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Sudan: Insecurity persists for the displaced in Southern Kordofan

Amnesty International is alarmed by reports that people displaced by the ongoing conflict in Southern Kordofan are being coerced to return by the Sudanese authorities to places where their lives and safety could be at risk and that humanitarian agencies are being prevented from accessing many areas.

Fighting between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and elements of the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) in Southern Kordofan, began on 5 June. A number of villages south of the state capital Kadugli, in addition to Dilling, Talodi, Heiban, and Kauda, have experienced ongoing fighting.

The SAF have engaged in indiscriminate attacks, bombing from high altitudes with imprecise bombs on areas which include civilians, whereby it is effectively impossible to ensure compliance with the principle of distinction between military objectives and civilians.

As a result, many of the main towns and villages are reportedly deserted. The UN estimates more than 73,000 people have fled as a result of the fighting.

Amnesty International has received reports of government attempts to coerce or force displaced persons to return to areas where their lives and safety could be at risk.

For example, aerial bombardments by SAF and artillery attacks by both SAF and SPLA around Kadugli and the surrounding areas continue. Despite this, government authorities including the Governor of Southern Kordofan and the Minister of Health made public statements on national television and radio in recent days that Kadugli town was now secure and citizens who fled should return to their homes.

On 20 June, local authorities entered a camp around the UN Mission in Sudan (UNMIS) compound on the outskirts of Kadugli town, and ordered the displaced seeking refuge there to return to their homes in Kadugli town or congregate either in schools or at Kadugli Stadium. Vehicles were provided by the government to transport them back.

The UN Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement underline that Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) have the right to seek safety in any part of the country and in particular the right not to be forcibly returned to or resettled in any place where life, safety, liberty and/or health would be at risk.

Amnesty International calls on the Government of Sudan to respect and protect these rights of all IDPs.

Kadugli town has been closed off to international humanitarian organizations since the beginning of the conflict. There are reports of freshly laid landmines around the town, which pose a further threat to civilians returning to the area. To date, no mine action team has been able to assess the situation due to restricted access to the town.

Anti-personnel landmines are inherently indiscriminate weapons which do not distinguish between civilians and combatants, and are prohibited under the 1997 Convention on the Prohibition of the Use, Stockpiling, Production and Transfer of Anti-Personnel Mines and on their Destruction. Sudan is a party to that treaty.

Amnesty International is further concerned about an estimated 138 southern Sudanese who were also seeking refuge at the UNMIS compound in Kadugli, and were ordered to vacate the area. They were caught in the fighting, whilst seeking to migrate from north Sudan to south Sudan, prior to 9 July, when the south will gain independence.

The southern Sudanese were provided with UN transportation and travelled north, due to lack of access to south Sudan. However, they were stopped on 23 June at a government checkpoint outside El Obeid, the state capital of Northern Kordofan, and prevented from travelling further.

People attempting to flee the fighting have also sought refuge in other places including Er Rahad and El Obeid in Northern Kordofan. Government authorities in Northern Kordofan also stated that displaced persons in the area should return to their homes, or seek accommodation with family members in other areas, outside of Northern Kordofan.

Local residents assisting the displaced in the El Obeid area were instructed by authorities to stop donating food to the displaced on 20 June. Furthermore, residents in El Obeid reported that the National Intelligence and Security Service (NISS) have been closely monitoring host families, and the displaced.

Pervasive NISS checkpoints have resulted in abuses against Nuba people or suspected SPLM supporters and have hampered the provision of much needed humanitarian aid.

Checkpoints have been reported on the main roads between Kadugli, Dilling, El Obeid and Khartoum. Amnesty International received eye-witness accounts of security officials with lists of people's names at each checkpoint.

People on the lists are believed to be members of the SPLM, or of Nuba descent. Further reports have been received that even those not on lists but who are believed to be Nuba are interrogated and harassed or ill-treated by security forces.

Humanitarian agencies are also impeded from reaching the affected population. On 14 June, Kauda airstrip was bombed, preventing humanitarian supplies from reaching the area. The airstrip has since been re-opened; however severe constraints remain to accessing the displaced and other civilians affected by the conflict. Humanitarian agencies are also subject to scrutiny by Sudanese authorities at checkpoints.

Amnesty International calls on the Sudanese authorities to guarantee unfettered access for impartial humanitarian assistance in Sudan.

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