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8 JANUARY 1999

## **Sudan: serious risk of human rights abuses after cease-fire ends**

Large scale human rights abuses against civilians in southern Sudan are likely in 1999 following the end of the six month cease-fire on 15 January, Amnesty International warned today. International efforts for a cease-fire extension in the devastated region of Bahr al-Ghazal continue and United Nations Special Envoy for Sudan and East Africa, Tom Vraalsen, is expected in Khartoum tomorrow.

"In the past, gross human rights abuses during raids by government-backed militia have been a key factor in creating famine, especially in Bahr al-Ghazal," Amnesty International said. "These abuses have included the slaughter of thousands of villagers and the mass abduction of women and children. The renewed and gross abuses are likely to lead to another famine."

"Unless a concerted effort is made by all sides to the conflict to protect the human rights of civilians, in keeping with their obligations under international law, history is likely to repeat itself with disastrous consequences for the population of Sudan."

Amnesty International is calling on all parties to the conflict to respect their obligations under the Geneva Conventions and to put an end to the arbitrary killing of civilians. All sides should abide by the principle of distinction between civilian and military targets and should never target civilians.

"The culture of impunity which allows military forces to commit gross abuses against civilians without fear of censure must also come to an end," the organization concluded.

Amnesty International's concern is intensified by the recent defection back to the government on 5 January of Kerubino Kuanyin Bol, a key military commander in Bahr al-Ghazal, amid rumours that he is massing forces in the area.

Fighting on the government side from 1994 to 1997, his forces inflicted massive human rights violations on the civilian population of Bahr al-Ghazal. Their military strategy was characterised by the deliberate and systematic raiding of civilian targets, in collaboration with the government's Popular Defence Forces (PDF) and informal militia groups known as the  *Murahaleen*.

In the course of these militia raids, thousands of civilians have been arbitrarily killed. Many more thousands have been displaced from their homes, seriously disrupting agricultural production. Villages have been looted and burnt and cattle stolen, further depriving civilians of the means to survive. The PDF and  *Murahaleen* have also abducted thousands of civilians, mostly women and children, and forced them into unpaid labour in the north of the country, in effect turning them into slaves.

The Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) has also been responsible for abuses against

the civilian population, including arbitrary killings, the looting of villages and the diverting of humanitarian aid intended for famine victims.

The Sudanese government has taken no action against those responsible for human rights violations and continues to claim that large-scale civilian deaths in southern Sudan are the result of inter-ethnic fighting over which it has no control. The SPLA has also turned a blind eye to abuses committed by its own forces.

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