

Darfur: A Human Rights Catastrophe

Since early 2003, the people of Sudan's western Darfur region have experienced a brutal government-coordinated scorched earth campaign against civilians belonging to the same ethnicity as members of two rebel movements, the Sudan Liberation Army (SLA) and the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM). The government's campaign has combined two key elements with devastating consequences for civilians. One is the systematic use of indiscriminate aerial bombardment in North Darfur and to a lesser extent in West and South Darfur. The second is the deployment and coordination of ethnic proxy forces known as "Janjaweed" militias who have been recruited from landless Arab nomadic tribes, some of whom have been involved in past clashes with the farming communities branded as supportive of the rebels.

Almost all of Darfur's population has been affected by the conflict, either directly through attacks on villages, killings, rape, looting and destruction of property and forced displacement, or indirectly through the near total collapse of the region's economy. An estimated two million people have been displaced in less than two years of conflict. An accurate estimate of the total number of conflict-related civilian deaths-including mortality from violence as well as from disease and malnutrition related to displacement-is unavailable, but is likely to surpass 100,000.

To date, the Sudanese government has neither improved security for civilians nor ended the impunity enjoyed by its own officials and allied militia leaders. Immediate action including an increased international presence in rural areas of Darfur is needed to improve protection of civilians and reverse ethnic cleansing. International prosecutions are also essential to provide accountability for crimes against humanity and ensure justice for the victims in Darfur. The Sudanese government is clearly unwilling and unable to hold perpetrators of atrocities to account: a presidential inquiry into abuses recently disputed evidence of widespread and systematic abuses and instead of prosecutions, recommended the formation of a committee. The United Nations Security Council, following receipt of the January 25th report of the international commission of inquiry's investigation into violations of international humanitarian law and human rights law and allegations of genocide in Darfur, should promptly refer the situation of Darfur to the International Criminal Court for prosecution.

