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Sudan: International community must act now to guarantee the protection of civilians

Amnesty International is reiterating its call for international monitors with a clear human rights component to be sent to Darfur immediately.

In spite of the Sudanese presidency's recent statement that "military operations in Darfur (western Sudan) have ended" Amnesty International continues to receive details of horrifying attacks against civilians in villages by government warplanes, soldiers and government-aligned militia.

"President Omar Hassan al-Bashir stated last week that humanitarian access to Darfur, western Sudan, is now authorized and will improve. But our reports from Darfur show that respect for international humanitarian law, which would create the conditions for independent and impartial humanitarian assessment and assistance, is not observed" Amnesty International said.

Information received by Amnesty International also details attacks on and looting of civilian property by armed political opposition groups (the Sudan Liberation Army - SLA, and the Justice and Equality Movement , JEM) fighting the Sudanese government in the region.

"Until there are firm guarantees by all parties to the war in Darfur to put an end to attacks on civilians, there will be no effective improvement to the humanitarian situation of civilians," Amnesty International said. "Given the competing claims by the Sudanese government and armed political opposition groups on the real situation of civilians in Darfur, it is crucial that independent and impartial human rights monitors are given access to the area and enabled to investigate and report on gross abuses of international humanitarian and human rights law."

"Those who have committed or ordered gross human rights abuses such as the killing of civilians, abductions and the destruction of property must be held accountable," said Amnesty International. On 3 February, Amnesty International called in a report for perpetrators of gross abuses in Darfur to be made accountable.

Reported abuses of international humanitarian law

Around 11 February, five villages, Shattaya, Derlewiya, Magara, Kaleik and Romalya, situated south of the town of Kass, in South Darfur, were reportedly attacked by the "*Janjawid*" militias aligned with the Sudanese government. Between 68 and 80 civilians were said to have been killed in these attacks. Last week some 30 girls were allegedly abducted by government soldiers in an attack on the area of Mukjar, in West Darfur State.

Between 10 and 12 February, 11 towns and villages, situated between Habila and Mornay in West Darfur - the names of the villages are Habila Karainik, Karainik, Moqarni, Mornay, Gurnyu, Mejmeri, Effendi, Urbi, Liri, Kastara and Nuri -were reportedly bombed by the Sudanese Air Force in what appeared to be indiscriminate attacks. The Janjawid reportedly killed civilians who were fleeing from Habila Karainik to Habila, including Mohamed Ismail, Imam of the mosque and Mubarak al-Nur. Those displaced by the bombing have reportedly taken refuge in the larger towns in the area such as Mornay, Habila, Magornay, Karainik, which are now said to be surrounded by *Janjawid* militias.

Darfur's armed political groups fighting against the government were also alleged to have attacked a hospital in the region, killing some patients, and engaged in looting of civilian property. On 13 February, the rebel groups reportedly attacked Sellya'a and Yasin villages in southern Darfur. They allegedly kidnapped two policemen and stole money in the attacks.

"We are calling on the government to demonstrate its commitment to protect civilians in Darfur by immediately suspending and bringing to justice all members of its armed forces, including government-aligned *Janjawid* militia, suspected of having participated in human rights abuses in the region," Amnesty International stressed.

"The SLA and the JEM should commit themselves to respect international humanitarian law, to ensure that no civilian is the subject of unlawful attack, and to give unhindered access to human rights monitors who can investigate and report on allegations of abuses by their forces," the organization urged

Humanitarian access to the region

On 11 February, after intense fighting and aerial bombardments in North Darfur, Sudanese President Omar Hassan al-Bashir announced a military victory - denied by armed political groups- and a "unilateral humanitarian access" in Darfur. He gave those fighting the government a month to give up their arms after which they could be given an amnesty. He also promised humanitarian organizations access to Al-Fasher, Kutum, Umbaru, Kornoj, Al-Tina, Jeneina, Zalingei, Mornay, Kolbus and the whole of Southern Darfur State. Last week international humanitarian experts and representatives of foreign embassies in Sudan were allowed to visit the region. Relief organizations have been able to bring food to Kutum, and consequently tens of thousands of internally displaced have reportedly flocked into the town.

"These steps are to be welcomed. However, humanitarian organizations must be able to reach those in need wherever they are, including in rural areas or areas where armed groups may operate", said Amnesty International.

The Sudanese government must also guarantee that humanitarian access will be free of political interference.

"Outside observers must be allowed to talk freely to people in Darfur, including the victims of this war, many of whom camp around the major towns in Darfur and continue to be denied proper protection. The government must also ensure that those who talk about human rights abuses are free do so without fear of reprisal," Amnesty International urged.

Today, peace talks to resolve the 20-year-old civil war in southern Sudan resume in Naivasha, Kenya. Darfur is not covered by these talks.

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