

Darfur Update

26 July 2003

1. Introduction

During July 2003 there has been an escalation of the current conflict in Darfur. A mediation attempt undertaken by the Minister of Education and the Governor of River Nile State failed. The Civilian Monitoring and Protection Team (CPMT) has contacted both the Government and the SPLM/A with a view to seeing if there is a case for their involvement.

2. Incidents

On 12 July SLM forces captured Tinah, a border garrison town, north of Geneina, about 900 kilometers west of Khartoum. The SLM withdrew from Tinah that same day but launched fresh attacks two days later. According to Government reports on the incident of 12 July, 35 rebels and 13 Government troops were killed. The SLM claimed to have killed about 250 soldiers and captured a number of vehicles as well as sizable quantities of fuel and ammunition.

On 16, 17 and 18 July the SLM launched an attack on Dessa, north of Kutum. On 19 July SLM forces attacked Tawila, 58 kilometers southwest of el Fasher. Government and SLM estimates of the casualties incurred in Tawila vary widely. According to one estimate, 500 rebels and 300 Government soldiers were killed and approximately 400 Government soldiers wounded, 200 sustaining serious injuries. (The SLM claims to have lost none of its troops). Two policemen were also killed in the Tawila attack. The SLM seized weapons, ammunition and vehicles and destroyed a police station as well as other public building. Reports from Tawila indicated that the inhabitants of the town felt unthreatened during the SLM incursion and that many expressed their support for the SLM.

In the week of 15 July bombing raids by government forces were reported in Tinah, Kornoï and Umm Baro resulting in the complete destruction of the public hospital and other public building. The SLM claimed that heavy civilian casualties were sustained during the bombing which lasted six days, but reliable figures have not been provided. In press statements the SLM has accused the Government of releasing toxic gasses during this attack.¹

As there is no access to the conflict zone, figures on casualties and use of prohibited weapons cannot be confirmed by independent sources.

¹ On 3 March, the Government attacked three Fur villages near Jebel Marra. At that time the SLM had also accused the Government of using toxic gases.

4. Failed attempt to initiate dialogue

The Government continues to favour the pursuit of a military solution to the crisis. On 25 July the daily al Sahafa quoted the Head of National Security, Major General Salah Abdullah, as reiterating the Government's conviction of the necessity on a military solution.

In early July, the Minister of Education, Dr Ahmed Babiker Nahar, a member of the Umma Party (Renewal and Reform) and Ali Abdullah Macar, Governor of River Nile State announced a mediation effort. Both Nahar and Macar come originally from Darfur: the former belonging to the Zaghawa tribe and the latter to the Rezeigat of Southern Darfur. Nahar and Macar met with leading members of the National Congress Party, including Ali Osman Taha, the First Vice President, Dr. Nafie Ali Nafie, Minister of Federal Relations Bureau and Abdel Rahim Mohamed Hussein, the Minister of Interior and obtained Government support for their mediation initiative.

In Darfur, Nahar and Macar met with the SLA in their stronghold in Kornoi. On 22 July al Ayam newspaper quoted the Governor of Northern Darfur State as saying that he had lost contact with the two mediators. Sources close to the SLM confirmed that the two officials had been taken hostage by SLM, allegedly because Macar had previously referred to the SLM as highway robbers and thieves. According to these sources, no negotiations took place though the rebels did present Macar and Nahar with a series of military and political demands. These demands included formal recognition of the SLM as a political party, the ending of the deployment of Arab tribal militiamen against SLM forces by the government and the cessation of the branding of SLM supporters as bandits and highwaymen. To date, Nahar and Macar have not returned from Darfur. Nahar reportedly is still in Kornoi, where he is held by the SLM. Macar is currently in Kutum, a town in northern Darfur controlled by the Government and is expected to return to Khartoum in the immediate future.²

In a separate development, General Ibrahim al Bushra who had been taken captive by the rebels during the attack on el Fashir on 25 April was set free on 22 July. In an interview in al Sahafa published on 24 July al Bushra urged the Government to start negotiations immediately with the SLM. According to al Bushra, morale amongst the rebels is high and their numbers are increasing daily. On the same day rebels denied newspaper reports that they had agreed to a 2-3 week truce with the government.

Despite increasing pressure on the Government to pursue the option of negotiation rather than a military solution to ending the conflict, given the recent public statements by both sides, the prospects for negotiations are poor.

² Tribal dynamics play an important role in the conflict in Darfur. The SLM consists mainly of Fur and Zaghawa, African tribes, traditionally opposed to the Arab tribes of Darfur. Eager not to antagonize Arab tribes including the Rezeigat to which Macar belongs, SLM has reportedly decided to release Macar ahead of Nahar. General Ibrahim al Bushra, a Massariya, was released after mediation efforts by the Massariya, which is one of the major Arab tribes of Kordofan.

5. Civilian Monitoring and Protection Team

Negotiations between the Government and the SPLM/A in March 2002 resulted in the signing of an Agreement to Protect Civilians from Military Attack. This Agreement provided for a verification team to monitor the compliance of the Parties (Government of Sudan and SPLM/A) in meeting their obligations and commitments in accordance with the provisions of the Agreement. A verification team known as the Civilian Protection Monitoring Team (CPMT) was established in September 2002. To date, CPMT has not investigated any incidents in Darfur as there was no evidence of SPLM/A involvement in the Darfur conflict. Recently, however, the Deputy Head of Security of the Government provided CPMT with documentation allegedly proving SPLA's involvement in Darfur. Based on this documentation, CPMT has recently requested both SPLM/A and the Government to confirm the involvement of the SPLM/A in the conflict. No reply has yet been received from the Government, but the SPLM/A has indicated that it opposes investigations in Darfur by CPMT.