

INTERNATIONAL RESCUE COMMITTEE

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Darfur: escalating violence and increasing suffering

The ongoing crisis in Darfur has been described as one of the world's worst humanitarian crises. More than 2 million people have been driven from their homes into overcrowded camps in Sudan http://www.theirc.org/where/the_irc_in_sudan.html and neighboring Chad http://www.theirc.org/where/the_irc_in_chad.html and as many as 300,000 people are thought to have died.

Despite the signing of the Darfur Peace Agreement in May 2006, the situation is deteriorating and attacks on civilians are continuing. Banditry and fighting between militias, rebels and government troops are increasing across the region and the ordinary people of Darfur are bearing the brunt of the violence, with numerous reports of rape, torture, atrocities and abduction.

IRC is still seeing thousands of new arrivals in the many camps for displaced people that have been set up throughout the region. Humanitarian aid is also being targeted and the ability of aid workers to access vulnerable populations is increasingly constrained.

Background to the Conflict

The current conflict in Darfur began in 2003, when rebels, primarily from the *Fur* and *Zaghawa* ethnic groups, launched raids against Sudanese military bases in the region. The rebel groups claimed to seek greater political representation for Darfur in peace talks between the North and South of Sudan. The rebels' raids triggered both a conventional military response and, more significantly, the mobilization of local militias drawn mainly from herder populations (widely known as the *Janjaweed*).

The fighting has been characterized by extensive violence against civilians, their homes, and their property. Although many reports depict the conflict in terms of 'Arabs' attacking 'Africans', the complexity of ethnic tensions in Darfur should not be over-simplified. Unlike in the civil war between the North and South of Sudan, all the combatants in Darfur are Muslim.

While various peace agreements have been signed in Darfur, the violence has continued. The top priority to improve the situation in Darfur requires that all parties immediately adhere to a ceasefire.

In August 2006, the United Nations Security Council passed Resolution 1706 that calls for 17,000 UN peacekeepers to replace the under-funded African Union force that is currently in the region. However, the Sudanese government initially objected to this resolution and resisted any peacekeeping plans that include UN or other non-African forces. Discussions between the UN and the AU about a 'hybrid' force are ongoing.

Increased Insecurity, Instability, and Tension

In recent months, violence in Darfur has increased dramatically, affecting rural, urban, and camp-based populations and spilling over into neighboring Chad http://www.theirc.org/where/the_irc_in_chad.html and the Central African Republic. Hundreds of thousands of newly displaced people have sought refuge in the camps.

The camps themselves are becoming increasingly insecure with widespread reports of harassment, intimidation, and the presence of armed groups. This has reduced the trust and confidence between camp residents and the authorities, including the African Union. Many people facing their third year in camps are increasingly hopeless and frustrated about the situation, creating additional tensions and potential for violence.

<http://www.theirc.org/resources/essays/darfurs-camp-life.html?p=1>

Vulnerability of Women and Children

In the unstable camp environments of Darfur, women and girls are at particular risk of harm. Women and girls remain at high risk of violence when they leave the camps to gather firewood, wild foods, water, or animal fodder. As reported by IRC <http://www.theirc.org/news/latest/increased-sexual-assaults.html>, more than 200 sexual assaults were reported in the vicinity of Kalma camp over a five-week period in August.

Children in Darfur are also vulnerable. Many of the traditional mechanisms to protect children and youth from harm have broken down due to family separation and an increase in the number of child-headed households.

Children are exposed to physical attacks, child labor, child recruitment, and exploitation. They also lack access to education or appropriate developmental activities.

Targeting of Humanitarian Aid and Limited Access to Vulnerable Populations

Vital humanitarian services have been targeted in the conflict. In early September, an IRC clinic and a pharmacy were looted while a health worker and community outreach volunteer were killed in the Hashaba area of North Darfur. In total, 13 aid workers have been killed since May 2006. Aid supplies have frequently been looted and numerous vehicles have been hijacked or ambushed.

High levels of banditry and violence are severely limiting access for aid workers. Large parts of Darfur now completely cut off from relief efforts. Fragmentation among rebel groups has also made negotiations for humanitarian access much harder. In addition, organizations working in Darfur have faced difficult bureaucratic restrictions impeding their ability to work.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- All parties to the conflict must stop targeting civilians immediately. A humanitarian ceasefire must be the immediate priority.
- All parties must fully respect humanitarian principles and international humanitarian law. Targeting of aid agency personnel, assets and supplies must be stopped.
- International governments must support a robust and properly resourced peacekeeping presence in Darfur.
- The African Union Mission in Darfur must do more to protect civilians and improve humanitarian access. They must reintroduce patrols to protect supply routes, camps, and rural areas.
- The Government of Sudan must do all it can to facilitate humanitarian access and remove bureaucratic impediments to the delivery of humanitarian assistance.

To learn more about the work of IRC in Sudan, please [click here](http://www.theirc.org/where/the_irc_in_sudan.html)
http://www.theirc.org/where/the_irc_in_sudan.html