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Sudan: Attack on north Darfur imminent

Amnesty International today warned that the northern areas of Darfur are currently in the crosshairs of the Sudanese armed forces and that further deadly attacks are imminent.

Amnesty International has received reports that Sudan Armed Forces (SAF) are gathering in large numbers in at least six towns in northern Darfur, including Tine, Kornoy, Um Baru, Kutum.

Local people fear further attacks by government or armed opposition forces before peace talks in Tripoli, due to start on 27 October.

"The northern area of North Darfur is under the control of armed opposition groups and it looks as though the Sudan Armed Forces want to attack this area before peace talks scheduled to take place in Libya before the end of the month," said Tawanda Hondora, Deputy Director of Amnesty International's Africa Programme. "We fear that civilians will once more suffer killing and displacement, with no force able to protect them."

Yesterday more than 40 civilians were killed and scores injured when the SAF and Janjawid attacked Muhajeria, a town some 130 kilometres west of Haskanita. The attack was supported by a SAF Antonov, painted white, in the colours of the United Nations. According to reports, bombing from the Antonov preceded the attack. Such Antonovs have been supplied to the SAF from Russia, the last known transfer in September 2006.

Locals attempted to flee the attack, which left a large number of casualties from gunshot and shrapnel at the African Union Mission in Sudan (AMIS) base in the town. The western part of the town has reportedly been looted.

Sudan is prohibited since 2005 from flying offensive flights over Darfur, and has often been criticised for painting aircraft white, in the colours of the UN.

"The gathering of forces in the north, the burning of Haskanita last week, and yesterday's attack on Muhajeriya show the vital importance of ensuring that UNAMID is deployed as soon as possible and has the resources available to protect civilians," said Tawanda Hondora, Amnesty International's Africa Deputy Programme Director.

"There is no time for delays. All signs are there that the people living in the northern area are at great risk and extra personnel and helicopters under military command must be urgently deployed to the area as soon as possible."

AMIS lacks personnel and material to protect civilians in Darfur. Although there are supposed to be some 7000 peacekeepers, there are actually less than 6,000 military personnel spread dangerously thinly over a region the size of France.

The Sudanese government frequently prevents AMIS movement, insisting that the situation is insecure. AMIS forces only have access to chartered helicopters, whose pilots often refuse to fly troops into areas they consider insecure.

"It will be a betrayal of the people of Darfur if, after so much struggle to get a UN force deployed, the international community allows the UN forces to suffer from the same defects that the AU forces have -- Sudan government obstruction combined with a lack of international will to give the right resources," said Hondora.

Background

No one has yet admitted to the 29 September attack on AMIS peacekeepers in Haskanita, which was believed to be by an armed opposition group. The town was then reoccupied by the SAF shortly after the attack. On 5-6 October the

town of 750 households was completely burnt down. Only the mosque and the school are said to be still standing; even the borehole and its water tank were reportedly shot and destroyed.

Public Document

For more information please call Amnesty International's press office in London, UK, on +44 20 7413 5566
Amnesty International, 1 Easton St., London WC1X 0DW. web: <http://www.amnesty.org>

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