Interview Jan Pronk
Structures of Violence in Darfur

Jan Pronk’s relationship with Sudan stems from the early 1970s and the 1990s when he was Minister for Development Cooperation in the Netherlands. He was appointed by Kofi Annan in June 2004 as Special Representative to the United Nations, he led the UN Peacekeeping Mission (UNMIS) in Sudan. The Comprehensive Peace Agreement signed on 8 January 2005 put an end to almost half a century of civil war in Southern Sudan. UNMIS was also given the task of providing political and logistical support to the African Union in Darfur. The Sudanese Liberation Movement, together with the Justice and Equality Movement, started a war early in 2003, accusing the government of socio-economic and political marginalization of Darfur. The conflict has been portrayed as one between “Black African farmers” and the Janjaweed, or Muslim “Arab” nomads. The latter are considered to be the perpetrators of the so-called ethnic violence, carried out with the support of the Sudanese government. The Darfur Peace Agreement reached on 5 May 2006, however, was only signed by the Sudanese government and part of a rebel faction of the Sudanese Liberation Movement. Jan Pronk was scheduled to step down from his post as under-Secretary General on 1 January 2007, when Kofi Annan would end his term. However, on 22 October, the Sudanese government requested Pronk to leave the Sudan within 72 hours as it was of the opinion that, by commenting in his weblog on clashes between the Government troops and rebel factions in Darfur, he had “interfered unwarrantedly in matters that do not fall within his mandate” and “acted in a way incompatible with the impartial and international nature of [his] duties or inconsistent with the spirit of [his] assignment.”

As the situation in Darfur has not changed much since the interview took place, the views expressed by Pronk in the interview remain relevant.

Asked for an analysis of the current problems in Islamist Sudan, Pronk highlighted some similarities between the conflicts in South Sudan and in Darfur. Both civil wars were referred to in the media as “religious” conflicts between Muslims and non-Muslims. Pronk, however, denounced the idea that religion is a major factor in the conflicts, stressing instead the multi-dimensional nature of both conflicts, arguing that they were rooted in environmental, economic, and demographic developments. In both cases nomadic peoples were forced to settle and engage in agriculture, thereby clashing with farming communities over access to land and water. These conflicts were rooted in colonial identity politics, which had the effect of essentializing tribal categories. In Darfur, for example, the colonial government granted sedentary peoples “dars” or homelands, while Arab nomads were not allotted any land-rights or positions of power. Moreover, the state borders were colonial constructions that cut right through nomadic peoples’ lands. Pronk pointed out that the history of slavery in Sudan was at the core of the racist attitude of “Arab” peoples towards “African” communities. In short, the nature of the conflicts is highly complex, with religion playing only a minor role in it.

Q: Why is it then, that religion has been prominent in media analyses of the conflict?

P: This is the result of a complete misconception of the reality on the ground. Darfur is an Islamic region with a strong Arabic orientation. Everyone speaks Arabic; even the African groups speak Arabic as their second language. (...) The conflict is of an autochthonous-autochthonous nature. Nomadic tribes are not considered to belong in Darfur, even though they have been there for over 200 years. (...) I consider the religious component to be of little relevance to the conflict, and subordinate to the tribal, economic, and political aspects.

Q: So in fact tribal issues have been part of divide-and-rule politics in the history of Sudan?

P: The history of Sudanese politics since [independence in] 1956, and even before that date, has been characterized by divide-and-rule politics. (...) The attempts by the government at destabilizing the South were part of these same efforts, which capitalize on tribal differences, and that were repeated also in Darfur. Even the peace agreement signed in Abuja is a continuation of this politics. It is an agreement, which has been signed by only one faction and the least powerful one at that. So yes, divide-and-rule. (...) Now there are as many as twelve different rebel factions! I have warned against a so-called normalization of the situation with different warlords operating independently.

Q: Warlords seem to dominate internal conflicts in African countries apart from Sudan, like Somalia, Liberia, and Sierra Leone. Can one compare these situations?

P: Not really. The last three countries are examples of failing states. Sudan, by contrast, is a strong state where the central government is able to control everything. But even in a strong state total depri-vation and neglect can lead to resistance. When the centre does not react with adequate policies, resistance may lead to a spiral of violence that gets out of control. If the resistance movement is not so strong and politically rather shallow like in Darfur, where the intellectuals are not in charge, violence can become a goal in itself. There is hardly any ideology among the leaders: some are simply against Khartoum, which is an anti-ideology (...); others just aim at gaining control over their own area. The resistance movement is as disinter-
P: I have always been amazed, and still am, by the lack of self-organization and self-protection in the camps. Also in relation to women who venture outside the camps; men do not come along to protect them. Fear reigns. Now a much more militant generation is coming up, with young men turning against each other, also on a tribal basis. The tribal conflict is transferred to the camps itself which is a disastrous development. Youngs have no chance to return and some might not even want to. There is no employment, no education. In Darfur we are losing a generation at this moment, which is disastrous. No one cares: neither the resistance movements recruiting them, nor the government. The 40% of affluent Arabs living in the towns, moreover, consider members of these tribal groups as “Untermenschen.”

Q: In several interviews you stated that when peace is signed, the main perpetrators of violence should be tried by the International Criminal Court (ICC) in The Hague. Is there also a role for local mechanisms of justice and reconciliation?

P: Yes, for sure. The ICC is important, but I also believe in strengthening traditional systems of justice and of authority (…). In Darfur, and elsewhere, because of the stability these may provide. They can, however, never be the only solution as modernization of the state is also required for stability. This process will undermine tribal systems from the inside; now they are being undermined from outside by the accelerated modernization of the 1990s. Maybe, and this requires further study, we in the West have played a negative role by focusing too much on modernizing the state, on decentralization, good governance via western standards, on democracy, etcetera.

This narrow focus has undermined mechanisms of stability provided by tribal systems. Traditional leaders have been pushed aside by appointed leaders in a modernized state.

Q: Because tribes “deliver” in terms of security and justice?

P: Of course! We may raise our eyebrows about the way conflicts are solved by paying blood money, but it does provide a way to contain violence. It has proven its worth for ages and is well thought out: the burden is shared among the members of a tribal group according to their capacity. It prevents acts of revenge because this kind of reconciliation not only concerns the family, but the whole clan or even tribe. All members need to commit themselves to the reconciliation by contributing to the payment. (However), in times of war this system does not function well. Now it is the government that imposes reconciliation on these groups, (which) makes the outcome very unstable. We really should leave this kind of reconciliation up to the tribal systems.

Q: What do you think of the recent turn to religion and human rights as focus for development cooperation?

P: Religion is a very important, but long neglected, aspect of development processes. Neglect of the cultural dimension, of which religion forms part, leads to imbalances. So, if development cooperation policies promote knowledge of and respect for other cultures, a “do-no-harm” policy then it is valuable. But I would warn against moving beyond that (…). The cultural dimension determines economic development to a large extent. In this respect I am not a Marxist; there is, of course, a dynamics between both. You can make so many mistakes when working in a different culture. (…) I am a traditional multi-culturalist and I am not averse to cultural relativism: I relate to my own culture where some of its cultural gains, such as certain kinds of freedom, have to be continuously fought for. But beware of exporting these ideas: do not enforce them on others as this has always been devastating influence on other societies. Let it please be a bottom-up process. (…) The longer you deal with a certain society, the more surprises you will encounter and the more you realise how little you know. In order to move forward, you have to consider yourself a student, you have to be willing to learn, to understand, and to place yourself in the position of the other (…).