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Sudan: Immediate steps to protect civilians and internally displaced persons in Darfur

Amnesty International today called on all parties responsible for intensifying attacks in Darfur, western Sudan, to immediately halt all deliberate and indiscriminate attacks on civilians and civilian objects. Hundreds of civilians, mainly from sedentary groups such as the Fur, Zaghawa, Masalit and Tungur have been killed or injured and tens of thousands displaced in the past few months. The attacks have been committed by "bandits", armed militia or in the context of the fighting between the Sudanese army and the Sudan Liberation Army (SLA), an armed opposition group operating in the area since February 2003.

"The Sudanese government must take immediate steps to protect the lives of civilians affected by the conflict, including displaced persons (IDPs) in Darfur", Amnesty International said. "The Sudanese government must take all measures necessary to ensure that those displaced by the unfolding conflict receive adequate protection and humanitarian assistance without discrimination."

The Sudanese government is responsible under international human rights and humanitarian law for the protection of civilians. Its response to the situation in Darfur should not include steps likely to cause more people to flee their homes. It must publicly condemn the human rights abuses committed in Darfur, which seem to target particular ethnic groups, and take urgent steps to prevent further unlawful killings of civilians.

Such attacks are forbidden by international humanitarian law. The deliberate and arbitrary killings of unarmed civilians is in clear contravention of common Article 3 of the Geneva Conventions of 1949 which prohibits "violence to life and person, in particular murder of all kinds" against persons not taking active part in hostilities. International humanitarian law also forbids forcible displacement and the destruction of civilian property without absolute military necessity yet parties to the conflict have committed such abuses.

Unlawful killings of civilians

In mid-August in the area of Wadi Salih, west of Kabkabiya, in West Darfur, Masalit and Fur villages were attacked, reportedly by the Jenjaweed, an armed group of "bandits" wearing government soldiers uniforms. In Bindisi, at least 26 persons were killed in the attack and 60 persons injured. In the past few days, Kornoy town and Tina, on the border with Chad, in North Darfur were reportedly bombed daily by government Antonov planes. Bombings of Kornoy, where civilians are still present, appeared to disregard the principles of proportionality and the requirement to distinguish civilian targets. Tina is reportedly under SLA-control but most of its inhabitants are said to have fled to Chad. Barday village, near Kabkabiya was reportedly bombed by government planes and attacked by ground forces on 16 July, resulting in the killing of at least 58 civilians.

On 5 and 6 August, at least 42 civilians, including Ali Suleiman and Alsir Ali Suleiman, were reportedly summarily killed in or outside their homes in Kutum town, North Darfur, by Jenjaweed wearing government soldiers uniforms. According to reports by civilians, those shot dead were deliberately targeted because they were community leaders and businessmen of Zaghawa, Fur and Tungur ethnicities. Civilians allege that the Jenjaweed were armed and supported by the Sudanese army; the Governor of North Darfur publicly denied this. The attackers then looted the market, civilian properties and burnt shops. The attack occurred after the SLA withdrew from the town on 3 August.

While the SLA was taking Kutum, armed militia allegedly supported by the government attacked villages surrounding the town. In apparently deliberate attacks, on 25 July, at least 15 civilians were killed, including Duda Hassan Jabir and Yakub Khalifa Hassan, and nine injured in Kereinga. On 26 July, 38 civilians were reportedly killed in the village of Abu Jidad, including Altigani Mahmoud Altayeb and Mohamed Abdulla Yaqub. On 27 July, at least 43 civilians were reported killed in the village of Goor al-Naem, including Makka Naser Mahmoud and Mohamed Mansour Nahar; a woman was allegedly raped then killed by the attackers.

Other large-scale killings of civilians are reported but difficult to confirm due to the absence of independent observers in the region, government-enforced restrictions on telecommunications and transport, and a black-out on news on Darfur imposed by the security forces on the Sudanese press in the capital. Amnesty International fears that the death toll in Darfur is much higher than that which is currently reported.

Population displacement triggered by the conflict

Attacks and threats of attacks have caused tens of thousands of civilians to flee and become internally displaced in Darfur or take refuge in neighbouring Chad. In a region chronically affected by drought, the displacement of civilians mostly dependent on farming for subsistence, increases the potential for a humanitarian disaster. The situation is further compounded by the fact that fields have been burnt, grains and other means of subsistence looted during attacks, and water wells destroyed by government bombings. Either concerns about insecurity or government restrictions have limited access by humanitarian agencies to the affected populations.

"Like all Sudanese citizens IDPs enjoy rights under national and international law. The government must ensure that it respects and protects their human rights without discrimination, including access to adequate medical treatment, food and shelter," Amnesty International said.

Scores of civilians have fled to Kabkabiya town in the past few months. Reports allege that 300 villages have been attacked or burnt to the ground in the area. Many reportedly live in the open or in the local school. They have very little or no access to humanitarian aid. For instance hundreds have fled after an attack on Shoba, a Fur village situated 7 km south of Kabkabiya on 25 July, by armed militia wearing government army uniforms, in which at least 51 Shoba villagers, including many elders, were killed. No casualties among the attackers were reported. They were reportedly prevented for two days from returning to Shoba, to assist the injured and bury their dead, by a road block organized by government soldiers.

Thousands of civilians have now fled Kutum and taken refuge in surrounding villages or unknown places or have tried to reach El-Fasher, the capital of North Darfur, situated some 80 km south-east of their town. Although a few are said to have reached El-Fasher, most are reportedly stranded in Kafut, a village halfway between both towns, because the Sudanese army stopped more civilians from taking refuge in El-Fasher. Civilians are reportedly living under trees, without any means of subsistence and are in desperate need of food, shelter and clothing. A preliminary assessment of their situation was reportedly made by the government Humanitarian Aid Commission and other relief organizations. Amnesty International fears that many other displaced are still unaccounted for.

"Amnesty International welcomes any positive move, such as the reported preliminary assessment

in Kutum, by the Sudanese authorities to address the security and humanitarian needs of the displaced in Darfur. However, the organization condemns the targeting of IDPs by the Sudanese security forces, whether it is bombings, restrictions on access to safer areas, or arbitrary arrests and detentions of persons on the grounds that their ethnicity or social position renders them suspected of supporting the SLA."

The organization further calls on the international community to condemn the numerous attacks on civilians in Darfur and to press the Sudanese authorities to take urgent steps to protect civilians and IDPs in the region.

Background

Over the past few years nomad groups from the area have killed hundreds of civilians from sedentary agricultural groups in Darfur, such as the Fur, Zaghawa and Masalit, burning homes and looting cattle and goats. In February 2003, the SLA took up arms in protest at the perceived lack of government protection against attacks on sedentary groups and the marginalisation and underdevelopment of Darfur.

Amnesty International called on the government not to respond to the crisis by violating human rights and to resolve it by inclusive discussions with leaders of different ethnic groups in Darfur. It then called on the Sudanese government to establish an independent Commission of Inquiry into the deteriorating situation in Darfur. When this opportunity was lost, Amnesty International called for the establishment of an international Commission of Inquiry into Darfur. The organization also asked for Darfur to be included in the agreement on the protection of civilians established as part of the internationally-sponsored peace process to resolve the long-standing civil war in southern Sudan and for human rights monitors to be sent to investigate attacks on civilians. Amnesty International continues its calls.

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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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