Researching attitudes towards peace and conflict in Darfur
Interim report – May 2008

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Executive Summary

The present report is part of a series of reports that covers:
1) The monitoring and analysis of opinion pieces published in Sudanese, Western, and Anglophone African press on Darfur
2) Ongoing ethnographic study of debates carried out by online communities through discussion boards/forums.

These studies are part of a multi-track project to gauge public opinion in Darfur related to the conflict and peace process.

By conducting a review of international English-speaking press alongside a review of Sudanese press and online discussion forums, we attempted to gain multiple perspectives on how the conflict and the peace process are framed both inside and outside Sudan.

Main findings of content analysis:

- The focus of commentators in both the Sudanese and international press is criticising the role in the conflict of the various political actors.
- The local press in increasingly portraying the conflict as hijacked by the interests of foreign powers.
- The international press in contrast prefers to focus its criticism on China, and on its failure to effectively pressure Khartoum to end the violence in Darfur.
- Both in the local and in the international press the criticism of UNAMID is mounting, especially because of its lack of capacity and obstacles being posed to its full deployment.

Main findings of online research:

- Anger toward the Western presence in Darfur has increased as a result of events such as the pardoning by Chad’s President of workers from the French Organization l’Arche de Zoé.
- In the month of April, the rebel movements have been targets of bitter criticism and accusations of serving their own narrow interests and not those of the people they claim to be representing.
- The census has been framed as an operation by the government of Sudan to further marginalize the people in Darfur.

Comparison between the content analysis of the press and the monitoring of online forums:

- Both the local and international media tended to focus their attention on large political actors, with the Sudanese press attacking Chad and the United States and the Anglophone press attacking Sudan and China. In contrast, the Internet forums focused more on internal
actors, primarily criticizing the movements and specific figures within the government of Sudan.
- Both in the press and online there is little hope that the solution of the conflict is near. However, if the press, especially the Sudanese press, seems to advance a different agenda about how the peace process should be conducted, in April most members of online forums just expressed their disillusionment towards most of the actors involved.
1.0 Introduction to Researching attitudes towards peace and conflict in Darfur

Researching attitudes towards peace and conflict in Darfur is a multi-track effort to gauge public opinion in Darfur related to the conflict and peace process. The goal is to provide negotiators and other parties to the peace talks with empirical information on the views and needs of those who have suffered from the conflict. In addition, the project aims to increase awareness of the importance of maintaining communication with the Darfurian people as part of the search for a just settlement and the implementation of any agreement.

Given the complexities of assessing opinion in an ongoing conflict, including difficulties of access and the polarisation of political views, the Stanhope Centre has undertaken a multi-track effort in the field and through desk research.

Research in the field is conducted through a series of progressively more targeted interviews, cumulating in a Darfur-wide survey. Oral history to lay the foundations for this survey were collected in North Darfur in a successful pilot, which was completed in September 2007. This research also piloted the ethnographic research methods employed for the present research on Internet discussion forums. Further oral histories are currently being collected in South and West Darfur and preparations are underway for a second round of more targeted, semi-structured interviews throughout all three Darfur states. Data from both sets of interviews will be analyzed in a final report to be published in August 2008.

2.0 Content analysis of opinion pieces on Darfur, February – April, 2008

Stanhope conducts daily monitoring of opinion pieces relating to Darfur in Sudanese and international newspapers (in the United Kingdom, the United States and a number of Anglophone African countries). The decision to focus on opinion pieces was made to find a basis for evaluating discourse relating to the Sudanese political class. By their nature, opinion pieces constitute a far smaller portion of a newspaper edition than news articles, and as a consequence the size of the sample generated requires further attention by the research team.

