

SUDAN

A scramble for gold is altering the nature of the decade-long conflict in western Sudan

# Darfur's deadly gold rush

BY ULF LAESSING

EL FASHER, SUDAN, OCT 8, 2013

**GOLD AND DUST:** Khartoum has encouraged gold exploration across north and west Sudan, including in Darfur. Here, an artisanal miner searches for gold in Sudan's River Nile State.

REUTERS/MOHAMED NURELDIN  
ABDALLAH

## SUDAN DARFUR'S DEADLY GOLD RUSH



**GUNMAN:** A member of a faction of the rebel Sudan Liberation Army stands guard as people wait for the arrival of a joint African Union-United Nations delegation at a new clinic in north Darfur last May. **REUTERS/ALBERT GONZALEZ FARRAN/UNAMID**

**W**ith its scrubland, unpaved roads and mud brick huts, the Jebel Amer area in Darfur, western Sudan, can look like a poor and desolate place. Under the ground, though, lies something sought by people everywhere: gold.

In the past year or so the precious metal has begun to alter the nature of the decade-old conflict in Darfur, transforming it from an ethnic and political fight to one that, at least in part, is over precious metal.

Fighting between rival tribes over the Jebel Amer gold mine that stretches for some 10 km (six miles) beneath the sandy hills of North Darfur has killed more than 800 people and displaced some 150,000 others since January. Arab tribes, once heavily armed by the government to

suppress insurgents, have turned their guns on each other to get their hands on the mines. Rebel groups that oppose the government also want the metal.

The gold mine death toll is more than double the number of all people killed by fighting between the army, rebels and rival tribes in Darfur in 2012, according to U.N. Secretary General Ban Ki-moon's quarterly reports to the Security Council.

U.N. officials and diplomats told Reuters the government has been complicit in the violence by encouraging at least one militia group to seize control of mines, a charge the government denies.

Until last year the Darfur conflict pitted the government and its Arab militias against three large rebel groups. The Jebel

Amer attack changed that, dividing Arab tribes against each other.

But international peace efforts are still focused on bringing the main rebel groups into a Qatar-sponsored deal Khartoum signed with two splinter groups in 2011.

At the last meeting to discuss the Qatar deal in September, Qatar's deputy prime minister, Ahmed bin Abdullah al-Mahmoud, expressed concern about the recent tribal violence, but stressed a key factor in bringing peace to Darfur would be to get the rebels to the negotiating table, according to Qatari state media.

### LOST OIL

The conflict in Darfur began as a struggle between African pastoralists and Arab



## SUDAN DARFUR'S DEADLY GOLD RUSH



**SMALL FORTUNE:** Gold miners bring their finds for weighing at a gold shop in Al Fahir, a town in North Darfur. **REUTERS/MOHAMED NURELDIN ABDALLAH**

cattle-owning nomads over access to land. It grew into what the U.S. State Department described as genocide after the government began sponsoring militias to put down a rebel insurgency.

In all, fighting in Darfur since 2003 has killed more than 200,000 people and forced some 2 million from their homes according to human rights groups and the United Nations. In 2009, the International Criminal Court charged Sudanese President Omar Hassan al-Bashir with war crimes for his role in the Darfur violence, charges he rejects.

The recent resurgence in violence is rooted in Sudan's loss of a huge chunk of its territory in the south two years ago. When South Sudan seceded in 2011, the rump state of Sudan lost most of its oil production – worth some \$7 billion in 2010 – sending the economy into a spin. Sudan's GDP contracted by 10 percent last year, according to the World Bank.

To replace the oil the government in Khartoum has encouraged people to dig for gold. Now half a million diggers roam Darfur and the north of the country with mine detectors and sledgehammers, according to the mining ministry. The gold rush helped boost output by 50 percent last

year to around 50 tonnes, making Sudan Africa's third-largest producer, equal with Mali after South Africa and Ghana, according to official data and expert estimates.

Gold exports have become Sudan's lifeline, providing the government with \$2.2 billion (net) last year and making up more than 60 percent of all exports.

Sudan's central bank, desperate for anything to secure foreign currency, pays artisanal miners up to 20 percent more than the global market price, several gold trading sources told Reuters. The central bank denies this.

At the same time, around a quarter of Sudan's annual gold output is smuggled abroad, industry sources inside and outside Sudan said. If that figure is right, the government lost up to \$700 million last year – money it badly needs.

"The government is so desperate for the gold that they are willing to stoke conflict to get artisanal mines under its control," said Magdi El Gizouli, a fellow at the Rift Valley Institute, a think tank based in London and Nairobi.

He said the mining ministry had handed out hundreds of exploration licenses to firms but only 20 were actually producing gold. "So they need to control mines which

produce like Jebel Amer."

The mining ministry said it wants to improve the performance of license holders, many of which do not yet produce.

### QUEST FOR GOLD

On a sunny morning in early January, dozens of Land Cruisers surrounded the town of El Sireaf near the Jebel Amer gold mine. Men readied themselves behind mounted machine guns and mortars and started firing.

