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## **Sudan: Southern Kordofan Civilians Tell of Air Strike Horror**

The Sudan Armed Forces (SAF) are indiscriminately bombing civilian areas in the Nuba Mountains region of Southern Kordofan and preventing aid from reaching desperate displaced people, Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch said today.

Researchers from both groups, during a week-long mission to the area in late-August, investigated 13 air strikes in Kauda, Delami and Kurchi areas. Those air strikes killed at least 26 civilians and injured more than 45 others since mid-June. The researchers also witnessed government planes circling over civilian areas and dropping bombs, forcing civilians to seek shelter in mountains and caves.

“The relentless bombing campaign is killing and maiming civilian men, women and children, displacing tens of thousands, putting them in desperate need of aid, and preventing entire communities from planting crops and feeding their children,” said Daniel Bekele, Africa director at Human Rights Watch.

“The Sudanese government is literally getting away with murder and trying to keep the outside world from finding out” said Donatella Rovera, Amnesty International’s Senior Crisis Response Advisor. “The international community, and particularly the UN Security Council, must stop looking the other way and act to address the situation”.

Civilians have no way to protect themselves from indiscriminate bombings. Relatives of victims told Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch about their ordeal: “I heard explosions, and then a neighbor brought the body of Maryam to the house,” said the mother of two girls killed in one air strike. “She was hit on the head and part of her head was gone. He told me to go to the graveyard because they had taken Iqbal there. I went but her injuries were so terrible, I could not even look.”

According to aid groups on the ground, the bombing, attacks, and fighting have displaced more than 150,000 people in areas under control of opposition forces, where government restrictions have prevented aid groups from delivering food and other assistance. About 5,000 people have crossed the border with South Sudan to reach a refugee settlement in Unity state.

The bombs have had a devastating impact on the civilian population. Displaced communities forced out of their homes by the repeated bombing live in harsh conditions in caves, on mountaintops, under trees, and in the bush far from towns. They lack sufficient food, medicine, sanitation, and shelter from heavy rains. Many displaced families told researchers they were eating berries and leaves and that their children were suffering from diarrhea and malaria.

On August 23, President Omar al-Bashir, who is wanted by the International Criminal Court (ICC) for serious crimes against civilians in the western region of Darfur, announced a two-week unilateral ceasefire in Southern Kordofan, where Sudanese forces have fought armed opposition forces since early June. However, local organizations on the ground said that despite the ceasefire, the government continued to bomb civilian areas. Al-Bashir also said that neither the UN nor international aid agencies will be allowed to assist the displaced.

While researchers were on the ground, Antonov aircrafts dropped bombs over farmlands and villages almost daily. For example, on August 14, a plane dropped bombs near the village of Kurchi, 70 kilometers east of Kadugli, destroying the home and possessions of Wazir al-Kharaba. The researchers also photographed three bombs falling from an Antonov aircraft near Kurchi at 5:15 pm on August 19. On August 22, another air strike seriously injured a man in the leg and an elderly woman in the jaw and damaged a school.

“Indiscriminate attacks in civilian areas and restrictions on humanitarian aid could amount to war crimes and crimes against humanity,” said Donatella Rovera, “Such attacks must cease and independent humanitarian needs assessment and relief delivery must be allowed immediately”

No evident military targets were visible near any of the air strike locations the researchers visited. Witnesses said Antonov planes or fighter jets flying at high altitudes dropped the bombs in civilian areas where, they said, there were no military targets nearby.

Weapons experts told the organizations that the munitions used are unguided and are often rolled out manually from Antonov cargo planes or launched from other aircraft in a manner that does not allow for accurate delivery. “Use of weapons in a civilian area that cannot accurately be directed at a military objective makes such strikes inherently indiscriminate, in violation of international humanitarian law”, said Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch.

In government-held areas, UN agencies and other aid groups say they have been prevented from reaching many affected people because of the security situation and severe government restrictions. The Sudanese authorities have prevented the same agencies from accessing and delivering relief to opposition-held areas by refusing to authorize relief flights and by launching air strikes on air strips/runways used for aid delivery. On June 14, 19 and 24 government aircraft, including fighter jets, bombed near and on the Kauda airstrip.

Although the government announced on August 20 that it had never restricted access to the Nuba Mountains, President al-Bashir said three days later that no international groups would be allowed into the state, and that only the Sudanese Red Crescent would be allowed to deliver assistance.

As parties to the conflict, the Sudanese government and the opposition forces should immediately agree to allow humanitarian aid by air and road to reach all affected populations, regardless of where they are living, Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch said. All humanitarian aid agencies should be given unrestricted access to help civilians now in urgent need of food, shelter and other aid.

The conflict began on June 5 between the Sudanese government and Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) in Kadugli and Um Durein, and quickly spread to other towns and villages where both government and SPLA forces were present.

Fighting erupted in the context of growing tensions between the northern Sudan ruling National Congress Party (NCP) and the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM) -- the political party that now rules independent South Sudan -- over security arrangements in the state and the disputed state elections in which the incumbent candidate for governor Ahmed Haroun, a former minister for humanitarian affairs who is also wanted by the ICC for war crimes and crimes against humanity in Darfur, narrowly won the governorship.

Southern Kordofan is home to large populations of ethnic Nuba groups with longstanding ties to the former southern rebel movement, which fought the Sudanese government forces in the Nuba Mountains during Sudan's 22-year civil war, which ended in 2005. When South Sudan became an independent state on July 9 this year, the SPLM operating in Sudan became known as SPLM-North, and the armed opposition group in Southern Kordofan became known as SPLA-North.

Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch researchers could not reach the front lines or enter the places controlled by the Sudan Armed Forces where the violence first erupted. But the researchers

interviewed scores of displaced people who escaped fighting in Kadugli and other areas.

Witnesses said soldiers and militia shot people in the streets and carried out both house-to-house searches and stops at checkpoints using lists of names of known SPLM supporters. The witnesses also described destruction, looting and burning of churches and homes, including the bulldozing of homes of known SPLM members.

The accounts are consistent with many of the findings in the report the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) released on August 15. That report was based on research carried out by United Nations Mission in Sudan (UNMIS) human rights monitors before the mission's mandate ended in early July, ahead of South Sudan's independence. The report documents patterns of unlawful killings and widespread attacks on civilian properties that could amount to war crimes and crimes against humanity, Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch said.

The Sudanese government has dismissed the UN report's findings, and asked the UN Security Council to delay discussion of Southern Kordofan until the government completed its own human rights investigation.

"Sudan appears to be trying to whitewash serious human rights abuses while it continues to bomb civilians and prevent humanitarian assistance," said Donatella Rovera of Amnesty International. "The Security Council has remained silent far too long. It should not sit silent as bombs fall on civilians."

The Security Council met on August 19, but failed to agree on a statement condemning human rights violations in Southern Kordofan or to take any concrete action, in large part because of objections by South Africa, Russia and China.

"South Africa's position is especially disappointing," said Daniel Bekele. "As a leading African state, it should use be doing everything to protect innocent civilians in Southern Kordofan from experiencing a repeat the horrific civil war in which so many perished."

Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch urged the Security Council to firmly condemn and demand an end to Sudan's indiscriminate bombings in civilian populated areas and other violations, call for unfettered access for humanitarian agencies to all affected areas, and take concrete action to ensure an independent human rights monitoring presence across Southern Kordofan.

The organizations also urged the Council to implement the recommendations of the High Commissioner for Human Rights to mandate an independent inquiry into the alleged violations of international human rights and humanitarian law that occurred during the hostilities in Southern Kordofan, and hold perpetrators to account.