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The human rights situation in Sudan deteriorated in 2013. Following his third visit to the country in June, the UN Independent Expert on human rights in Sudan stressed that major challenges needed to be addressed, although he acknowledged the government's stated commitment to meet its human rights obligations. The context for the deterioration in human rights included the worsening humanitarian situation generated by increased tribal conflict and lawlessness in Darfur, and the deteriorating security situation in South Kordofan and Blue Nile.

Following the lifting of fuel subsidies at the end of September, violent protests in Khartoum and other cities around Sudan led to the death of over 100 protesters and police. Hundreds more were injured, with live ammunition being used by security forces against protesters. Over 800 people were reported detained during the protests and in the days that followed. There were allegations of beatings and other abuse during their detention. We continue to encourage the government of Sudan to hold the perpetrators to account and to make public the findings of their investigations.

The UK's human rights objectives for Sudan in 2013 focused on conflict resolution and humanitarian access in conflict areas, and on supporting civil and political freedoms. This included practical support for the establishment of a human rights centre in the University of Khartoum, strengthening the capacity of Sudanese media to research into discrimination, and increasing the capacity of human rights monitors and the press to work for greater transparency and accountability across Sudan. We encouraged the development of a more constructive and productive relationship between Sudan and the UN Independent Expert, and provided support to many non-governmental and professional groups, including the National Commission on Human Rights.

In 2014, the UK will continue to focus on conflict resolution and humanitarian access. We will work through the Foreign & Commonwealth Office and the Department for International Development (DFID) to support national dialogue and a better environment for free and fair elections in the future. We will encourage a transparent and participatory constitutional review process. We will work with civil society to enhance their organisational capacity and encourage an opening up of political space. We are encouraging the government to sign the 2013 UN Declaration on the Prevention of Sexual Violence in Conflict and to participate in the planned summit in London in June 2014.

Elections

Sudan continued to operate under an interim national constitution drafted in 2005 as part of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement with South Sudan. The government has made a public commitment to hold a constitutional review process, including political opposition parties and civil society organisations. However, at the end of 2013, no such process had been formally initiated, and concerns raised in international observation reports following the 2010 elections (in particular freedom of expression and conduct of security forces) had not yet been addressed.

Following the elections for the governor of Gedaref state in March, a number of activists were arrested and detained for demonstrating. Ongoing conflict, an increasingly polarised political scene, and other restrictions to fundamental freedoms outlined in this report, suggest that the current environment is not conducive to free and fair elections in 2015.

Freedom of expression and assembly

Political freedom came under increasing pressure in 2013 with civil society organisations facing major political and legal restrictions, leading to a continually shrinking operating environment. Many report routine harassment by security services. This included reports of forced closures of some organisations. Some continue to operate from outside Sudan but continue to lobby the government for registration locally.

Newspapers continued to be subject to censorship. Between July and mid-September, the authorities confiscated the printed editions of around ten newspapers for publishing material of which the authorities did not approve. During the protests in late September, security services issued a directive against publishing negative articles on the lifting of subsidies. Up to three Sudanese newspapers were banned from publishing for indefinite periods. The Khartoum bureaux of Sky News and Al Arabiya were closed down by the authorities. Up to 400 journalists were reported to have gone on strike as a result of the directives. By the end of 2013, there were indications that the government was considering lifting the ban on some newspapers. Faisal Mohammed Salih, who faced imprisonment or a fine for writing an article calling for the investigation of security forces for a case of gang rape, was acquitted on 22 December 2013. Others are still facing trial.

Access to justice and the rule of law

Mechanisms of justice and law enforcement in Sudan are weak due to decades of armed conflict and general neglect. Access to formal justice mechanisms is unequal: women suffer disproportionately. There is limited respect for the principles of due process, equality before the law, accountability, independence, accessibility, predictability and transparency. Although the formal justice system operates at local level, citizens rely heavily on informal mechanisms of justice. However, the escalating levels of conflict and the eroding of traditional authority have weakened the traditional justice system.

