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Sudan: Crisis in Darfur - urgent need for international commission of inquiry and monitoring

As the situation in Darfur, western Sudan, worsens Amnesty International is calling for Darfur to be included in the human rights monitoring set up under the Sudan peace process. In addition, an independent international commission of inquiry should be sent to Darfur to investigate the deteriorating situation.

"At a time when peace talks are taking place to end a 20-year conflict which has caused two million deaths and 4.5 million displaced persons, the international community must not watch in silence while the choice of a military solution for human rights problems drags another area of Sudan into disaster," the organization said.

Over the past few years nomad groups from the area have killed hundreds of civilians from sedentary agricultural groups in Darfur, such as the Fur, Zaghawa and Masalit, burning homes and looting cattle and goats.

In the latest tragic incident on 23 April, armed members of nomad groups, some of whom were wearing uniforms and said to be members of a government militia, attacked men around the mosque at the market of Mulli in West Darfur, 15 kilometres south of the state capital Geneina. They killed some 55 people, wounded at least 20 and looted or killed domestic animals.

On Friday, 25 April a demonstration in Geneina, protesting at the killings and the failure to arrest those responsible, burnt the governor's office; the security forces killed one demonstrator and arrested a number of people including Munira Abdel Rahman Bahr al-Din, who reportedly led the demonstration. At least one policeman was also killed.

Thousands of villagers have reportedly fled their villages since 11 April after attacks by government forces and government-organized Arab militias fighting against the Sudan Liberation Army (SLA - formed in February by members of sedentary groups in the region) in the area of Kutum, in North Darfur. There are reports of food supplies growing short, but as a result of the military presence in the area, it is extremely difficult to get information about those who have fled their villages. Now Kutum is under curfew from sunrise to sunset, telephones are cut and checkpoints have been set up on the roads in the area.

On 25 April the SLA attacked the military airport at El Fasher the capital of North Darfur, reportedly damaging two Antonovs and four helicopters.

"A conflict, which no one wants and which could be solved by clear recommendations and human rights protection mechanisms, must not be allowed to escalate," said Amnesty International. "The

international community must act!"

Amnesty International's delegates visited El Fasher in January 2003 and discussed the situation with representatives of the Sudan Government, people from villages which had suffered attacks and local lawyers. Amnesty International subsequently called on the Sudan Government in February to set up an independent commission of inquiry and implement its recommendations. The call was widely welcomed by people in Darfur and outside.

However, this opportunity to clarify the complex factors which have led to the present deteriorating situation and to identify human rights mechanisms to protect the people was lost.

"The people of Sudan should not suffer more war with more human rights abuse and suffering. A speedy and impartial international inquiry into the complex causes of the crisis, which can make authoritative recommendations in line with human rights principles to end it, could bring an immediate cease fire."

An independent international Commission of Inquiry could be set up by the African Union or the United Nations General Assembly or Security Council. The investigation should be properly resourced and members of the commission should be independent with a good knowledge of the region and its problems. All authorities concerned should be obliged to cooperate fully with the investigation, and grant it free access to people, places and documents it wishes to examine. Its findings should be made public and recommendations implemented.

In the context of the peace talks the Sudan Government agreed to allow an independent international Commission of Inquiry to be set up to investigate abductions and accusations of slavery in the context of the civil war.

"Serious independent inquiries can find out the complex factors which have caused human rights abuses in the region and suggest human rights mechanisms to solve them," Amnesty International said.

Background

Although at first the Sudan Government seemed to seek a peaceful solution to the situation in Darfur - the Sudan National Assembly set up an emergency committee on Darfur and a consultative assembly of citizens of Darfur made recommendations to solve the conflict peacefully - at the end of March the government said demands by the Sudan Liberation Army (formed by sedentary groups in the region) were too high and it had decided to solve the conflict by military means.

In April, after intense lobbying by the Sudan government, the UN Commission on Human Rights voted against the mandate of the Special Rapporteur on the Sudan who reported to the UN on the human rights situation in Sudan and whose reports raised the deteriorating situation in Darfur. The loss of the UN Special Rapporteur further jeopardises outside monitoring of human rights violations in Sudan.

Peace negotiations are continuing in Kenya under the auspices of the Inter Governmental Authority on Development (IGAD) and international mediators. But Darfur, in northern Sudan, is not included in the peace talks, nor in the monitoring which is to accompany the peace.

Public Document

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