

Urgent Action

In Focus

An insight into the stories behind UAs

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DARFUR: Fighting for peace



AI Secretary General Irene Khan meets internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Darfur, 2004

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The Darfur region in western Sudan covers an area around the size of France or Texas. Since 2003, thousands of people have died as a result of the ongoing conflict in Darfur, and millions more have been displaced. Yet the violence shows no sign of decreasing. What can Amnesty International do in the face of such widespread human rights violations?

The escalating conflict

"In this country with its diverse population, if you give guns to one group you're pitting brother against brother and that's volatile and it's not good. And who is it that's done that? The Sudanese government has done that."

The Sultan of Dar Sila, Chad

For a number of years, Darfur was the scene of sporadic clashes between farming communities such as the Fur, Masalit and Zaghawa, and nomadic groups, which led to many deaths and the destruction and looting of homes.

The government blamed competition over scarce resources for the clashes.

In February 2003 a new armed opposition group, the Sudan Liberation Army (SLA) took up arms against the government, because of what they perceived as the lack of government protection for their people and the marginalisation and underdevelopment of the region. The support base of this armed group came mainly from the agricultural groups in the region. Shortly afterwards another armed group, the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM) emerged.

The government of Sudan responded by allowing free rein to Arab militias known as the Janjawid (guns on horseback) who began attacking villages, killing, raping and abducting people, destroying homes and other property, including water sources and looting livestock. At times government troops also attacked villages alongside the Janjawid, and government aircraft have been bombing villages sometimes just before Janjawid attacks, suggesting that these attacks were coordinated. The links between the Sudanese armed forces and the Janjawid are incontrovertible; the Janjawid are now wearing uniforms provided by the army.

The Sudanese government and the Janjawid deliberately targeted civilians of the same ethnicity as the rebel groups as a counter-insurgency strategy. To date, some 85,000 people have been killed, around 200,000 have died as a result of conflict-related hunger or disease, and more than two million people have been displaced. Rebel groups have also committed human rights abuses, including targeting humanitarian convoys and workers. Amnesty International and the UN have called the attacks committed in Darfur crimes against humanity and war crimes.

The latest surge of violence

In the past few weeks, there has been an upsurge in violence in the region, mostly in North Darfur and areas near the Chad border, resulting in civilian deaths and displacement and jeopardizing the ability of humanitarian organizations to provide life-sustaining assistance to hundreds of thousands of war-affected people."

UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan, letter to the President of the UN Security Council, 10 August 2006

In May 2006, the Sudanese government and one rebel group, a faction of the Sudan Liberation Army led by Minni Minawi (known as the SLA/ MM), signed the Darfur Peace Agreement. The other SLA faction and the JEM refused to sign the agreement, saying it did not have enough guarantees on compensation, militia disarmament and political representation. Since the signing of the agreement, insecurity has worsened in Darfur, causing more killings of civilians, rapes and displacement. It is now apparent that the government is massing troops in Darfur in order to attack areas under the control of armed groups which have not signed the Darfur Peace Agreement.

Two recent UAs have highlighted individual cases at the heart of the latest wave of violence. UA 235/06 (AFR 54/045/2006, 31 August 2006) brought attention to the plight of civilians in areas under rebel control in Darfur, particularly in the area around Kulkul, some 40 km northwest of North Darfur's capital al-Fasher. On 28 August this area was heavily bombed by government Antonov aircraft, prompting civilians to flee the town and their villages. A few hours later, government troops moved in the town of Kulkul. The leader of the nearby village of Um Dereisa, Mohamed Ahmed Kundidu, was arrested by Janjawid militias, and there are fears that he may "disappear" and that he risks torture and ill-treatment. The Janjawid also killed three men in Um Dereisa: Hamdu Issa, Abdallah Mohamed Ali and Suleiman Abdulrahman Bushara; and injured two

others: Yusif Eirab and Ibrahim Hamdu Issa.

UA 241/06 (AFR 54/048/2006, 7 September 2006) highlighted the plight of more individuals in North Darfur. On 31 August, Saraf Osman Ibrahim, Yasir Jabir Juma, Mohamed Adam Ali and Ismail Adam Omar were reportedly captured near the town of Um Sider by government troops and Janjawid militia, with three other men. The three men captured with them were reportedly found shot dead in a valley near barracks occupied by government troops in Um Sider. Their bodies apparently had tyre marks on them. The whereabouts of Saraf Osman Ibrahim, Yasir Jabir Juma, Mohamed Adam Ali and Ismail Adam Omar are unknown. They are at grave risk of being killed or "disappearing". On 5 September, five women and girls were reportedly abducted by the Janjawid and government soldiers in a village called Tarmakera. They were reportedly taken away, raped and severely beaten before being released. Two of them are reportedly critically injured.

The two UAs not only called for letters to the Sudanese government urging them to end direct and indiscriminate attacks on civilians but also encouraged the too-passive African Union peacekeeping mission to be more proactive, calling on them to act immediately to protect civilians and to investigate reports of unlawful killings and rape.

Peacekeepers powerless

Humanitarian agencies, who have provided the bulk of medical assistance and food to civilians affected by the Darfur conflict, have withdrawn from many parts of North Darfur since tensions between signatories and non-signatories of the Darfur Peace Agreement increased.