"I saw 30 cars. They came from all sides and fired randomly into houses," said Fateh, a worker who hid in his house as the attack began. "They shot women, children, even cattle, anything they spotted," he said, asking for his full name to be withheld as he fears the gunmen might come back.

The attackers, members of the Arab Rizeigat tribe appeared to locals to have one goal: to seize control of the mines from the Bani Hussein, a rival Arab tribe.

"They wanted the gold," said al-Tijani Hamid, a Bani Hussein tribesman who lives in Britain but was visiting El Sireaf during the January attacks.

"There were...corpses in the streets everywhere. It was terrible," said Hamid, who has now given up his UK teaching job at

*Text continues on page 5*

## SUDAN DARFUR'S DEADLY GOLD RUSH



ROUGH TERRAIN: Mine workers, above, seek shelter during a sandstorm in Al-Ibedia, River Nile State. Below left and right, artisanal miners at work in Al-Ibedia. **REUTERS/MOHAMED NURELDIN ABDALLAH**





an agricultural college in Reading to help organise aid.

A truce was reached in late January, but the two tribes fought again in February and in June. The Rizeigat have sent hundreds of fighters to consolidate control of the mine and to avenge cattle rustling by the Bani Hussein, residents said.

Until the fighting began, the area was dominated by small artisanal miners. Over the past couple of years, gold diggers arrived from neighbouring Chad, the Central African Republic and even far-flung West African countries such as Nigeria and Niger, Darfur residents said.

"There were even some Libyans, Syrians and Jordanians," said Suleiman Dubaid, a Bani Hussein leader who said seven members of his family were killed during the fighting. "Some people made 6,000 (Sudanese) pounds (\$800) a day."

The gold is smuggled out in bags or underwear, to middlemen on the other side of the Chad border. From there it goes to the capital N'Djamena where it is loaded onto commercial flights or stashed in the baggage of courier firms, Sudanese gold sources and Darfur residents say. The final destination is often Dubai, the Middle East's main gold market.

Some gold is also smuggled to Cameroon, where it is exported and shipped to gold markets in India and China, a Sudanese gold source said.

In 2011, after the state lost access to oil, the Sudanese government clamped down on the smugglers. Nonetheless, gold revenues are expected to fall as low as \$1.5 billion this year due to declining global prices. The weak market comes as output at Sudan's biggest industrial mine, Ariab, in the Nubian desert, has fallen: to around 2 tonnes in 2011, the last reported figure.

That may be one reason, say Western diplomats, tribal leaders and international peacekeepers working in Darfur, why government officials encouraged the Rizeigat tribe to break the Bani Hussein's control

# The limits of peacekeeping

Asha Ibrahim was searching for firewood when the attackers struck. She had set off with three other women from the makeshift camp where she has lived since conflict broke out in Sudan's Darfur region a decade ago.

"Several men grabbed and raped us," the mother of four said, standing on the dusty square of the Shangil Tobaya camp for displaced people in the north of a region the size of Spain. "All the girls get raped here."

The camp is only a few km from a large base of UNAMID, a joint mission between the African Union and the United Nations and the world's second largest international peacekeeping force. UNAMID has an annual budget of \$1.35 billion and almost 20,000 troops mainly from Africa, Asia and the

and equipment, and to ensure the security and freedom of movement of its own personnel and humanitarian workers." But it is penned in by both rebel fighters and the government, which has armed Arab militias, according to the U.N. resolutions setting out UNAMID's mission. Around 50 UNAMID peacekeepers have been killed.

"It's kind of open season on UNAMID," said Dane Smith, former U.S. special adviser for Darfur. Sudanese authorities make no effort to arrest culprits, he said. Khartoum denies this.

Critics say UNAMID should be more aggressive. UNAMID officials respond that they need to work with the government or risk getting kicked out.

Even if it wanted to be more aggressive, the force lacks transport, equipment and experienced soldiers. Sudan has rejected the deployment of more robust troops from NATO.

UNAMID has a unified command but in practice all troops report to their individual governments. This makes it a nightmare to respond to emergencies.

When diplomats ask UNAMID commanders why its patrols can't better protect women, they are told that the mission's shift system does not fit in with that of the women searching for wood. One patrol goes in the afternoon, a rather unproductive time, soldiers say, because people stay indoors to escape the heat. The women like looking for wood late at night when it's cooler. But the patrols don't venture too far at night for security reasons.

UNAMID head Mohamed Ibn Chambas said his forces have limited resources. UNAMID stresses that it makes the camps safer and provides basic services such as clean water and hospitals. But women like Ibrahim have given up hope a long time ago. "We have no security, food rations are not enough and no hospitals," she said. "Life is very bad here."

*By Ulf Laessing in Shangil Tobaya, Sudan*



MARCH: Darfuri women in a rally for peace in Al Fashir, North Darfur, last month.

REUTERS/MOHAMED NURELDIN ABDALLAH

Middle East. But it has struggled to protect civilians since it set out in 2008. Attacks, often by Arab "Janjaweed" militiamen, continue according to UNAMID and aid groups. The conflict, which started as a row between African pastoralists and Arab nomads over land, has killed more than 200,000 people and displaced two million.

