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Sudan: Intimidation and denial - attacks on freedom of expression in Darfur

Rather than taking decisive action to curb widespread human rights violations in Darfur, the Sudanese government instead is seeking to gag those who are speaking about the abuses, Amnesty International said in a new report published today.

Under increasing international pressure, the Sudanese government is attacking freedom of expression, so as to control information which would reveal whether or not the government is fulfilling its commitments.

"Instead of arresting those who commit human rights violations, the Sudanese authorities are arresting those who are exposing the perpetrators," Irene Khan, Secretary General of Amnesty International said.

Despite the risks attached, people are speaking and will continue to speak out against human rights violations in Darfur because of the feeling they have nothing more to lose.

On 30 August the UN Security Council will discuss the Secretary-General's report on the situation in Sudan: "As long as people who want to speak out about these violations are intimidated and arrested, the commitments of the Government of Sudan to the international community remain hollow," Irene Khan said.

Freedom of expression has been notably absent in political discussions between the Sudanese government and the United Nations or others. Freedom of expression is essential not only because it is a right in itself, but because it acts in defence of other rights. Unless people are allowed to speak freely it will be difficult for UN and AU observers to make an accurate assessment of any progress in Darfur.

Among the cases in Amnesty International's latest report are those of seven people arrested for giving information to the African Union's ceasefire monitors in Abu Dereja near Al Fasher on 15 July and 17 July. They were reportedly still being detained in the National Security centre in Al Fasher as of 20 August.

The Sudanese authorities are also trying to stop civil society from discussing the causes

and solutions to the crisis. People have been arrested for presenting petitions, trying to organize public meetings and opposing the return of those displaced by the conflict to unsafe areas.

Control over the independent Sudanese press is tight, and government-owned television and radio give a one-sided view of the crisis, portraying foreign media reports about human right violations in Darfur as a "conspiracy against Sudan". As one Sudanese lawyer said: *"One problem is the lack of information in Khartoum about the conflict. People in Khartoum do not know what is happening in Darfur. On the television and the radio the government says that everything is all right in Darfur, that people receive aid and that the situation is under control,"*.

The Sudanese government has further sought to control information on the crisis by not granting access to Darfur, in spite of numerous requests, to international human rights organizations, including Amnesty International, which have been critical towards Khartoum.

The Sudanese government should lift all restrictions on the right to freedom of expression and release all those detained solely for expressing their opinions.

The right to freedom of expression must be protected in Sudanese commitments, in peace talks, and in any monitoring of the situation in Darfur.

Public Document

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