The pieces are coded for six major themes:
1. Pieces stating a view of the causes of the conflict;
2. Pieces stating a view on the impact that particular actors (countries, organisations, political actors, etc.) are having on the conflict at the moment;
3. Pieces expressing opinions on punitive action to deal with the conflict;
4. Pieces expressing opinions on peace building actions to deal with the conflict;
5. Pieces that suggest ulterior motives on the part of actors involved in the conflict; and
6. Pieces expressing opinions on the nature of the conflict and gravity of the situation.

In addition, the pieces are further coded according to the opinion expressed on:
1. The United Nations-African Union Mission in Darfur (UNAMID);
2. The international mediation efforts; and
3. The Darfur-Darfur Dialogue and Consultation.

The coding scheme has been developed over the course of several months. The coding process is iterative and flexible, thus allowing for the emergence of new themes, which can then be captured
and compared across samples. The approaches to sampling and coding were developed and tested in a pilot project conducted in January 2008.

2.1 Dominant themes in the Sudanese Press – a three-month perspective

The main point of discussion in the Sudanese press was the impact that various political actors have had on the conflict; in February and March, critical discussions over the intentions and motives of outside political actors were also frequent topics of debate. Another theme within Sudan was debate over peace building measures that could be employed to deal with Darfur. The UNAMID mission was the only one of the three internationally supported initiatives to receive any significant amount of discussion.

Table 1 - Dominant themes by month in Sudanese publications:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>&gt;&gt; February</th>
<th>&gt;&gt; March</th>
<th>&gt;&gt; April</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sudanese press</td>
<td>Impact of political actors (50.0%)</td>
<td>Impact of political actors (58.5%)</td>
<td>Impact of political actors (34.1%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peace building measures (14.7%)</td>
<td>Political actors’ ulterior motives (11.8%)</td>
<td>Nature of the conflict (23%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political actors’ ulterior motives (11.8%)</td>
<td>Performance and deployment of UNAMID (8.5%)</td>
<td>Performance and deployment of UNAMID (8.5%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These themes are discussed in turn below.

3.1.1 Impact of political actors

By far the most recurring theme in the Sudanese press, this category includes opinions expressed on the impact that political actors have on the conflict on a day-to-day basis. The overwhelming majority of opinions expressed (82%) are negative.

Much of the blame for the deterioration of the situation in Darfur is on the instability ongoing in Chad and the impact this has on West Darfur. A proxy war through rebel groups supported by N’Djamenn and Khartoum have been reported since the early days of the Darfur conflict, although both Chad’s government and the international press have accused the Sudanese government of aiding Chadian rebels, Khartoum continues to deny involvement in the conflict. In some cases commentators demonstrated an open support for these Chadian rebels:

“Khartoum should be proud of supporting our brothers the good Chadian rebels if it was right what the international agencies say about a Sudanese supporting of the rebels in Chad. We should be proud and furthermore we have to help the Chadian Opposition Front, as it looks like it needs some urgent political directions, which could help it to win the war.”

- Al Hindi Iz Ad-Deen, Akhir Lahza

Though Sudan is often assumed to be a totalitarian regime with strict control over the media, our monitoring indicates that criticism of the Government of Sudan in the Sudanese press is not uncommon (although criticism of the exiled SLA leader Abdul
Wahid is marginally more frequent). The overwhelming majority of articles in this category that address the role of the government criticise it for having a negative impact on the conflict (in our tally, there are 19 instances of criticism of the government and 7 positive appraisals of government actions).

3.1.2 Nature of the conflict

This category includes articles that offer a view on the humanitarian situation in Darfur, including the extent to which there is an improvement or deterioration in the situation on the ground. Articles overwhelmingly describe the conflict as “not as bad as is often portrayed” (26 of 27 pieces) The following excerpt reflects opinions downplaying the conflict:

“A report that was made by the World Health Organization says that the average of the number of killed people in Iraq after the American colonization in 2003 up to date is 128 persons per day, even with more than 160 of American soldiers with modern deadly weapons. There is no comparison between the situation there and the situation in Darfur, even with their fake. press that covers the world with bloated numbers of murdered people and rape cases in Darfur.”

