

"Yet in the year 2000, all the early warning systems told us that conflict was there," she says. "The whole situation was stirred up deliberately, to take advantage of all the problems that had arisen. It was not a tribal conflict. A whole village would be burnt. A tribal chief would be as-

sassinated. It was systematic assassination leading to revenge killings. Unknown people carried out these atrocities. They were not familiar to us."

Tension mounted in 2003 and people began to mobilise. "We all knew that disaster was unavoidable." Massacre, rape, pillage and movements of huge numbers of the population into refugee camps — the world expressed its horror and indignation but little was done to influence events. Peace in southern Sudan was a more important consideration. Nothing must jeopardise that process.

## Main Victims

Safaa "started to advocate for Darfuri women. They were the main victims of this conflict. Where was their voice? Women are vital stakeholders in this situation. As farmers they are the backbone of the rural economy. Why were women not part of any negotiating process? Why were we always absent? It was clear to us that without the participation of women, peace would not happen."

By 2004 she and her colleagues had developed "a women's vision on resolving the conflict" and had formed the Darfur Forum for Dialogue and Peaceful Co-existence. Funding from the embassy of The Netherlands in Khartoum followed.

The Oslo Donors' Conference in April 2005 which followed set out



**African Union police officer Rose Etim from Cameroon greets Sudanese children in Ardamata refugee camp, West Darfur. Photo/REUTERS**

the Sudanese women's priorities and recommendations in unequivocal terms. It demanded that gender inequalities in law, policy and practice be reduced. It stated that women should be represented "in the monitoring mechanisms of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement for southern Sudan and all peace missions." It sought women's full participation in the Darfur peace process.

The voice of the women of Darfur

was heard. With the support of the African Union, Safaa led a 15 strong Gender Expert Support Team (GEST) into the seventh and decisive round of the Abuja peace talks. The team gathered women from all three Darfur states and a variety of tribal and ethnic backgrounds to create a unified platform of women's priorities for incorporation into the peace agreement. Key points raised by GEST were that women should be

included in discussions on resource sharing and land reform and that land ownership should be extended to women: also, that the militia should be completely disarmed.

Safaa is the first to admit that the Darfur Peace Agreement is fragile and that, while conflict continues, and spirals still further out of control, the women victims of the conflict will not be able to return home.

## Sharing Power

The Darfur-Darfur Dialogue and Consultation, involving all Dafurians in building support for the peace agreement, while addressing issues of reconciliation, reconstruction and political representation, is a way forward. But in the meantime, a robust and effective international peace force on the ground is desperately needed.

Safaa is clear, too, on what is required — not only for Darfur but for the whole country. "The central problem has to be settled," she says. "Unless we have women at national level, it will not happen. We need more women in parliament, sharing power and the wealth of the country. The days of women as objects just to receive handouts from men and bear children have gone — forever!"

Safaa has been described as a beacon of hope for all Sudanese women. When the guns eventually fall silent, as they must, a new chapter will begin for this remarkable peace builder from Darfur.