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Darfur: UN Should End Silence on Rights Abuses

(New York) – The United Nations Security Council should direct the African Union/United Nations peacekeeping mission in Darfur (UNAMID) to improve human rights monitoring and public reporting when it renews the mission's mandate. The Security Council is expected to act on the mandate during the week of August 25, 2014.

The human rights situation in Darfur, [Sudan](#) has deteriorated sharply in 2014, Human Rights Watch said. Rapid Support Forces, a Sudanese government force consisting largely of former militias, attacked scores of villages in South, Central, and North Darfur between [February and April](#). Dozens of civilians died, tens of thousands of people fled, and there was massive destruction and looting of civilian property.

"The government attacks in Darfur since February recall the brutal government-led 'janjaweed' militia attacks that began in 2003," said [Daniel Bekele](#), Africa director at Human Rights Watch. "Accurate and timely reporting by the AU/UN mission is critical for protecting vulnerable civilians. The UN Security Council needs to order the mission to ramp up its human rights monitoring and public reporting."

The AU/UN mission, now in its sixth year, has been largely ineffectual in protecting civilians from violence, Human Rights Watch said. UNAMID has a team of about 60 human rights officers in Darfur, but the mission has all but ceased public reporting on human rights. Although it has described these attacks and other patterns of insecurity in its periodic reports to the UN secretary-general, it has not reported detailed findings, including civilian death tolls, estimates of property destruction, and alleged violations of international human rights and humanitarian law. The mission has not issued a stand-alone public human rights report in five years.

Various forces have targeted civilians during fighting between government forces and rebel groups, and between government and militia forces, and between armed community groups. The government has also intensified aerial bombings of [Jebel Mara](#), a longtime rebel stronghold, and [other locations](#), killing civilians and damaging property. More than 380,000 people have fled violence in Darfur since the beginning of 2014, according to [UN estimates](#).

Government security forces have also committed human rights abuses against civilians in camps for internally displaced people, Human Rights Watch said. On August 5, security forces raided the Al Salaam camp, near Nyala, South Darfur. The raids, ostensibly to search for weapons, alcohol, and other contraband as part of the governor's emergency response to rising criminality, were also conducted in Dereig and Ottash camps. In Al Salaam, residents told local human rights activists that the security forces beat camp residents with sticks and hoses while searching homes and stealing mobile phones, cash, and other property. Security forces arrested dozens of residents. Some were released and others convicted in special courts that lack basic due process protections. Three people remain in detention, a community leader [told local media](#).

Sudanese government restrictions have seriously hampered the peacekeeping mission's access to conflict areas. Chronic security threats to peacekeepers have also undermined its effectiveness. Attacks on the mission have killed at least 58 peacekeepers since 2008.

Despite the obstacles, UNAMID could improve its civilian protection role. Peacekeepers should increase patrols and human rights monitoring where they are present, particularly in and around camps for displaced people.

"The Sudanese government has the responsibility to maintain law and order, but its forces need to conduct operations lawfully and respect basic rights," Bekele said. "UN/AU peacekeepers could help deter abuses during law enforcement operations through close monitoring and prevent future abuses with timely reporting, both of which are clearly within the mission's mandate."

The last UNAMID human rights report on Darfur, published jointly with the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, was issued in January [2009](#), about a government raid on a camp for displaced people in South Darfur that killed 33 people and injured more than 108.

In April 2014, *Foreign Policy* [published](#) allegations of [cover-ups](#) and misreporting of events by the AU/UN mission, based on internal documents leaked by its former spokeswoman, Aicha al Basri. She alleged that the mission's

leadership – reluctant to criticize the Sudanese government – had failed to report accurately on crimes by government forces. News of the leaks prompted the secretary-general to establish an internal investigation into the alleged cover-ups and review probes into the mission, according to a press statement in [July](#). The investigation is due to begin in September.

The secretary-general's investigation should recommend improvements to the mission's reporting and its advocacy to protect human rights, Human Rights Watch said. In February, a separate AU/UN review of the mission's effectiveness, carried out over several months, found serious deficiencies in performance, and recommended new priorities and benchmarks for the mission. However, that review did not call for improvements in reporting or for improving protection for civilians and peacekeepers.

Human Rights Watch also called on the [UN Human Rights Council](#), which will hold a session on Sudan in September, to condemn human rights violations in Darfur and in other parts of Sudan, Human Rights Watch said. The council should reappoint a special rapporteur to specifically monitor and report on the human rights situation across the country, upgrading the current independent expert's mandate.

Serious crimes committed in Darfur led the UN Security Council to refer the situation to the International Criminal Court (ICC) for investigation in March 2005. Charges are pending against five individuals, including Sudan's President Omar al-Bashir, for war crimes, crimes against humanity, and genocide. Khartoum refuses to cooperate with the ICC and has obstructed its work.

"With the surge in Sudanese government-led attacks on civilians, credible public reporting on the situation in Darfur is more important than ever," Bekele said. "The UN should not allow this core aspect of its work to be degraded, especially when the secretary-general has pledged to put 'Rights up Front' in the UN's work."

Abuses by Rapid Support Forces in Darfur since February 2014

From [mid-February](#) to late March, the Rapid Support Forces, consisting of former militia under the command of the Sudanese National Intelligence and Security Services, moved into Darfur from the Kordofan region, where they had been deployed to fight rebels in Southern Kordofan. The forces are led by former militia leader, Brig. Gen. Mohammed Hamdan Dagolo, known as "Hemmeti."