- Al Hindi Iz Ad-Deen, Akhir Lahza

3.1.3 Peace building measures

Articles in this category discuss the advantages or disadvantages of peace building or restorative approaches to the conflict, and address issues of compensation, returns, negotiations, consultations with civil society, and so forth. The Sudanese press addresses a variety of peace building approaches, almost always advocating in favour of them. At the same time, the Sudanese press does not call for punitive action against the Sudanese government.

Fig. 1 – Articles promoting peace-building measures – Sudanese press – February-April, 2008
3.1.4 Political actors’ ulterior motives

These articles express the opinion that actors involved in the conflict are acting to defend strategic power interests rather than to promote the interests of Darfurians and the resolution of the conflict. This category is distinguished from the “impact” category in that it focuses on the interests that lie behind the action. The views expressed in this category are overwhelmingly sceptical.

“As I said yesterday the countries of the world which have been running to us since the Berlin Conference in 1884, know their interests very well and here they are competing for our oil and iron and wealth.”
- Mahjoub Urwa, As-Sudani

“America and its followers the western authorities and international organizations took hostile attitudes against Sudan for pleasing the US admin. Even all envoys of the international organizations in Sudan were known that they all don’t reflect the reality of Sudan, they write fake reports ... to be under the American sovereignty and its own interests.”
- Mohammed Al-Hassan Dirar, Akhir Lahza

3.1.5 Performance and deployment of UNAMID

This category looks to trace the dominant debates on UNAMID. The deployment of the mission was a much debated topic by Darfur watchers following the passage of UN Security Council Resolution 170 in August 2006, and much energy has gone into making the deployment of a force a reality. Stanhope’s field research found that the displaced had high expectations for the force.¹

Much of the debate has followed the exchange of recriminations on why deployment of the mission has been delayed. There is also considerable criticism of the mission, only a few months after its deployment. Nearly a third of articles in the Sudanese press criticised the force for its perceived ineffectiveness owing to the difficulties in completing deployment and gaining the necessary resources.

3.2 The International Press

Monitoring of the international press showed a remarkable constancy of dominant themes. From February through April, the same three themes dominated opinion pieces in the international press:

- The impact of various political actors on the conflict
- Discussions of punitive measures that could be taken to make an impact on the conflict; and
- The nature of the conflict more broadly and the state of the humanitarian situation

¹ Stanhope Centre Sudan, Researching attitudes towards peace and conflict in Darfur: An overview of the method and findings from pilot project July–October 2007 (available on request)
Fig. 2 - Dominant themes by month in international publications:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th><strong>&gt;&gt; February</strong></th>
<th><strong>&gt;&gt; March</strong></th>
<th><strong>&gt;&gt; April</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>International press</td>
<td>Impact of political actors (45.8%)</td>
<td>Impact of political actors (47.5%)</td>
<td>Impact of political actors (48.6%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Punitive measures (21.5%)</td>
<td>Punitive measures (18.6%)</td>
<td>Punitive measures (24.3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Nature of the conflict (15.9%)</td>
<td>Nature of the conflict (15.9%)</td>
<td>Nature of the conflict (15.9%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3.2.1 Impact of political actors

In contrast with the Sudanese press, where criticism of Sudan, Chad and the United States was prominent, international opinion articles focused on criticism of China.

Following Steven Spielberg’s February 12 announcement that he would not serve as artistic consultant for the Olympics, more than half of all opinion articles from February to April (including 71% in February alone) addressed this decision and related discussion of whether the Olympics should be used as a platform to protest China’s relationship with Sudan. Of these articles, 66% (22 of 33 articles) believed that actions against the Olympics could potentially influence China to change its policy.

3.2.2 Punitive measures

While punitive measures received scant attention in the Sudanese press during the February – April 2008 period, they were the second-most dominant topic in the international press.

