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Sudan UN: must extend Darfur peacekeepers mandate by at least six months

The UN Security Council must extend the mandate of the peacekeeping mission in Darfur (UNAMID) by at least six months in light of failure by government security forces to protect civilians in recent months, said Amnesty International, with weeks left to the end of the mission’s mandate.

More than 70 people, including farmers and the internally displaced people (IDPs), were killed by members of armed groups between July and September 2020 in Masterei, in West Darfur state, in Nertiti, Central Darfur state, and in Fata Borno, North Darfur state, areas that are under the control of Sudanese security forces. At least another 78 people were injured in armed attacks in this period, while looting and burning of houses, markets and shops was commonplace as thousands of people were displaced in Darfur. Also, from July to September 2020, according to the International Organization for Migration, more than 8,000 displaced was caused by the conflict between factions of the Sudan Liberation Army – Abdel Wahid (SLA-AW) in Central Darfur.

“With UNAMID’s mandate due to end at the close of the year, and UNITAMS which is meant to replace it still not yet staffed or operationalized, Amnesty International is concerned for future civilian protection in Darfur, particularly given the national security forces’ failure to step up and protect civilians from attacks in recent months, we fear a security vacuum may arise with disastrous consequences for the people of Darfur,” said Deprose Muchena, Amnesty International’s Director for East and Southern Africa.

“The UN Security Council should extend UNAMID’s mandate for at least six to ensure the peacekeepers do not leave before UNITAMS is fully operational, and to enable proper training of national forces to take over the massive responsibility of civilian protection. Otherwise, there will be a security vacuum, with disastrous consequences for the people of Darfur.”

Rapid Support Forces implicated

Amnesty International has interviewed witnesses to various attacks between July and September in Fata Borno in North Darfur state, Masterei in West Darfur state, and Nertiti in Central Darfur state.

In Fata Borno, approximately 10,000 Internally Displaced People (IDPs) began a sit-in protest on 6 July to demand better security, protection of their crops and the sacking of officials affiliated with former President Omar Al-Bashir. A week later an armed group attacked the protesters, killing at least nine and injuring at least 17.

Mariam, (not her real name) said the armed group started their attack on the area at 7am. When the IDPs called local government officials to alert them, their phones were switched off. “The attackers looted our properties and a large number of livestock. They burnt and ransacked the market and houses. They killed nine people and wounded 17. They attacked and killed men inside the sit-in area. The attack continued from 7am until 3pm. Government security arrived after 4pm. UNAMID also came and treated the injured and took some to hospitals in Kutum and Al Fasher,” she said.

Adam, also not his real name, said the attack came after a delegation from the North Darfur state had come to see the protesters and insulted them. “...armed men wearing Sudan Armed Forces and Rapid Support Forces uniforms attacked us from all directions and killed about nine people and injured 17 or 18 people. They are some people still missing. They looted and burnt houses and the market. Now we have no food or anything. The government sent some security forces at 5pm. I told them you came too late. All the government officials in the locality could not be reached during the attack,” Adam told Amnesty International.

“The Sudanese government must ensure that the Darfur people are not abandoned. It must ensure national forces are adequately equipped and trained to respect, protect and fulfil human rights. Members of the security forces suspected of crimes under international law must be excluded from the proposed joint forces,” said Deprose Muchena.

“The government must also ensure its forces and their allied armed groups are held accountable for any violations under international human rights laws, and international humanitarian law.”

“We call them Janjaweed”

In Masterei, West Darfur state, at least 60 farmers from the Massalit community were killed and over 60 others wounded on 25 July during sit-in protests to demand security during the rainy season so that they could plant their crops. Eyewitnesses told Amnesty International that thousands of armed men attacked the town killing, injuring and maiming the protesting farmers.

One told Amnesty International that the protesters had appealed to the state government for protection after an earlier attack on 18 July, but government officials “failed to heed our call”. The witness said on 25 July, approximately 3,000 armed attackers approached from different directions, some from the northeast, others from the southwest.

“Some were on foot, some were riding horses, motorcycles, and cars. They were carrying all types of weapons. Some wore uniforms like those of the Rapid Support Force, others were wearing brown camouflage uniforms. The attackers belong to many tribes, but we call them Janjaweed; we know some of them by name and we reported them to the police,” the eyewitness said.

Amna, not her real name, a health worker, said the assailants killed her husband, leaving her to care for their eight children alone. “They looted and burnt my house. The attackers were wearing different clothes, some in khaki uniform [army uniform] and others in civilian clothes. Some were walking and others riding motorbikes, pick-ups and saloon cars.”

A medical doctor said the El Geneina and Al Salam hospitals treated several people injured in the 25 July attack. “I think what happened there was due to a weak security presence in the area. The security forces failed to intervene as the attack lasted nine to 10 hours. This behaviour is entirely unjustified, and we don't know the reasons for such failure.” The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) reported that about 2,000 families or 10,000 people were forced to flee their homes to the state capital, El Geneina, some 48km away, because Sudanese authorities failed to intervene to stop the attack that went on for hours.

Farmers killed in their fields

In Nertiti, people staged peaceful protests in June and July and initially received positive responses to their grievances from the Government of Sudan. However, their joy was brutally cut short when an armed group attacked farmers working their fields on 10 September, killing two people and seriously wounding one in Kibi, north of Nertiti, in West Jebel Marra.

According to police reports, 55-year-old Ibrahim Ahmed Issa was killed by gunshots to the chest, while 29-year-old Ammar Abdul-Moamen Abkar Suleiman was killed by a gunshot to the abdomen. Khadija Ahmed Muhammad Ishaq, 40, was injured by a gunshot also to the abdomen.

On the day of the attack, the Central Darfur state government accused unnamed “criminal groups of seeking to sow discord and friction among the citizens”, saying they had dispatched officers to the scene of “the accident” to assess the situation and pursue perpetrators.

“Amnesty International is deeply concerned about the preparedness of the Sudanese forces to take on the sensitive responsibility of civilian protection because they have so far failed to demonstrate willingness and readiness to respond to community pleas for help before and during attacks. The UN and AU must ensure that the Darfur people are not abandoned in a hasty UNAMID withdrawal,” said Deprose Muchena.

“Peacekeepers in Darfur may have a mixed record of protecting civilians as on many occasions they have failed to prevent attacks on villages, but they have often been able to protect civilians fleeing violence who manage to get themselves to areas near UNAMID bases and UNAMID-protected camps. This physical protection is still urgently needed around Jebel Marra and in other parts of Darfur, and UNAMID's mere presence in these areas acts as a deterrent and more than justifies its extension.”

On 3 June, the UN Security Council approved the establishment of the United Nations Integrated Transition Assistance Mission in Sudan (UNITAMS) to replace the Darfur-focussed UNAMID peacekeeping force. UNITAMS will support the political transition in Sudan, the implementation of the recent peace agreement, rule of law and civilian protection, and national peacebuilding efforts, and will heavily depend on the Sudanese joint security forces to implement the protection-of-civilians component of its mandate.

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Appeal to extend mandate of UN
peacekeeping force as more than 70
individuals, including farmers and IDPs,
have been killed by armed groups between

July and September 2020 in the states of
West Darfur, Central Darfur and North
Darfur

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