Military and security forces have the primary responsibility for law and order in many areas rather than civilian police, and are frequently accused of violating human rights. The National Security Act in Sudan gives wide discretionary powers of arrest and detention to the National Intelligence and Security Services. Arbitrary arrest is common.

Although there have been some attempts to hold criminals to account, armed groups continue to act with impunity in Darfur and other conflict areas. The deteriorating security situation has led to judges and prosecutors being threatened with violence for trying to do their jobs. The majority of the Justice and Reconciliation chapter of the 2011 Doha Document for Peace in Darfur (DDPD) remains unimplemented, and there is no evidence of any serious attempt by the government of Sudan to punish those who have committed serious crimes in the region.

Certain laws in Sudan provide significant immunities to security services leading to impunity. These have been further expanded in 2013. In July 2013, parliament passed an amendment to the Sudan Armed Forces Act of 2007 allowing civilians to be tried in military courts, in contravention of international human rights law. Application of the public order laws also remained a concern, including the case of female activist Amira Osman, arrested in September and accused of indecent conduct after refusing to pull up her headscarf over her head. She is still awaiting a trial date.

In February, there were reports of a case of amputation as punishment for theft. While permitted in Sudan's Penal Code, there had been a de facto moratorium since 2001. At the time, the press reported a statement by the Deputy Chief Justice that judges could be trained to perform the amputations should medical professionals refuse to carry them out. There have been no further reports.

In October, the reported final number of arrests by Sudanese security forces following the September protests exceeded 800. This included activists, journalists and members of opposition parties. Many were held incommunicado without access to their families or legal representation. By November, over 600 of these detainees were reported to have been released. Among them were political activists Najlaa Mohammed Ali and Amin Senada, arrested in November on charges of indecent behaviour, and Adam Sharief, who was detained for one month without charge, after he featured on a local radio station in Darfur criticising the Governor of South Darfur and the use of live ammunition by government forces during the protests in September. In November, Human Rights Watch reported that dozens remained in custody. Many of these are still awaiting trial.

The DFID Safety and Access to Justice Programme in Sudan concluded in 2013. It promoted human rights principles as part of its training programmes with the police and judiciary. A key theme of the programme was the promotion of rights of women and children, including support to the Family and Child Protection Units in the Sudanese Police Force.

Death penalty

Sudan is the country in Africa that makes the most use of the death penalty, which is applicable to a number of offences, including adultery, sodomy, and alleged crimes of a religious or political nature. The number of offences punishable by the death penalty is rising: in July the Anti-Trafficking Bill was introduced to Parliament carrying a range of punishments, including the death penalty for the "most serious" offences.

Amnesty International's latest figures (for 2012) reported that at least 19 executions were carried out, and at least 199 death sentences were handed down by the courts. Civil society leaders claim that these figures are in fact much higher, in part due to application of the death penalty through informal justice mechanisms.

Torture

Torture is prohibited by the Interim Constitution. There are, however, widespread reports that security forces routinely carry out torture, beatings, rape, and other cruel and inhuman treatment or punishments.

Conflict and protection of civilians

The UK is deeply concerned about continued fighting between the government of Sudan and the rebel forces in South Kordofan and Blue Nile states. The UK has regularly expressed our concerns with the government and the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (North) (SPLM (N)) and pressed them to negotiate to agree a cessation of hostilities. The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) reports that over one million people have been directly affected by the conflict as a result of fighting and food insecurity. However, it is impossible to confirm these figures without proper humanitarian access to these areas. We strongly condemned the continued

use of aerial bombardment by the Sudanese Armed Forces resulting in civilian casualties. There were also credible reports of civilian deaths as a result of unexploded ordinance. Human rights groups reported that the government continued to detain without charge civilians suspected to be members of the SPLM-N. Many remain under detention, while several were reportedly charged and convicted. We welcome the release of the 18 female detainees in July.

Despite high-level advocacy and lobbying (including through the UN Security Council), the UN's attempts to broker an agreement between the SPLM (N) and the government, to include SPLM (N) controlled areas of South Kordofan and Blue Nile States in Sudan's national polio vaccination campaign that took place in November, failed. Renewed efforts are planned for 2014. It will be imperative that this and other humanitarian assistance are not linked to progress on political talks.