Punitive measures discussed in the international press include sanctions, referral to the International Criminal Court, the imposition of a no-fly zone, and non-consensual military intervention. Such actions have at various times been a central part of the campaigns of advocacy groups in Western countries, as exemplified in the writings of Eric Reeves, one of the activists credited with playing the largest role in increasing attention to Darfur in the United States.² Suggested targets of punitive actions are either China (considered a key sponsor of the Sudanese government at the UN, a key investor and an important arms exporter) or Sudanese government officials:

“[a] new approach should be to use international pressure to exploit fissures between the existing elites in Khartoum. [...] In Sudan this approach would take the form of an international ban on dealing with the business interests that fund the atrocities in Darfur and provide the finance for the regime’s powers of patronage; asset freezes targeted against Sudanese ministers; British and US support to the ICC by handing over evidence from signal intelligence sources; even targeted sanctions against the oil sector, so long as revenues could be retained for humanitarian purposes.”

- Nick Donovan, The Times (UK)

Other than actions against the Olympics, sanctions against the Sudanese government remain the preferred action toward the conflict, followed by military intervention.

Fig. 3 – Articles promoting punitive and peace-building measures – international press – February-April, 2008

Advocating pressure on China through 2008 Olympics (24)
Advocating pressuring China through other means (1)
Advocating sanctions against the Government of Sudan (4)
Advocating use of ICC (1)
Advocating military intervention (6)
Advocating talks with rebels (4)
Advocating return of displaced (2)
Advocating development for Darfur (4)

3.3 Comparing the two data sets

A comparison of the discourse in Sudanese and international opinion pieces highlights the disparities between the international and Sudanese portrayal of the conflict and the most pressing issues. Though there are many differences in what gets reported in the international press, three discrepancies stand out:

3.3.1 Role of various political actors

Although this is a major theme in both the Sudanese and international press, Sudanese criticism in this period was aimed mainly at the United States and France while criticism in the international press is overwhelmingly aimed at China, with the Government of Sudan in second place. The uproar building up to the summer Olympics that has filled international editorial pages for the past several months has had a much smaller impact in the Sudanese press.

Fig. 4 – Opinions concerning taking action against the Olympics/ China – February-April, 2008

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>Pieces</th>
<th>OPINIONS TOWARD ACTIONS AGAINST THE OLYMPICS/ CHINA</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>SUPPORTIVE OF TAKING SUCH ACTION</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>International</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sudan</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ALL ARTICLES</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
3.3.2 Punitive measures vs. Peace-building measures

While we have not yet collected enough data to record statistically significant results, the data thus far suggest that the Sudanese press is moderately more likely to support peace-building actions; the international press supports more punitive forms of conflict resolution. Such punitive actions are rarely discussed in opinion pieces in the Sudanese press: only a handful of writers criticise the suggestion that China’s Olympics should be targeted and one rejecting the use of the International Criminal Court.

Fig. 5 – Articles advocating peace-building/ punitive action – February-April, 2008

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>SUPPORTING PEACE BUILDING ACTION</th>
<th>SUPPORTING PUNITIVE ACTION</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Grassroots Peace Building</td>
<td>Peace Talks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>International</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ALL ARTICLES</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3.3.3 Nature of the conflict

Not surprisingly, the picture painted of the Darfur conflict in the Western press is far grimmer than that of the Sudanese press. The repeated charge that the violence in Darfur amounts to genocide (for example, the quote below) is virtually absent from Sudanese opinion pieces:

“Sudan’s National Islamic Front regime has begun its sixth year of genocidal counterinsurgency warfare in the vast western region of Darfur, targeting African civilian populations perceived as the primary support for fractious rebel groups. Given the length of the conflict, news reports have inevitably taken on a grimly
familiar and repetitive character that obscures the impending cataclysm of human destruction.”

