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PRESS RELEASE

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Sudan: Distress, denial and disappointment in Darfur **Findings of Amnesty International visit to Darfur**

The picture in Darfur is one of distress, denial and disappointment. Distress of people whose lives and livelihood have been destroyed, denial of responsibility by the Sudanese government and disappointment at the slow progress to resolve this crisis, concluded Amnesty International, the first international non-governmental human rights organisation to visit Sudan and meet with senior members of the Sudanese government, since the Darfur crisis began.

In a marked departure from past practice, the mission delegates were given free and full access to Darfur. Delegates visited Al Jeneina, Nyala and Al Fasher and met with senior government ministers and officials in Khartoum and Darfur, as well as international organizations and civil society representatives.

The visit confirmed Amnesty International's earlier analysis of attacks on villages by government supported militia, in some cases backed by the Sudanese armed forces, killing civilians, looting and burning homes.

The delegation saw several sites where villages had been burnt to the ground, or abandoned and which were now almost overgrown with vegetation. They saw camels, goats and cattle being grazed by nomads on land where previously villages of farming tribes had been situated.

They heard first hand accounts of atrocities from displaced persons in camps and villages in western Darfur and in Nyala in southern Darfur. Two women described how, in February 2004, their village near Nuri in western Darfur was attacked by armed militia and bombed, leaving some 130 people dead. One of the women said that so many men had been killed that it was left to the women to bury the dead and she and another woman had buried seven men. The women placed the bodies they could not bury that evening in a shelter, but they said that the Janjawid returned in the night and burnt the shelter and the bodies.

"While we found engagement and admission of violations of human rights and international humanitarian law by some members of the government there was total denial by others. Such denial is insulting to the victims," said Irene Khan, Secretary General of Amnesty International.

"The displacement of people continues -- people are still being uprooted from their homes by fighting as well as by deliberate attacks on civilians," stated Bill Schulz, AI USA Executive Director and a member of the delegation, as he described the recent arrival of 3,000 people to Kalma camp.

The delegates visited displaced people from nomadic tribes now in Musai camp near Nyala, where they heard "mirror image" accounts of killings and rapes said to have been committed by the insurgents. Amnesty International condemns strongly all violations of international humanitarian law committed by armed political groups.

Amnesty International acknowledged the government's efforts to increase the number of police in Darfur by redeployment from other parts of Sudan. However, often they are not properly equipped. Furthermore, the delegation heard from displaced persons that police did not investigate their complaints and that some of Janjawid had been absorbed apparently into the police and government militia.

"Because of rampant insecurity and the failure to address past abuses, those who have suffered say they do not trust the government. They say they don't feel safe in the camps, they say they are filled with fear outside. Every person we spoke to in the camps was adamant that they do not feel safe enough to return to their villages," said Samkelo Mokhine, Chair of AI South Africa, and a delegate on the mission.

"In this situation the only solution is a massive increase in monitors. An international presence in every district is what is needed now to build the confidence of the people and improve security."

Amnesty International welcomes the proposed increase of AU monitors. "But it is not just an issue of numbers but also of ensuring that the mandate and capacity of the AU monitors are strengthened to enable them to meet the expectations. The UN human rights observers must also be dramatically increased and properly resourced to carry out their responsibilities."

"Indicators and benchmarks to judge progress on protection of human rights must be qualitative and not quantitative -- it is not a question of numbers of monitors and observers but of their impact on the protection of civilians; it is not a question of simply having more policemen, but of them having the ability and willingness to protect people," said Ms Khan.

"Restoring security is essential to enable people to return home voluntarily and in safety and dignity. The significance of establishing these conditions cannot be too heavily underscored. Otherwise there is a risk that ethnic cleansing might lead to ethnic re-engineering," cautioned Ms Khan, pointing out that prolonged displacement could upset the demographic balance in the region.

The Amnesty International delegation found that the "safe areas" designated by the Government of Sudan do not provide real safety to those living there, imply that those living elsewhere can be attacked with impunity, and is a disincentive for restoring security elsewhere.

"The UN must persuade the Government of Sudan to abandon this concept and instead put its weight behind the already agreed Plan of Action to enhance safety throughout Darfur by stopping violations of human rights and international humanitarian law, respecting the ceasefire, disarming and disbanding the militia, and ending impunity."

"The authorities told us that they have arrested, prosecuted and punished some Janjawid but the cases we tracked with the judicial authorities in El Jeneina and Nyala confirmed our impression that impunity remains largely unaddressed," said Ms Khan.

Amnesty International welcomes the request by the UN Security Council for the rapid establishment of an independent International Commission of Inquiry, which has been one of Amnesty International's key recommendations for some months, to investigate war crimes and crimes against humanity and establish whether genocide has taken place.

The delegation concluded that the humanitarian situation in Darfur remains extremely precarious, despite full and free humanitarian access. "The region does not have the infrastructure to allow a humanitarian operation of this scale to be run for a long period of time. If displacement continues, access is

lost, international assistance and attention drops, there is still a possibility that the crisis could turn into a catastrophe."

"Darfur must remain on the agenda of the international community until the people are able to live freely and safely," declared Ms Khan.

Background

An Amnesty International delegation headed by its Secretary General Irene Khan and which included the Director of Amnesty International USA and the Chair of Amnesty International South Africa, visited Darfur from 14-21 September 2004 to gather information, assess the human rights aspects of the crisis and press the Government of Sudan to take action.

Mission delegates:

Irene Khan, Secretary General, Amnesty International
William Schulz, Director of Amnesty International USA
Samkelo Mokhele, Chair of Amnesty International South Africa

From the International Secretariat in London:

Erwin van der Borght, Deputy Program Director Africa
Elizabeth Hodgkin and Lamri Chirouf, researchers
Judit Arenas, External Relations Adviser
Selina Nelte, Audio Visual team

High resolution images of the mission in Sudan can be downloaded from
http://news.amnesty.org/pages/sudan_photos

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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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