The killings and insecurity in North Darfur highlight the powerlessness of the 7,000-strong African Union peacekeeping force in Darfur (African Union Mission in Sudan, AMIS). The force came to Darfur in 2004

with a mandate to "protect civilians under imminent threat and in the immediate vicinity". However, citing a lack of resources and a limited mandate, they rarely protect civilians under attack.

Due to its failure to protect civilians, AMIS has lost the faith of many of the people in Darfur. Many of the displaced people who do not support the Darfur Peace Agreement have become wary of the African Union which has brokered it.

UN prepared to step in

Civilians in Darfur, most Sudanese political parties, the different factions of the armed opposition in Darfur, and the African Union itself are all calling for AMIS to be replaced by a UN peacekeeping force. On 31 August, the UN Security Council passed a resolution to send UN peacekeepers in Darfur to take over from the AU. The resolution included a number of key points that Amnesty International had been calling for, including expressly authorising UN troops to use all necessary means to protect civilians under threat of physical violence in Darfur.

Yet Sudanese President Lieutenant-General Omar al-Bashir has fiercely opposed such a move, accusing the UN of seeking to send "colonial" forces into Sudan. The Sudanese government has rejected the UN resolution, and has even threatened to expel AU forces when their mandate expires at the end of December. The government of Sudan instead proposes to take over the peacekeeping function in Darfur. They have stated that they will be sending 10,000 troops to Darfur to implement the Darfur Peace Agreement. In reality, this plan is no more than a military solution to the conflict, with dire consequences for the people of Darfur.

The UN Secretary-General, Kofi Annan, and a number of governments have stepped up pressure on the Sudanese government to obtain its consent to a UN peacekeeping force. On 11 September,

Kofi Annan called on the Sudanese authorities to reconsider their position on the UN resolution:

"Once again, therefore, I urge the Government of Sudan to embrace the spirit of resolution 1706, to give its consent to the transition... The consequences of the Government's current attitude - yet more death and suffering, perhaps on a catastrophic scale - will be felt first and foremost by the people of Darfur. But the Government itself will also suffer, if it fails in its sacred responsibility to protect its own people. It will suffer... disgrace - in the eyes of all Africa, and the whole international community."

However, the government of Sudan has not reconsidered its refusal to accept UN peacekeepers. Instead, it has stepped up its campaign to gain support for its position, most notably with Arab and African countries. The government of Sudan has also been clamping down on internal criticism and is attempting to silence any support for UN peacekeepers forces in Darfur. On 30 August and 5 September, demonstrations in Khartoum in protest of recent price increases of basic commodities were violently broken up. Hundreds of protestors were arrested, including leading political activists and human right defenders. Many see this as a warning not to oppose the government. Several Sudanese journalists have also reported experiencing increased harassment; one newspaper was seized and another had a page blanked out reportedly for reporting the protests.

In the capital, Khartoum, there is active propaganda about the situation in Darfur. Since the government in Khartoum controls all information, there is no public information which contradicts the government line. It is not widely known, for example, that almost all political opposition parties in Sudan support the deployment of UN peacekeepers.

Amnesty International calls for action!



Activists in Denmark mark the Day for Darfur by calling for UN peacekeepers © AI

On 17 September 2006, thousands of Amnesty International members, along with other activist groups around the world took part in the Global Day for Darfur, led by a large partnership of organizations (www.dayfordarfur.org). Groups all over the world displayed support for the Darfuri people; helping place much needed pressure on governments and the UN to protect civilians. Events which took place around the world included the installation of a cardboard tank in a park in Mexico with the message "Peacekeeping forces in Darfur", to a petition with signatures written on blue paper UN-style helmets in Mongolia, protesters wearing blue berets in London, and a rally of 30,000 people in Central Park, in New York, USA.

All those who participated in the Day for Darfur also urged the international community to ensure that there is no break in peacekeeping, and to bolster the capacity of AMIS by providing the force with the training, equipment and means to be proactive and ready to protect civilians. This must include experts in human rights and civil affairs, to ensure AMIS restores relations with the people of Darfur.

However, the main message of the event was that in order to protect the people of Darfur, individuals need to act to keep up the pressure on Sudan to accept a UN peacekeeping force, which should be

mandated to protect civilians, disarm the Janjawid, prevent cross-border incursions into Chad and monitor the arms embargo on Darfur.

AI's researcher on Sudan says: "Only Sudan is standing out and defying the will of the whole world. What people need to do is mobilise and demonstrate their public support for the people of Darfur for this peacekeeping mission. The only way we are going to be able to change the position of Sudan... is to get our own governments, all around the world, to use every possible means they have to influence Sudan, to use leverage against them, to make sure that they

accept this UN peacekeeping force."

The Sudanese government has shown only contempt for the civilians of Darfur that it is supposed to protect. It has bombed them, attacked them, and given support and impunity to the Janjawid who have wrecked Darfur. Failure to stand up to Sudan and to insist on effective peacekeepers will condemn Darfur to a slow and painful death.

To see a slideshow of pictures from the Day for Darfur, and to sign a petition calling for UN peacekeepers in Sudan, go to www.amnesty.org.