- Eric Reeves in The Washington Post

3.4 Monitoring in April - Waning interest in Darfur?

In April, Stanhope’s press monitoring increased the number of issues monitored in the Sudanese press to two editions per day (almost double on previous sample) and continued to monitor all previously monitored publications from the UK, United States and Anglophone African countries. The total number of opinion pieces in the Sudanese press gathered by the reinforced sampling technique was lower in the month of April than in previous months partly because of various press restrictions in Khartoum.3

However, apart from the reduced number of newspapers published, the month of April also saw a clear reduction in the amount written on Darfur in the Sudanese press. This was reflected in news articles as well as in opinion pieces.

*Fig. 6 – Proportion of opinion articles that deal with Darfur*

*Fig. 7 – Average number of articles on Darfur per day*

4. Analysis of online forums

3 On 15th April three privately owned newspapers were prevented from distributing their daily print run after they were asked by the government security services to bring the day’s edition for review. The following day, five privately owned papers were prevented from publishing. The beginning of the 5th National Census on 22nd April also meant that no newspapers were published on that day. In addition certain papers from the monitored sample were exceptionally not published on 8th, 9th and 10th of the month.
In April, the Stanhope team also focused on analysing online forums as a way to better understand attitudes toward the Darfur conflict among the Sudanese Diaspora, which uses the forums extensively. This ethnographic method also tracks currents of opinion on a daily basis, key for understanding how opinions of the conflict and the peace process change over time and what effect particular events have in shaping public attitudes.

This technique of analysing online forums was used in the pilot research the Stanhope Centre conducted in September. As with the content analysis of the local press it is a method that allows the registration of what people think without direct interrogation. This method is necessarily incomplete and must be carefully interpreted. First, it is difficult to assess with certainty whether the participants in each forum are posting from inside or outside Sudan, although extended ethnographic observation of these online spaces suggests that the majority of the participants are members of the Diaspora. This dimension will be further explored in the future by directly contacting the most active members of each forum. In addition, we have not undertaken a study to determine what relationship exists between opinions of Darfurians at home and in the Diaspora.

4.0.1 Short methodological note

Online forums have been preferred to other spaces such as blogs or online newspapers because of their open nature. Multiple voices can compete and every member is given the opportunity to post and make his/her ideas known to the other participants. In general, each thread of discussion is opened by a member posting a stand-alone message. Other participants can then extend the thread by sending their comments or open a new thread on a similar or different topic. This structure allows analysis of a combination of quantitative and qualitative factors. The amount of interest in different issues was registered by counting the number of threads on a particular topic and the number of overall comments received by the threads and the topic. For the most popular issues, an in-depth analysis of the content of each thread was later carried out.

Among the forums focusing on Sudan in general and Darfur in particular, we selected five based on their popularity and capacity to provide nuanced perspective on the conflict:

- Sudanese online
- Sudan.net
- Sudanese offline
- Sudanjem
- Sudan for all

4 Looking at both spaces (press and online) at the same time provides useful hints to understand the real capacity of the media in setting the agenda and influencing ideas. It is common to find newspaper articles copied and pasted in online forums as a way to promote discussions on particular topics or to praise or criticize the author for his way of addressing a specific issue. From the exploration of the comments surrounding those pieces it is thus possible to look at how the relatively small, but increasingly influential, group Sudanese active online respond to the voice of the media.

5 For more information about the forums and the selection process, see the pilot report.
The content and level of discussion varies among these forums, which enhances the diversity of our sample. Sudanese online, Sudanese offline, and Sudan.net are the largest, most active forums. Sudan for all witnessed the highest level of discussion per post (average of 55.5 comments for the thread); the longest period of discussion for a thread (for example, two of the threads dated to 2006, and another two started in 2007); and relatively more sophisticated and intellectual discussions. Sudanjem distinguishes itself by its focus on politics and its attention to events in Darfur. The period covered by the analysis of these forums was April 1 - 25.

4.1 Main findings

- In general, the threads addressed most of the news related to Darfur during the month of April, but a number of topics were more popular than others.

