

## **The Ongoing Tragedy of Darfur**

*The Amherst Unitarian Universalist Social Justice Spotlight*

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*The Spotlight is written monthly by individual Social Justice Committee members. This month's Spotlight comes to us from **Mary Beth Seminario**.*

The present conflict in Darfur, which began in February 2003 when two rebel groups, the Sudanese Liberation Movement and the Justice for Equality Movement (JEM), challenged the government, changed dramatically on March 4, 2009.

On that date, the International Criminal Court (ICC) issued an arrest warrant for Sudanese President Omar Hassan al-Bashir, charging him with crimes against humanity and forcibly transferring large numbers of civilians and pillaging their property. However, these charges may ultimately be symbolic because the Sudanese government refuses to cooperate with the ICC.

Almost immediately, the Sudanese government ordered the expulsion of 13 international aid organizations, including CARE, Oxfam Great Britain, Mercy Corps. On March 4th and 5th these groups received letters from the Sudanese government demanding they cease humanitarian operations and leave the country. Approximately 14,000 aid workers have been operating a complex mechanism of providing aid in Darfur to 4 million people, 2.6 of whom are in camps for internally displaced people.

In the background, efforts to cease decades of conflict between Southern and Northern Sudan have been going on. The fragile 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement is still in place. In February 2009 Khartoum and JEM signed a declaration of intent with plans to pave the way for broader peace talks with sponsorship by Qato, the U.N. and African Union and the Arab league. The 2005 agreement called for nationwide elections in July 2009. However, many observers question the country's readiness for elections, and the indictment of al-Bashir adds a further complication. The African Union-United Nations Hybrid Mission in Darfur (UNAMID) has achieved limited success in maintaining the peace. Operating at only 60% of its anticipated number, only 15,000, not 26,000, troops provide security for civilians.

Meanwhile, the situation for people who had depended on aid workers for life's necessities continues to be grave. There is no easy answer. Hopefully, a way will be found to put an end to Bashir's actions.

The UUSA Social Justice Committee keeps in touch with the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee, which formed the UU Darfur Network, and the UU United Nations Office as well as the Save Darfur Coalition to keep abreast of activities we can do to help.