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Sudan: Systematic rape of women and girls

*"In our culture, it is a shame, and women will hide this in their hearts so that the men do not hear about it,"
a woman interviewed by Amnesty International*

Alarming reports about the systematic rape of hundreds of women by the government backed armed militia, the Janjawid, have been coming from Darfur region in western Sudan over the past months, demonstrating the need for the international community to step up its pressure on the government. The Sudanese government must take urgent steps to address the human rights and humanitarian crisis in Darfur, Amnesty International said today.

"The cease-fire agreement of 8 April is an important step but remains largely insufficient, if the government does not immediately give access to humanitarian agencies and international human rights monitors. This must include monitors who are trained to deal with issues relating to sexual violence."

"We have received countless reports of women being raped by the Janjawid militia. The long term effects of these crimes can be seen in countries like Rwanda where many women and children remain traumatized and live with sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV/AIDS, following the systematic rape during the genocide 10 years ago. We have also received unconfirmed reports that many women and girls have been abducted to be used as sexual slaves or domestic workers," Amnesty International said.

Villages were attacked in the Tawila area, between 27 and 29 February 2004. Residents and outside humanitarian aid workers, including the United Nations (UN), reported the systematic rape of women and schoolchildren. The former Humanitarian Coordinator for Sudan, Mukesh Kapila said: "All houses as well as a market and a health centre were completely looted and the market burnt. Over 100 women were raped, six in front of their fathers who were later killed".

In March a shaikh told the UN that, in Mornei in Western Darfur, up to 16 women per day were being raped as they went to collect water in the river bed (*wadi*). Women had no choice but to continue to go to collect water despite the threat of rape, because they feared that their men would be killed if they went instead.

The extent of the problem has yet to be fully established, as one refugee woman in Chad told an Amnesty International researcher in January: "women will not tell you easily if such a thing happens to them. In our culture, it is a shame, and women will hide this in their hearts so that the men do not hear about it."

Women make up a disproportionate number of internally displaced people, who have sought refuge in urban centres in the region. There they come under the control of the Janjawid and government forces and are at continued risk of sexual attacks. They also suffer chronic food shortage because of the Sudan government's delays in allowing humanitarian access to the region. Currently only an estimated 50 per cent of internally displaced people have access to humanitarian assistance.

"Humanitarian access and protection of civilians must not be conditional on developments in the peace talks in Ndjamena. The international community must put added pressure on the Sudan government to allow unimpeded humanitarian access to all areas of Darfur and to allow the deployment of international human rights monitors to the region," said Amnesty International.

The organisation is also concerned that the UN fact finding mission headed by Bacre Waly Ndiaye, head of the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights in New York, has not been granted access to Darfur, suggesting that the government is not serious about addressing the human rights crisis in the region.

In the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court rape is a war crime and crime against humanity. Sudan signed this statute and the international community must ensure that it abides by its international legal obligations.

Finally, it is time that any cease-fire agreement and any political agreement commit the participants to fully respect the human rights of women.

Amnesty International is running a global campaign to end violence against women. For more information and news related to the campaign "Stop violence against women" visit:
<http://news.amnesty.org/mav/actforwomen>

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