- Through a comparison of the issues which received the most attention in April with those that received the most attention in September (the month of the pilot project), it appears that interest in certain issues, such as marginalization or sovereignty, remained constant, even if the events triggering discussion may have been different. Other debates were more specific to events that took place within the analysed period.

4.1.1 Recurrent theme: anger towards the exploitative behaviour of international workers

The condoning of the French Organization l’Arche de Zoé by the Chadian President generated a strong reaction among the online participants, who expressed feelings of pain and humiliation. The topic also opened the door for sceptical views of the foreign presence in Darfur.

For example, one of the participants of Sudanese online stated on 1 April:

    Giving up our rights and the rights of our children means we are a cheap commodity to be consumed by any one. The behaviour of the Chadian president opens the doors for hostility.

Another participant who was describing the situation in Darfur on Sudan.net said on 9 April:

    Darfur is becoming like Iraq. Everything is overlapping and people do not know anymore who the friend is and who the enemy is. And above all, it became a topic for earning money through marketing the empty bellies of the innocents.

A participant of Sudanese offline stated:

    Those children are victims for the long European hand which is dishonest in the way it deals with countries of the south. The return of the children does not reflect the awakening of the European consciousness. They were returned because Europe is fed up with immigrants and refugees and it does not intend to receive any more of
them. Rumsfeld has declared the end of Europe that symbolises justice and democracy. There is a new Europe that is more brutal than it was in colonial times. And those children are also the victims of regimes that put their citizens at the end of the priorities list. They become aware for a moment and then sleep for ages, and do not respond except on the scene of blood shed.

However, the topic raised criticism not only of foreigners but also of nearly all the parties involved in the Darfur conflict, including rebel groups and the government. One of the participants of Sudanese offline, while directing her speech to one of the members affiliated with the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM), said:

You as movements demanding the rights of Darfuri people, what is your position from this? What have you done to protect your children? OK, the government did not do anything, what have you done then? Is rebelling only about stealing? All what I know is that the stuff you steal from Darfur gets Sold in Chad, then Chad is your ally!!

On Sudanese online, a member commented that:

No one is exempted from responsibility. The guilt is shared among all the monsters, starting from the government to the Darfuri Movements that used the situation as a fruitful trade. And not to forget Darfuri activists who collected millions in name of their people from the organizations they established in the West claiming that they are representatives of the interests of Darfuri people.

4.1.2 Recurrent theme: limited representativeness of rebel movements

This issue, although not directly addressed in the online component of the September pilot, characterized many of the April posts, which dealt, for example, with the “failed” peace talks and the behaviour of prominent figures such as Abdul Wahid Nur and Minni Minnawi.

In the month of April the negative image of the Darfuri rebel groups could be captured in an informal poll conducted on Sudan.net, where one of the participants asked ‘What do you think of rebel groups in the West of Sudan?’:

62% of participants thought they are mercenaries working to fulfil hidden agendas, and above all imperialist agendas.

24% of participants thought they are groups of organized militant robbers that used Darfur to reach their private interests, and they are not interested in the political process.
14% of participants thought they are groups concerned with the affairs of Darfuri people.⁶

A post from Sudanese offline illustrates how the online sphere often associates Darfuri rebel groups with corruption, pursuit of private interests, and indifference towards the miseries of the Darfuri people:

If they really care about Darfur they wouldn’t refuse peace negotiations. Since these movements started coming up, I haven’t seen anything except militant movements. Having problems with the government does not justify going around stealing and killing and displacing their own people in the name of marginalisation. This is what a rational mind can not accept. All the people of Sudan have been marginalised since the independence. We don’t want the members of these movements to go against their own people and the people of Darfur. Do they think that the United States and all the partners who escalated the situation are more concerned about people of Darfur than we are? And was the government affected by this? This is all external pressure that will not do anything.

