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Sudan: New Attacks on Civilians in Darfur

(New York) - Sudanese government and rebel attacks on civilians in Darfur have dramatically increased in recent weeks without signs of abating, Human Rights Watch said today. The government of Sudan, its allied forces, and rebel factions should end abuses against civilians, and concerned governments - still focused on South Sudan's referendum - should press for an end to unlawful attacks and accountability for abuses, Human Rights Watch said.

"While the international community remains focused on South Sudan, the situation in Darfur has sharply deteriorated," said Daniel Bekele, Africa director at Human Rights Watch. "We are seeing a return to past patterns of violence, with both government and rebel forces targeting civilians and committing other abuses."

On January 25, 2011, Sudanese government air and ground forces fought rebel troops in and around the town of Tabit, North Darfur. The fighting reportedly destroyed eight villages and caused thousands of civilians to flee the area.

At Tabit, and in other clashes in Darfur since early December 2010, both government and rebel forces carried out targeted attacks on civilian populations based on their ethnic affiliations, Human Rights Watch said. The fighting has caused civilian deaths and injuries, destruction and looting of civilian property, and mass displacement of tens of thousands of people to displaced persons camps and safe havens.

The renewed fighting began after the Sudanese government severed ties with the Sudan Liberation Army (SLA) rebel faction loyal to Minni Arko Minawi, who signed the Darfur Peace Agreement in 2006 and was appointed special adviser to President Omar al-Bashir and head of the Darfur Transitional Regional Authority. Relations between the government and Minawi soured in late 2010, resulting in Minawi's dismissal from government in early December.

According to the United Nations, the violence in December alone caused 40,000 people to flee their homes. Many are taking refuge near African Union/United Nations Mission in Darfur (UNAMID) bases in Khor Abeche, Shearia, and Shangil Tobayi.

Sudan has continued to restrict UN and humanitarian agencies from accessing conflict-affected areas, including Tabit, the site of the January 25 clash. The government also still bars access to much of eastern Jebel Mara where, since early 2010, [government forces and militias have clashed with the SLA faction led by Abdel Wahid al-Nur](#), and attacked civilians from the majority Fur ethnicity. Humanitarian agencies have also been denied access from the Wada'a and Khazan Jedid areas, between North and South Darfur.

December Clashes and Attacks in North-South Corridor

Fighting in the corridor between North and South Darfur started on December 8, when rebels from the Minni Minawi faction of the SLA ambushed a convoy containing the governor of North Darfur at Shangil Tobayi on the road to El Fasher, North Darfur's capital. Two government soldiers and three rebel fighters were killed.

The ambush was possibly in retaliation for comments made by the North Darfur governor, Youssif Kibir, in a speech delivered at the graduation ceremony of a group of Popular Defense Forces (PDF) - a government paramilitary force that fought alongside the Sudanese army during Sudan's long civil war and throughout the Darfur conflict.

The corridor is strategic for its transport route linking the North and South Darfur state capitals and for its access routes to the mountainous region of Jebel Mara, a rebel stronghold dominated by the Fur ethnic group where there was heavy fighting in 2010 between government and SLA forces loyal to Abdel Wahid.

In response to the ambush, on December 10 the government began large-scale attacks on the SLA-controlled area of Khor Abeche and surrounding villages in South Darfur. The attacks included aerial bombing by Antonov aircraft, followed by ground attacks led by government soldiers in more than a dozen military vehicles and hundreds of militia members on camels and horseback. The attacks killed at least two civilians, injured dozens, and caused massive damage to civilian property, particularly that of ethnic Zaghawa, who the government treats as being linked to the SLA.

Villagers told Human Rights Watch that SLA forces were not in the area during the government attacks. Under international humanitarian law, which is applicable in Darfur, armed forces must take all feasible precautions to ensure that targets of attack are military objectives and not civilians. Civilians and civilian property may never be deliberately attacked - those responsible are committing war crimes, Human Rights Watch said.

A Khor Abeche resident told Human Rights Watch that he saw government soldiers looting the town's market and beating civilians with sticks. Among the victims were the man's wife, who sustained injuries to her head, as well as many other women and children. He said that on December 11, he saw soldiers shooting into populated areas with mounted machine guns, injuring more than a dozen civilians and killing two.

