

Sudan: 10 Years After

By Sally Harris

2013 marks the ten-year anniversary of the conflict in Darfur, and sadly there is no end in sight for conflict, violence and human rights abuses and ongoing displacement of civilian Darfurians. In May, the Castan Centre hosted a public forum at which a panel of experts - comprised of Professor Alex Bellamy of the Griffith Asia Institute, former chair of the Sudanese Organisation for Peace and Social Development Elmardi Abdelrasol and activist Aisha Mohamed - discussed Darfur's future.

The evening, which was held in partnership with the Darfur Australia Network (DAN) and the Sudan Peace Project, began with an introduction by Sandra Chestnutt, President and Chair of DAN. She explained that though some positive steps have been made, the economic and humanitarian situation of people in Darfur is still deteriorating. The security situation is still unpredictable, she emphasised, and abductions, shootings and bombings have caused the closure of basic services such as medical clinics.

initiative which allows international intervention into a State when the State is not protecting its own citizens, has been ineffective. Having only been established in 2005, he explained, the principle had not yet become entrenched in the policies of governments and humanitarian agencies at the time of the peak period of conflict in Darfur. This meant that no agency or group took responsibility for the protection of civilians. However, Professor Bellamy was quick to defend R2P as a concept, explaining that in later cases of conflict such as Kenya and Mali it has been a success.

Finally, acknowledging that Australia is in a unique and powerful position with its seat on the UN Security Council, Professor Bellamy suggested that Australia could help create change in Darfur. This could be done by pushing for every UN mission to include a gender protection advisor, which would ensure that the protection of women and children would always be a priority in times of conflict. Though pushing for a change like this may seem small, Professor Bellamy



Elmardi Abdelrasol addresses the crowd

Professor Bellamy, taking the podium, then elaborated on these current issues of concern. These include significant and long-term displacement, with 1.4 million people currently remaining displaced without any realistic prospect of being able to return home in the near future. Women still remain the targets of gender-based violence, Professor Bellamy added and programs put in place to battle this trend do not seem to be working. Additionally, he explained, a recent upsurge in violence indicates the underlying conflict is in no way resolved and that there is a possibility of further escalation. Finally, the continuous flow of arms into Sudan - despite an arms embargo and the recruitment of new proxies by the Sudanese Government - have only exacerbated the deadly situation in Darfur.

Professor Bellamy then discussed the causes of the world's failure to protect Darfur. Firstly, he emphasised that international politics have played a huge role in this failure. The United Nations (UN) Security Council has not been able to agree on what action, if any, to take because of material interests and a lack of political will. For instance, the United States has been reluctant to get involved because the government in Khartoum was helpful in providing information to assist in the War on Terror.

Secondly, he explained, the Responsibility to Protect (R2P), a UN

argued, it is achievable and would make a real difference to many lives.

Mr Abdelrasol, who arrived as a refugee in Australia less than a year ago, then delivered his lecture. He presented two proposals to help assist Darfur end the conflict and move forward. Firstly, he called for the cooperation of the international community in creating a national transitional government. This government would ensure security and stability and allow displaced people to return to their homes. Secondly, Mr Abdelrasol argued, Australia should support the Sudanese Revolutionary Front and recognise them as the legitimate representatives of the people.

The final panellist, Ms Mohamed, then delivered a personal reflection on her experiences of Darfur. As she explained, she left Darfur in 2003, at age 11, but she was struck by the subhuman conditions in which she observed people living when she returned in 2011 on a family visit. Women, she saw, were most vulnerable, often having to contend with the threat of sexual violence while maintaining financial responsibility for their families in the wake of their husbands' deaths. Highlighting her concern for the next generation of Darfurians, who will have grown up without access to stable homes or education, Ms Mohamed urged the Australian government to assist with this pressing issue.