A sarcastic comment posted on Sudanese online on 10 April invited those who do not have means to get married to join the rebel groups to resolve their financial problems:

In the last period, so many young people have refrained from marriage because of its high costs. But lately there has been a phenomenon of the marriages of the rebel movements’ members, especially members from the Justice and Equality Movement. When you look at the jewellery their brides are putting on you feel that it is enough to feed a whole refugee camp for a week! I wonder, don’t those people look at the suffering of women and children when they are suffocating themselves with means of luxury!

However, the bitterness and sarcasm that can be found in these online spaces has to be put in the context of the political debates occurring in the Diasporic networks, where discourse is frequently more highly polarized and critical than within the country.

4.1.3 Emerging theme: marginalization

The issue of marginalization has emerged during various streams of research used in Researching attitudes towards peace and conflict in Darfur, such as the oral histories, but until now it had not been studied online.

Discussion emerged in the online sphere in April, surrounding the case of students in Northern Darfur whose university entrance exams apparently included questions not found in exams throughout the rest of the country. All participants perceived this to be a deliberate attempt by the government and the Ministry of Education to fail those students, thus further marginalising Darfuri people. The number of threads this topic generated

⁶ It should be noticed that polls like this are not representative. The participants are self-selected and the number of them is very limited (36 in this specific case). Nonetheless they can be useful for giving a sense of the tone that characterizes the attitudes towards peace and conflict online.
among the analysed forums, the large number of comments on related threads, and the emotionally tense vocabularies used in the discussion reflected a high level of disappointment and anger towards this incident. For example, one of the threads, which received 66 comments within only three days, was titled:

*The exams in the North of Darfur is a proof on the impossibility of living with cowards, hypocrites, murderers*

The conversations also developed into a criticism of the content of Sudanese educational syllabi.

Although the case of Darfuri students and their exams was the most debated topic relating to marginalisation, it is useful to note that there is a general trend in the discussions associating marginalisation with poor standards of living and poor infrastructure. Many of the threads that addressed marginalisation also spoke about lack of resources, such as medical care and food. For example, a thread which was posted on Sudanese online showing pictures of a surgical operation in Darfur being done by primitive means opened the debate on Sudanese infrastructure and the use of resources in Sudan. Similar threads were found in other forums.

Different, overlapping levels of marginalisation are addressed within the conversations: the marginalisation of the Darfuri people with respect to the Sudanese population; the marginalisation of the average Sudanese with respect to the government; and the marginalisation of the Sudanese nation and state with respect to various international actors, with specific mention of the Arab League.

### 4.1.4 Emerging theme: the census

The census was one of the most hotly debated topics in the forums. In just the first two weeks of April, the census was addressed through 335 comments in three different forums (Sudanese online, Sudanese offline, and Sudan.net). Many of the comments discussed the importance of censuses in general, how the census is usually conducted, and how citizens can help to make it as accurate as possible.

Although the wide majority of participants admitted the importance of this census for the future of Sudan, they doubted whether it could be held given the current climate in Darfur. Many also viewed government’s insistence on holding the census despite the continued conflict as another attempt to distort the demographic picture in Darfur. These arguments were accompanied by voices addressing the government’s attempts to change the ethnic composition of Darfur by adopting hostile policies against the African tribes and encouraging the resettlement of Non-Sudanese Arabs (One participant of Sudan.net, for example, titled his thread ‘Is the census the beginning for cheating in the coming elections?’). The forums were also ripe with rumours and sceptical interpretations of the Sudan People’s Liberation Movement (SPLM) with regards to the census.

