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More killings as “peacekeeping gap” threatens in Darfur

Despite the signing of the Darfur Peace Agreement in May 2006, crimes against civilians are on the increase. In North Darfur, civilians have been targeted as factional fighting erupted between armed rebel groups who are split over the peace deal with the Sudanese government.

"In the past few weeks, there has been an upsurge in violence in the region, mostly in North Darfur and areas near the Chad border, resulting in civilian deaths and displacement and jeopardizing the ability of humanitarian organizations to provide life-sustaining assistance to hundreds of thousands of war-affected people."

UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan, letter to the President of the UN Security Council, 10 August 2006

Despite the signing of the Darfur Peace Agreement in May 2006, crimes against civilians are on the increase. In North Darfur, civilians have been targeted as factional fighting erupted between armed rebel groups who are split over the peace deal with the Sudanese government.

Peace signatories leading attacks

Between 4 and 8 July, villages around Korma town were ravaged. Eleven pupils and a teacher were shot dead at a school in the village of Dalil. Seven women were killed and 39 were raped. There was extensive looting of livestock and possessions. Survivors dubbed their attackers “Janjawid 2”, such was their ferocity.

But these attackers were not the infamous Janjawid that have killed, raped and driven some two million people in Darfur from their homes in the past three years. The forces that struck in Korma are supposed to be intent on peace, not on destroying it.

The attackers were reported to be members of the Minni Minawi faction of the Sudan Liberation Army (SLA), a signatory to the Darfur Peace Agreement. The SLA, who are the main opposition force to the Sudanese government and Janjawid in Darfur, is now fragmenting over disagreements on the peace deal.

In recent weeks the Minni Minawi faction has attacked the bases of other SLA factions who have not signed the peace deal. The Korma area was one such area. Those who refused to sign the peace agreement argue that it provides insufficient guarantees for the disarmament of the Janjawid and not enough compensation for victims of human rights violations. Villagers reported their attackers as saying that the Korma raids were carried out as punishment for opposition to the peace deal.

According to eyewitnesses, Sudanese government armed forces and the Janjawid accompanied Minni Minawi's group in their attacks in Korma..

Peacekeeping forces powerless

The killings in North Darfur highlight the powerlessness of the 7,000-strong African Union peacekeeping force in Darfur (African Union Mission in Sudan, AMIS). AMIS was not only unable to protect civilians in Korma, but has yet to investigate the killings thoroughly. Investigations of ceasefire and human rights violations by AMIS are being hampered by the rift between signatories and non-signatories of the Darfur Peace Agreement.

Due to its failure to protect civilians in Darfur, AMIS has lost the faith of many of the people in Darfur. Many of the displaced who do not support the Darfur Peace Agreement have become wary of the African Union which has brokered it.

Civilians in Darfur, most Sudanese political parties, the different factions of the armed opposition in Darfur, and the African Union itself are all calling for AMIS to be replaced by a UN peacekeeping force. Yet Sudanese President Lieutenant-General Omar al-Bashir has fiercely opposed such a move, accusing the UN of seeking to send "colonial" forces into Sudan.

"We shall never hand Darfur over to international forces which will never enjoy being in the region that will become their graveyard."

Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir, 28 July 2006, quoted by the Sudan News Agency

There is a serious risk that the Sudanese President will succeed in creating a peacekeeping "gap" by refusing a transfer to a UN force. AMIS peacekeepers are now expected to stay in Darfur until the end of 2006, but in too few numbers to be effective.

Effective and resourced peacekeepers needed

Amnesty International is urging the Sudanese President to accept the deployment of a UN peacekeeping force in Darfur that is properly resourced and with a robust mandate to protect civilians. But it is also urging the international community to ensure that there is no break in peacekeeping.

To bolster the capacity of the African Union peacekeepers currently on the ground, AMIS must be reinforced immediately with the training, equipment and means to be proactive and ready to protect civilians. This must include experts in human rights and civil affairs, to ensure AMIS restores relations with the people of Darfur.

In the meantime the UN Security Council must define the mandate of a UN peacekeeping force, to ensure it is prepared to rapidly take on the roles of protecting civilians, disarming the Janjawid, preventing cross-border incursions into Chad and monitoring the arms embargo on Darfur.

The Sudanese government has shown only contempt for the civilians of Darfur that it is supposed to protect. It has bombed them, attacked them, and given support and impunity to the Janjawid who have wrecked Darfur. Failure to stand up to Sudan's recalcitrance and to insist on effective peacekeepers will condemn Darfur to a slow and painful death.



Aza Ahmed Ibrahim breaks down as she tells her story, Goz Beida, Chad.
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