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Interview Jan Pronk

Structures of Violence in Darfur

KARIN WILLEMSE

Jan Pronk's relationship with Sudan stems from the early 1970s and the 1990s when he was Minister for Development Cooperation in the Netherlands.³ Appointed by Kofi Anan in June 2004 as Special Representative to the United Nations, he led the UN Peace-keeping 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 *Janjawid*, 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.⁴

Jan Pronk addressing a press conference in Khartoum, 21 September 2006

Jan Pronk was scheduled to step down from his post as under-Secretary General on 1 January 2007, when Kofi Anan 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'".⁵ 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 Pronk⁶ 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

On 25 September 2006, Jan Pronk delivered a keynote lecture at the conference "Culture is a Basic Need: Responding to Cultural Emergencies," organized by the Prince Claus Fund. In his speech, he passionately argued that cultural heritage refers not just to cultural property but also to traditions, values, and practices that make a community.¹ Pronk explicitly referred to the annihilation of villages in Darfur when illustrating that destructing cultural heritage also means the destruction of a way of life. Pronk's concern for community structures and for Darfur was discussed in more detail during an interview earlier that day.²

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-allochthonous 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 Somaliization 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 deprivation 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-

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ested in its own people—who are living in camps as victims—as the government is.

Q: *These movements comprise mainly young men: is there any involvement of women or women's groups?*

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. (...) Youths 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 Arabs⁷ living in the towns, moreover, consider members of these tribal groups as "Untermensch."

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 a requirement 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,⁸ 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 foci 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 a destabilizing 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 (...).

Q: *And you can take this perspective even when you negotiate with government officials?*

P: Well, sometimes I do understand their viewpoint. My concern is that at this moment the international political climate does not allow for trying to understand the perspective of others. We have now

a uni-polar system, with Americans holding power to the extent that they do not need to take heed of other powers. Europe has insufficiently resisted this development.

Q: *Has that been a reason why you did not want to use the notion of "genocide" with respect to Darfur?*

P: I have three reasons for this. In the first place, at the request of the General Assembly, Kofi Anan appointed an International Commission of Inquiry in November 2004 that was highly competent and unprejudiced, in order to write a report with just one goal: to inquire if what had happened in Darfur was a genocide. The inquiry showed that this was not the case, although what had happened was equally horrific. And as this constituted the official viewpoint of the UN, I had to propagate the same stance. Secondly, I am very careful with the notion of genocide since it is also a judicial term, which has been codified in the Genocide Treaty. When one proclaims a genocide one has [the obligation] to intervene. The Americans have repeatedly referred to the conflict in Darfur as a genocide. But when what they now refer to as genocide actually took place, they never raised the issue. They even refused to put Darfur on the agenda of the Security Council in 2003 and the first part of 2004, when it all happened. After that there were many killings, burnings, and murders, but nothing that resembled genocide. I consider it a kind of hypocrisy: and hypocrisy is not my style. And thirdly, I refer to the conflict rather as ethnic cleansing or tribal cleansing, than as genocide. The violent character of the conflict is in both cases quite similar, but not everyone is killed because he or she is a Fur [a name of one of the tribes]. I was the first to use the notion of genocide with reference to Srebrenica, but in that case every male Muslim from Srebrenica was killed.

Q: *Would you like to have an agreement on a UN Peace keeping force in Darfur by way of farewell?*

P: No, I am not in favour of that solution because that will lead to war. (...) In the Security Council I have always stated that a robust force is needed, in the sense of its capability to protect, but not that it should be a UN force. I think that in the current political climate in Sudan sending in a UN force would be counterproductive: it would become part of the problem rather than a solution. [Current president of Sudan] Bashir would consider it a form of re-colonization, as a neo-colonial intervention. He has stated that he would lead a war of jihad against it. Though this is an Islamic notion, the regime in Sudan is a secular regime and it uses this term in order to cover its back against Islamic extremists. I am convinced that President Bashir will not shy away from leading or allowing attacks against a UN force in Darfur. This would make the political situation even more complex than it is now. The extremists in Sudan are not only religious fundamentalists. There is also a strong political notion: being Arab. A third dimension of radical opposition groups is their antagonism towards the West. And finally, there is antagonism towards the regime itself. In the West all these movements are considered to be one and the same. Westerners are inclined to see all opposition in the region as inspired by Islam. By overemphasizing the religious dimension and underestimating political and cultural aspects, Western politicians have made Islamic extremism a more forceful antagonistic movement than otherwise would have been the case.

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Notes

1. For Pronk's speech, see http://www.princeclausfund.org/en/what_we_do/cer/index.shtml.
2. The interview was conducted in Dutch. The text has been authorized by Jan Pronk.
3. Pronk was Minister of Development Cooperation in the periods 1973–1978, 1989–1992, and 1994–1998. From 1980–1986, he was Under-Secretary of the UNCTAD.
4. For further details on both conflicts see www.janpronk.nl and, for example, Willems in *ISIM Review*, no. 15 (Spring 2005): 14–15.
5. Quoted from: www.janpronk.nl, weblog no. 37, November 2006.
6. In 1978–1980 and 2002–2004 Jan Pronk held the Chair of "Theory and Practice of International Development" at the Institute of Social Studies in The Hague. Currently he has returned to this position at the ISS.
7. The term "Arabs" refers here to town-dwellers of Central Sudanese descent also called *jellaba*, and not to Arab nomads, or Bedouin, who are engaged in the armed conflict.