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BOOK REVIEW

'The Translator: A Tribesman's Memoir of Darfur' by Daoud Hari

A tribesman who served as a translator for U.N. observers and foreign journalists in Darfur tells his story.

By Stephanie Hanson, Special to The Times

April 25, 2008

Most Americans have heard of Darfur. Some know that it's in western Sudan, that the U. S. has called the crisis there a genocide, and that the United Nations has authorized a peacekeeping force. Yet few understand the roots of the conflict, what is happening on the ground, or what it would take to enable millions of displaced Darfuris to return to their homes.

In his moving memoir, "The Translator," Daoud Hari illuminates the complexities of the conflict and the motivations of those involved: Sudan's Arab-minority government; the Arab groups it has armed, including the janjaweed militia; and Darfur's non-Arab rebel groups. Hari, a Darfur native who was a translator and guide for foreign journalists after the conflict broke out, does not offer a magic bullet for saving Darfur, but his book's modest scope is perhaps its greatest strength. In its intimacy, quiet humor and compassion, "The Translator" is more like a conversation with a friend than a call to action. The plight of someone close to you can pierce you, and Hari keeps his readers close. "Imagine if all the systems and rules that held your country together fell apart suddenly and your family members were all -- every one of them -- in a dangerous situation," he writes. "It was like that."

In 2003, he returns from Egypt to Darfur days before his village is attacked by Sudanese government forces and janjaweed gunmen. He escapes, crosses into Chad, and begins working as a translator in the refugee camps there. Because he speaks English, Arabic and Zaghawa (the language of many Darfuris), he's hired by a U.N. team sent to assess whether the conflict should be classified a genocide.

It is heart-rending work. Hari must make drawings of the terrible stories he's told to get them out of his head so he can sleep. With the money he earns working for the U.N. investigators, he buys a cellphone and fills it with numbers -- rebel commanders, NGO workers, the region's sultans and sheiks. Thus armed, he begins taking foreign reporters into Darfur, navigating dangerous territory to get the story of his people into the international spotlight. The Sudanese government blocks nearly all journalists from entering the country, so Hari escorts them into Sudan from Chad, across a nebulous border that citizens of both countries are hard pressed to identify. On the way back from one reporting trip, as darkness falls, a driver speeds through the desert taking directions from Hari, all the while yelling in dismay, "Sudan? Chad? Sudan?"

On another trip, Hari is captured by rebels, who eventually turn him over to the Sudanese government, along with the reporter accompanying him and their driver. Their survival is a harrowing tale and a testament to Hari's courage and ability to invoke his captors' humanity. He persuades the young rebels not to shoot him, befriends his Sudanese guards, and has the gall to demand cigarettes from a colonel who's just sent him on a tour of the prison's torture chambers before interrogating him. The colonel is impressed with Hari's fearlessness, but Hari is just doing what he does best -- making connections. Of the colonel he muses, "I think he was a little glad to see some human beings he could talk to."

Hari manages to shatter the idea that Sudan's government is a monolith, bent on destroying its non-Arab population. As he shows, the government is military commanders waving images of Osama bin Laden on their cellphones and screaming at him, but it is also prison guards from the Nuba Mountains, whose people were once persecuted by the same forces now employing them. Such rifts are evidence

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that Khartoum is not as strong as it leads the world to believe.

Hari is hopeful that the U.N. can create a protection zone in Darfur and bring Darfur's home. Experts and policymakers are not so optimistic. Peace talks between Darfur's rebels and the government in Khartoum are stalled; meanwhile, the government keeps, as Hari puts it, "promoting Arab identity at the expense of Sudanese national identity," not just in Darfur but also in Sudan's south and east. Reporting this week to the U.N. Security Council, John Holmes, undersecretary general for humanitarian affairs, said, "We continue to see the goal posts receding, to the point where peace in Darfur seems further away today than ever."

Stephanie Hanson is news editor at CFR.org, the website of the Council on Foreign Relations, where she covers Africa and Latin America.

The Translator
A Tribesman's Memoir of Darfur

Daoud Hari

Random House: 218 pp., \$23

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