Amsallam Adam, another woman who lives in the camp, said life beyond the perimeter was dangerous. "Even our men don't dare leave."

UNAMID has a mandate to use force to "protect its personnel, facilities, installations

## SUDAN DARFUR'S DEADLY GOLD RUSH

of the Jebel Amer mine. "They wanted the Rizeigat to shake up things a bit so that at least some of the gold goes to the central bank," said a Western diplomat.

Khartoum has used the Rizeigat before: The tribe provided the core of the feared "Janjaweed" militias, armed and unleashed by the government in 2003 to put down the rebel insurgency, according to rights groups such as Human Rights Watch.

The Rizeigat were also Khartoum's allies during the 1983-2005 civil war with the south, sending fighters armed by the government.

Mining minister Kamal Abdel-Latif visited the Jebel Amer mine late in December, a trip covered by state media. There he told the Bani Hussein that only 5 of the 15 tonnes the mine produced annually was going to the central bank, said Tijani, who was present at the meeting. Abdel-Latif is close to Khartoum's security establishment. His appointment in 2011 was widely seen by Western diplomats and local analysts as an attempt by Khartoum to get a better grip on the sprawling amateur mines.

At the same time, the state-linked Sudanese Media Centre reported that the North Darfur government and top security command had met "to devise a meticulous plan to guarantee that all the gold produced (in Jebel Amer) will be directed to the Central Bank of Sudan."

A top Rizeigat tribal official with close government ties said officials had asked Rizeigat paramilitary forces to break up the hold of the Bani Hussein over the mine. "They encouraged some of our tribesmen serving in paramilitary forces to seize the mine."

Adam Sheikha, a Bani Hussein tribal leader and lawmaker for Bashir's National Congress Party said during the January attack, many Rizeigat wore the uniform of Sudan's border guards, a paramilitary force formed when Khartoum armed militias in the early stages of the conflict.

"The weapons they used were issued by



PEACE TIME?: A boy plays in front of UNAMID peacekeepers in Shagra, a village in North Darfur  
REUTERS/MOHAMED NURELDIN ABDALLAH

“They encouraged some of our tribesmen serving in paramilitary forces to seize the mine.

Rizeigat tribal official

the army,” he said.

Several witnesses confirmed they had seen attackers wearing border guard uniforms. Sudan's mining ministry said it had nothing to do with the Jebel Amer clashes.

Authorities also denied reporters access to the mine. "The ministry has nothing to do with the tribal violence," a senior official read out to a reporter visiting the ministry on Khartoum's Nile banks. He declined further comment.

The Rizeigat had their own reasons to seize the mine, according to Western diplomats and tribal leaders. Many of them had been integrated into state forces such as the border guards or central reserve police, but Khartoum has slashed funding to those forces.

Since the January attack, Rizeigat tribesmen have mined Jebel Amer on their own, residents said. Guards have sealed off roads and banned anyone from the Bani Hussein or even some government forces from approaching the site. They attacked a nearby army base in June, according to an internal report from the UNAMID peacekeepers seen by Reuters.

### REBELS

Darfuri rebels want gold, too. Tribesmen from the Zaghawa, the backbone of the rebel Sudan Liberation army (SLA), until recently operated its own mine in Hashaba to the east of Jebel Amer. There is no data on how much rebels make from gold sales but locals and UNAMID staff say Hashaba's output was much smaller than Jebel Amer.

The potential spoils are huge. To the south of Jebel Amer, for instance, there is an area called "Shangil Tobaya", which is Sudanese Arabic for "turn a brick and you find gold." Rebels and Arab militias are vying for control for a strip of low-rise mountains. "People say there is gold up there



## SUDAN DARFUR'S DEADLY GOLD RUSH

FOOD AID: A man guards sacks of food at a distribution centre in North Darfur. REUTERS/ MOHAMED NURELDIN ABDALLAH



but we cannot check it because the armed militias are there,” said Adam Saleh, a local farmer.

Khartoum downplays the tribal violence and the changing nature of the conflict. “The security situation improves from day to day,” said Osman Kibr, governor of North Darfur. “We had some issues but we’ve fixed them,” he told diplomats who had come to El Fasher in June to discuss the recent surge in tribal violence.

But security in Darfur has deteriorated. Aid groups report a sharp rise in hijackings and robberies by Arab militias since mid-2012. This has stopped the U.N. World

Food Programme delivering food to several areas, and delayed development projects backed by a Qatar-sponsored donor conference in April where pledges of \$1 billion were made.

Even some government officials now wonder if the Rizeigat are out of control. In the past, tribal leaders would call a meeting and try to end bloodshed by offering compensation for families of victims and pressing local leaders into making peace. Now “the traditional tribal reconciliation mechanism doesn’t work anymore,” said Tijani Seissi, head of the regional Darfur authority and a former rebel who made peace with

Sudan under the Qatar deal. “We need to fight them.”

*Laessing reported in both Khartoum and Darfur; Edited by Simon Robinson, Richard Woods*

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