The security situation in Darfur deteriorated significantly in 2013. Clashes between government forces and the rebel movements continued, while intertribal violence and general banditry increased. Reports of human rights abuses in Darfur increased during the year, with reports of sexual gender-based violence almost doubling in the last quarter. 3.4 million people are in need of humanitarian assistance in Darfur, of whom 1.9 million are internally displaced. The UN estimates that 360,000 people were displaced by intertribal violence. Access to people affected by conflict in Darfur remains constrained by the government's Directive for Humanitarian Work, issued in March 2013.

Attacks on the UN Assistance Mission in Darfur (UNAMID) resulted in the death of 16 peacekeepers this year. International humanitarian organisations also suffered losses, impacting on their ability to operate. The UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) estimate that thousands of refugees, asylum seekers, migrants and Sudanese nationals rely on smugglers to transport them in and out of Sudan every year. Most victims of kidnapping and trafficking are Eritrean refugees, with an estimated 400-600 new arrivals each month. In December, the government took positive steps to address the issue in endorsing the UNHCR and IOM joint Strategy to Address Human Trafficking, Kidnappings and Smuggling of Persons in Sudan.

Freedom of religion or belief

There were reports in early 2013 of international Christian institutions and individuals being harassed by the Sudanese security forces, including the detention of individuals without charge, and the confiscation of scriptural books and travel documents. We believe that over 150 non-Sudanese Christians have left Sudan following harassment. On 1 December, National Intelligence Security Service officers reportedly arrested and detained a Christian priest. He was allowed only brief family visits while detained, before having his Sudanese nationality revoked and being deported from the country. We have raised our concerns for the treatment of Christians jointly with other international partners.

Women's rights

Women play an active role in public life in Sudan and a parliamentary quota guarantees 25% of seats for female parliamentarians in the National Assembly. Women continue to face considerable challenges through discrimination. Women's groups and other civil society organisations report widespread gender-based violence.

We continue to encourage the government to implement measures to effectively tackle sexual violence in conflict amid reports of the continued use of rape as a weapon of war in Darfur and other conflict-affected areas. Female genital mutilation is still widely practised across Sudan. The most recent figures suggest that at least 64% of the female population aged 16-49 have undergone some form of genital mutilation.

Dr Attiyat Mustafa, Director of the Unit for Combating Violence Against Women, launched the "16 Days of Activism Against Gender Violence" campaign in November, calling for a change in approach to addressing gender violence issues in Sudan. In November, the Nobel Women's Initiative published a report "Survivors Speak Out: Sexual Violence in Sudan", which outlined reports of sexual violence in conflict areas across the country. In December, the Chief Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court described reports of "disturbing" abuses in Darfur to the UN Security Council.

On 3 December, the Head of the Advisory Council for Human Rights, Muaz Tango, confirmed that the domestic court had lifted the punishment of a woman sentenced to death by stoning for adultery following an appeal lodged by the council.

The UK continued to promote women's rights through a range of initiatives including campaigns against gender-based violence. In February, we supported an event at Afhad University as part of the "One Billion Rising" campaign, which aims to end violence against women.

Children's rights

Gaps remain in the implementation of the Child Act (enacted in 2010), which raises the age of criminal responsibility, criminalises child exploitation and abuse, and prohibits recruitment of children to armed groups. There are credible reports of the continued use of child soldiers, particularly by armed militia groups in Darfur, South Kordofan and Blue Nile States. However, in December, the Sudan Liberation Movement issued an order prohibiting the recruitment and use of child soldiers.

DFID's Safety and Access to Justice programme worked on improving justice for children, including through support to Family and Child Protection Units.

LGBT rights

Homosexual acts are criminalised in Sudan and punishable through fines, flogging, stoning, prison sentences, and even the death penalty. In 2013, there were limited press reports that some homosexual men were arrested and accused of committing indecent acts. Strict legal sanctions and social stigma create difficulties for the few organisations working to support the LGBT community in Sudan.

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