These forces, with other security forces and militia, carried out massive ground attacks on dozens of villages in South and North Darfur, targeting areas where they accused the population of sympathizing with rebel forces. They burned homes and shops, looted livestock, killed and robbed civilians, and forced tens of thousands of residents to flee to towns and camps for displaced people.

President Omar al-Bashir has [publicly defended](#) the Rapid Support Forces. Authorities have [detained opposition leaders](#) for criticizing security force abuses in Darfur and Kordofan. Sadiq al-Mahdi, head of the National Umma Party, was arrested in May 17 and released after a month in detention, while Ibrahim al-Sheikh, head of the Sudan Congress Party, has been detained since June 8 on charges that could carry the death penalty and suffers from health problems.

South Darfur

Starting February 19, government forces attacked as many as 35 villages south of Nyala in South Darfur. The area had been the site of clashes with the rebel Sudan Liberation Army (SLA) prior to the attacks, but residents said the rebels had left the area. Residents from villages in Hijier and Um Gunia who had fled to Nyala told Human Rights Watch that government aircraft bombed the area, and large numbers of ground troops in land cruisers and on horses and camels entered the villages, destroyed water pumps, stole animals, and burned homes.

Witnesses said that security forces rounded up merchants and their family members and shot them dead. One 45-year-old woman from an area west of Hijier told Human Rights Watch that three armed men on camels and a motorcycle fatally shot her husband and son, and looted livestock. "When I started screaming they shot me twice in my right arm, then took the animals away," she said.

Community leaders gave Human Rights Watch a list of 38 civilians who were killed and 10 others who were missing, though casualty figures are difficult to verify. They said militias had prevented the community from returning to bury the bodies. One woman, who was missing 3 of her 10 children when she spoke to Human Rights Watch, said that a relative had been shot and killed: "I saw his dead body with two other bodies of old men lying beside him. It is very unfortunate that up to now no one was able to pick them up."

More than 60,000 people fled the area, mostly to Sani Dileba and to camps near Nyala, according to [UN estimates](#).

North Darfur

In early March 2014, Rapid Support Forces moved to eastern Jebel Mara and North Darfur, leaving a trail of destruction, targeting communities they said supported rebel groups. Starting around March 15, they attacked scores of villages near El Fasher, Korma, Kutum, Um Sidir, Hashaba, Bashim, Anka, and Melit. While SLA rebels had attacked Melit a few days earlier killing 5 people, they had left the area by the time government forces arrived, residents said.

Residents told Human Rights Watch, UN staff, and local monitors that government forces entered villages in land cruisers and pickup trucks, often accompanied by militia on horseback or camels, shooting at homes, looting livestock and other goods, and assaulting and killing civilians. In some cases, government aircraft bombed the locations, especially in or near Jebel Mara.

A 39-year-old man from the village of Birka, northwest of El Fasher, said that around March 14 a large group of soldiers stopped him and accused him of being a rebel, but allowed him to proceed to El Fasher. Upon his return later that day, he learned that the soldiers had surrounded the Birka market, looted shops, beat people, and killed a man who tried to protect his daughter from being raped.

A 15-year-old girl from Dolma village, southwest of El Fasher, told local monitors she saw soldiers arrive in a vehicle on March 15 and shoot her 15-year-old friend Khadija Adam. The girl died from her wounds under a tree after everyone else had fled, she said.

A 45-year-old merchant from Gozdor, west of El Fasher, told Human Rights Watch that on March 22, large numbers of soldiers in land cruisers and pickup trucks arrived from the south, fired in the air, then started looting animals and property and set fire to houses. The soldiers killed at least two people and abducted a 17-year-old girl, the merchant said.

Residents also described attacks around Um Sidr, north of El Fasher. They said that beginning on March 16, soldiers in several hundred land cruisers mounted with *doshka* machine guns and other weapons, shot at people, burned houses, and looted livestock.

"The government forces came in 225 [sic] vehicles, supported by *janjaweed* militia on horses and camels and burned 23 villages," a community leader reported to local monitors. "The attack went on for three days and killed seven males. We fled to the *wadis* [dry riverbed] to hide. They took all our belongings and left us with nothing."

The government forces then attacked villages to the north and west, around Hashaba and Bashim, killing and injuring dozens of people, residents said.

"It was at 10 a.m. The government forces arrived in about 180 vehicles and started burning the houses and shops in the market," a 55-year-old woman who fled from the attack on Hashaba told Human Rights Watch. "They found one of the mentally ill men and tied his hands and threw him into the fire."

On March 23, government forces in a convoy of hundreds of vehicles attacked Bashim, several witnesses said. "I hid behind a tree until evening, then ran toward the mountain," recalled a 37-year-old man, who said he had buried three relatives killed in the attack. "They were killed by bullets or run over by vehicles and we buried them together."

A 45-year-old woman who also fled the Bashim attack said that government forces killed her brother: "I sat down and tried to speak to him but he was already dead. I covered him with my scarf and ran away." She also reported that a woman and two young girls she knew were shot dead in the attack.

The forces remained in Bashim for nearly two weeks, using the town as a base from which to attack other villages in the area, residents said.

Smaller groups of government soldiers attacked civilians in other locations, such as Anka, north of Bashim. Badly injured villagers brought to El Fasher for medical care told local monitors that soldiers drove through the Shagor Ali area shooting randomly at groups of civilians, killing at least three people instantly and seriously wounding 14 others.

The death toll from the government attacks in North Darfur is not known, but information received by Human Rights Watch indicates that at least 38 people were killed near Um Sidir, Bashim and Melit alone. Tens of thousands of people fled for safety, mostly to camps around El Fasher or UNAMID bases.