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Sudan: New evidence of scorched earth tactics against civilians in Blue Nile

New satellite imagery and eyewitness testimonies from rebel-held areas in Sudan's Blue Nile State show that Sudanese military forces have resorted to brutal scorched earth tactics to drive out the civilian population, Amnesty International said in a report published today.

“We had no time to bury them”: War crimes in Sudan's Blue Nile State documents how bombings and ground attacks by Sudanese military forces have destroyed entire villages, left many dead and injured, and forced tens of thousands to flee — with many now facing starvation, disease and exhaustion.

Evidence gathered by Amnesty International indicates that villages in the Ingessana Hills, an area held for a time by the Sudan People's Liberation Army – North (SPLA-N) — endured multiple scorched earth offensives in 2012. Witnesses also described bombing attacks as recent as April 2013 that killed children and other civilians.

“This systematic and deliberate targeting of civilians follows a disturbing pattern that was used by the Sudanese government to devastating effect in Darfur,” said Jean-Baptiste Gallopin, Amnesty International's Sudan researcher.

“Deliberately attacking civilians is a war crime. Given the scale, as well as the apparently systematic nature of these attacks, they may also constitute crimes against humanity.”

The report also describes how some people had to choose between carrying their children to safety or carrying their elderly parents.

“Faced with attack, aerial bombardment and the prospect of starvation, those who are physically able have little choice but to flee — often after making painful decisions about who among the weakest should be left behind,” said Jean-Baptiste Gallopin.

Some of those who were unable to run because of disability or age were burned alive in their homes; others were reportedly shot dead by Sudanese troops and pro-government militia. In addition, soldiers and militiamen looted valuable possessions, including livestock, before systematically setting fire to houses.

Awadallah Hassan, who fled from his village of Qabanit in the northwestern part of the Ingessana Hills, told Amnesty International:

“My grandmother Weret was blind and couldn't run. [When we ran away] we thought someone had taken her ... [But] we went back to the village at 5pm and found Weret's body completely burned. Her body was black.”

At least eight villages* in the Ingessana Hills were destroyed in this way and their inhabitants displaced.

Witnesses also reported that a further nine villages** were burned down, although Amnesty International was unable to verify these claims.

The humanitarian situation of those remaining in rebel-held areas is dire. Because civilians are unable to tend their crops without fear of being bombed, food supplies are scarce. Displaced people told Amnesty International that they were often forced to live on poisonous roots that have to be soaked in water for days to become edible.

The organization documented more deaths from hunger, illness, and deprivation than as a direct result of the violence. Children and the elderly, the most physically vulnerable members of the population, are disproportionately hard hit.

The Sudanese government continues to block humanitarian relief to civilians in rebel-held areas.

“By taking the unconscionable decision to bar humanitarian aid, the Sudanese government is once again causing civilian deaths and suffering on a massive scale,” said Jean-Baptiste Gallopin.

“The international community has failed to enforce the International Criminal Court’s indictment of President Omar al-Bashir who is wanted on charges of genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes committed in Darfur. The ongoing violations in Blue Nile demonstrate yet again that it is civilians who pay the price when impunity for war crimes goes unchecked.”

The current violence in Blue Nile began almost two years ago, following the formal secession of South Sudan from Sudan. The Sudanese government is fighting the SPLA-N, a rebel group that emerged in 2011 when the Sudan People’s Liberation Army became the army of South Sudan.

The armed conflict in Blue Nile is closely linked with the conflict in Southern Kordofan but has received much less international attention due in part to the logistical difficulties of travelling to the area.

Amnesty International is calling on the government of Sudan to immediately end indiscriminate aerial bombings and deliberate ground attacks in civilian areas and to grant immediate access to humanitarian organizations.

“Both the UN Security Council and the African Union have been far too preoccupied with relations between Sudan and South Sudan to take effective action to stop the horrific events in Blue Nile and Southern Kordofan,” said Jean-Baptiste Gallopin.

“The possibility of a long-term stalemate is extremely worrying. The international community must give this human rights crisis the attention it deserves.”

*Qabanit, Jegu, Khor Jidad, Taga, Kumrik, Marol, Bau and Fadamiyya

**Mirik, Gan, Harra Khamsa Qabanit, Torda, Salban, Filga, Gammar Massoud, Gammar at-Tom, and Abu Garin