**DARFUR:
SUDAN’S LOST PROVINCE**

Darfur, Sudan’s most western province, is in the news. Supported by the Sudanese government, local Arab militias have been raiding black Sudanese villages, carrying out ethnic killings and kidnappings. The U.N. Security Council has debated a resolution condemning the Sudanese government for its involvement and the European Union has dedicated $15 million and 270 soldiers to try to stem the regional violence. The United States has called actions by the militias and the Sudanese government “genocide.”

Sudan is a large central African country, the northern half lying in the Sahara and the southern half in the Sahel, the semi-arid grassland that stretches east-west across the continent. Except where irrigation is feasible, little sedentary agriculture is possible in the Sahara. During most years, however, the Sahel receives just enough seasonal precipitation for villagers to farm small plots and graze their animals. Lengthy droughts are common in the Sahel, often leading to crop failures, and human and animal starvation.

Sudan is divided culturally and ethnically somewhat along the lines of its climates. In the irrigated north along the Nile, Arab Muslims dominate the government and the economy. In the south, black Sudanese of Christian and tribal faiths prevail, living in small agricultural villages. In Darfur, along Sudan’s border with Chad, black Sudanese of Muslim faith also live in small villages. The northern Arabs have long been prejudicial toward the black Africans, often taking advantage of the black population economically and politically, even though Darfurians are also mostly Muslim.

Sudan received its independence in 1956 and declared itself an Islamic state and began trying to impose Islamic law, or sharia, on the entire population. By the mid-1980s, black rebels from the south rose up against the government in a struggle that has taken an estimated 1.3 million lives and displaced perhaps 3 million more, most to refugee camps.

The militias, called Janjaweed, or “horsemen,” are mostly Arab, but there is strong evidence that they are supported by government airplanes and helicopter gunships. The result has been widespread raiding of black villages. Negotiators have been slow to get involved in Darfur for fear of sidetracking ongoing discussions of the truce between the north and south.

Finally, in 2004, the international evidence of crimes against humanity in Darfur became overwhelming. Even as intervening parties, including U.N. Secretary General Koffe Annan, arrived at refugee camps in Darfur, the Sudanese government continued its denials of involvement. Increasing media coverage, however, is helping world leaders place intense pressure on the government to halt the bloodshed and discrimination and provide assistance to its Darfur citizens. The world has been far more anxious to thwart such ethnic violence in hopes of avoiding a repeat of the disastrous Rwandan genocide.

***Geography in the News***