A 30-year-old mother of four gave a similar account: "The soldiers went to the market and started beating the people, including women and old men, with sticks and the butts of their guns. I was able to take my children and some clothes and flee. All our remaining things were completely burned."

The government's looting of the town resulted in more than 60 homes being burned and caused thousands of people to flee the area. Many sought refuge at the United Nations/African Union mission's compound, and government forces shot at civilians moving toward the compound, presumably to prevent them from entering. Government troops positioned themselves in front of the camp, also in an apparent effort to block civilians seeking safety.

Attacking civilians and preventing them from seeking safe haven are serious violations of international humanitarian law. Blocking civilians from entering the UNAMID compound is also a violation of the Status of Forces Agreement between the Sudanese government and the UN. Human Rights Watch urged UNAMID to press Sudan to guarantee the security of peacekeepers and the civilians who seek their assistance.

Following the attacks on Khor Abeche, the government and various rebel factions clashed throughout December in numerous areas, causing further civilian displacement. In mid-December, government forces began a series of attacks on the town of Shangil Tobayi, which is host to large displaced populations, and surrounding villages, displacing thousands more. On December 26, government forces in Land Cruisers and on camels and horses attacked the ethnic Zaghawa section of the town, killing at least two civilians. The soldiers also harassed civilians and raped one 16-year-old girl, which required her to seek medical treatment.

At the same time, SLA forces carried out attacks on the ethnic Birgid communities, whose members are in the Sudanese army and PDF paramilitary, and are seen as pro-government. Rebel attacks on Jaghara and surrounding villages caused numerous civilian casualties, said Birgid and government sources interviewed by Human Rights Watch. In one incident on December 18, rebel fighters attacked Nigaa and Jaghara, killing at least eight civilians.

Attack on Displaced Persons Camp

On January 23, heavily armed government forces surrounded and entered the Zamzam displaced persons camp in North Darfur. They rounded up and detained 37 people; at least 27 men remain in detention facilities. Human Rights Watch received reports that the government forces entered civilian homes, looted properties and beat several people, killing one man.

The government publicly stated that the operation aimed to retrieve arms and drugs, and arrest "criminal elements." It did not give notice to the UN mission, despite requirements in the Status of Forces Agreement between Sudan and the peacekeeping mission that require consultation on actions related to displaced persons camps.

Background

The peace process for Darfur has stalled, with government and rebel factions unable to agree on key terms. In early December 2010, the SLA's Minawi, who signed the Darfur Peace Agreement in 2006, formally broke ties with the government after the federal minister of defense, Ibrahim Mohammed Hussein, said that SLA fighters were "a legitimate military target." Government forces arrested several of Minawi's cadres in North and South Darfur, and President al-Bashir dismissed Minawi from his position in government.

Meanwhile, the government has pursued a new strategy for Darfur, calling for "domestication" of the peace process, development and reconstruction, accelerated returns of displaced persons, and government-provided security across the region. Rebel movements and the vast majority of displaced communities oppose the plan based on the continued conflict and lack of security on the ground.

Despite the recent surge in fighting and attacks on civilians, the head of the UN humanitarian operation in Sudan, Georg Charpentier, on January 23 said that the security situation in Darfur was improving. The UN Security Council met on January 26 to discuss peace and security in Sudan.

The Sudanese government has not carried out its commitments to disarm militias or improve accountability for past and ongoing human rights violations. It has yet to prosecute anyone who participated in a brutal attack on Tabrat, North Darfur in early September that killed more than 37 civilians. The government has also not taken concrete steps to carry out the [justice recommendations of High-Level Panel of the African Union on Darfur](#) - the so-called Mbeki panel - which recommended the establishment of hybrid courts and promoted legal reforms to bring justice to this troubled region of Sudan.

"President Bashir and the people of Sudan should be congratulated for holding a peaceful referendum on southern secession, but that smooth process does not exonerate Sudan's leaders for ongoing abuses in Darfur," Bekele said. "Concerned governments should urgently and forcefully press both Khartoum and rebel movements to end their abuses of civilians in Darfur, grant humanitarian access to affected areas, and ensure accountability for war crimes."

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