The general pattern of debate reflected a degree of confusion among the participants. While they recognise the importance of the census, they fear the consequences of
conducting it within a general state of anarchy and lack of trust. For example, on 15 April a participant said on Sudanese online:

_We are worried about this census. First, because the results of this census will shape the future of new Sudan in terms of sharing authority and resources. Second, because of our past experiences with the Government of Salvation which has successfully managed to falsify our will and censor the opinions of the other._

On 13 April, a member of Sudan.net desperately asked:

_I heard today that a large number of Egyptians, Egyptian Nubians, Palestinians, and people from Chad have been given the Sudanese nationality to be included in the census. The Egyptians and Palestinians have been given the nationality through the Sudanese embassies in Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, and Jordan, and they have been brought to Sudan on the government’s expenses. Is this the reason why the People’s Movement demanded including tribe and religion in census cards? Is there any one here who could prove or deny this information please?!!_

This attitude was evident throughout all the forums in relation to the different actors involved. On 14 April, on the same forum, another member mentioned that:

_The government of the South changed its mind and accepted the census only if it was delayed one week. But one week will not be enough for the displaced people to come back or for the problem in Darfur to be solved?!! They say that the Movement received 8.30 Million dollars to approve the census and already agreed not to include religion or ethnicity. I think this lacks political responsibility and morality._

But on the same day on Sudanese online a member posted a comment saying:

_I think the stubbornness of the Sudanese government and insisting to go on like this is a waste of the time and money of the Sudanese people. The only solution is to solve the problem of Darfur, the South, the East, and above all the problem of governance in Sudan._

Reflecting the lack of trust in the government’s ability to conduct the census honestly and transparently, some participants expressed a wish for the census to be supervised by the United Nations.

5. Conclusion

By conducting a review of international English-speaking press alongside a review of Sudanese press and online discussion forums, we attempted to gain multiple perspectives on how the conflict and the peace process are framed inside and outside Sudan.

Monitoring of the international press suggests that commentators are less responsive to the movement of events and some of the finer detail of issues that have arisen in negotiations, such as the nature of compensation, the meaning of reconciliation, and the inclusion of civil society. This is not to say that such issues are absent altogether. Indeed, a wide range of themes is covered in the
international press, and the average number of themes in any article is considerably higher in the international press than it is in Sudanese papers. However, the recurrence of these themes conveys a dominant message that might drown out the nuance that is evident in the Sudanese press and in the online discussions.

As might be expected, the Sudanese opinion pieces studied in the content analysis deal with a set of issues somewhat different from those studied in the online forums. By looking at the opinion articles, some sense of emphasis and direction of the debate, especially within Khartoum, can be ascertained. The data from the Sudanese press here are sparse, but we think the direction indicated would be reinforced with more information.

The agenda and context for the conversations on the online forums provide a window into a different discourse. Drawing upon a more heterogeneous base and operating under fewer limitations, the forums can be seen to be filling an information gap that is created by the lack of transparency under which Sudanese politics are sometimes conducted. Consequently, there is evidence of much more polarized and critical views in the online forums and a great deal of rumour that appears to receive considerable interest and debate.

Both the Sudanese opinion pieces and the online discussions reflect a growing disenchantment with all actors in the conflict, including the rebels, the Sudanese government, international mediators, and UNAMID. The Sudanese opinion pieces generally take a less polarized view: for example, although opinion pieces do venture to criticise the government of Sudan, the focus for much criticism in the Sudanese press is Chad, and punitive actions against Sudan are not widely discussed. The tone and content of the debates on the Internet are much more direct. Rebels are spoken of less in the context of an ongoing peace negotiation and are often accused of serving their own, narrow interests. The Sudanese government is the target of widespread criticism, including the charge that it is deliberately marginalising Darfurians and, indeed, the people of Sudan as a whole.

Such differences in tone and content are not surprising, given that participants in online forums tend to express their resentment more openly than in the printed press, and that online spaces – particularly those in this study, largely involving participants in the Diaspora – operate outside of the state’s control.

Given the challenges of carrying out interviews in Darfur, such online spaces serve as something of a proxy for discussion on the ground. The findings from this study suggest that the debate among the average Darfuri (and Sudanese) is much more robust than would be expected according to a reading of international, and even the Sudanese, press.

Future studies – particularly when the research team is able to conduct interviews in the field – will help to bridge the gap between opinion within Darfur, within Khartoum and within the Darfuri Diaspora.