

message sent to Dr Kapig

SOAT
Sudan Organisation Against Torture

SOAT Press Release: 6 April 2004

Aerial bombardment of Darfur Village

The armed forces bombed Mahajrea village, 4 April 2004, east Nyala, Southern Darfur State. The military bombed the village using two Helicopter gunships and one military plane (Antonov). SOAT has received information that at least four civilians have been killed with one civilian wounded. The aerial bombardment took place between 3: 30pm and 7: 30pm. The victims of this bombardment have been named as:

1. Student Yagoub Adam Hussain Omer, 15 years, from the Zakhawa tribe (killed at the scene).
2. Student Fawzi Issa Hassan Omer, 18 yrs, from Zakhawa the tribe (he was taken to Nyala hospital but he died, 4 April 2004, at 5 o'clock in the evening).
3. Farmer Abdel Kareem Toubaya, 67 yrs, from the Zakhawa tribe (killed at the scene).
4. Student Abbas Adam Jouma Bakheat, 15 yrs, from the Zakhawa tribe (killed at the scene).
5. Farmer Dossa Khatir Doud, 32 yrs, from the Zakhawa tribe (wounded and taken to Nyala hospital where he is receiving medical treatment).

Background

The situation in Darfur – the three westernmost states of the country – has worsened dramatically. Sustained attacks by government forces and local Arab militias on local civilian populations have led to catastrophic levels of violence and destruction. Faced with scant government accountability and little chance of international intervention, new armed political groups such as the Sudanese Liberation Movement/Army (SLM/SLA), and the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM) have emerged within the region.

While there were initial efforts to pursue a political resolution to the problem, these attempts degenerated into violence when the GoS and the rebel groups resolved to the use of violence. Since this point, the GoS has systematically attempted to crush the insurgency using aerial bombardment, militia forces and regular armed forces.

Darfur, a region that has traditionally suffered from massive underdevelopment, lack of infrastructure and resources, is now in the grip of a conflict that threatens the lives of many of its inhabitants. Hundreds of villages have been destroyed, populations forced to flee their homes to areas both within Darfur state and also to neighbouring Chad. Human rights violations have now grown to unprecedented levels. Special courts - which were convened under the premise of preventing murder and armed robbery - have in fact further aggravated the situation, since they fail to adhere to international human rights procedures or even basic standards of justice. Armed groups with no basic command and control structure terrorise local populations, committing rape, extra judicial killings, arbitrary arrests, robbery and arson. While there have been some

reports of atrocities being committed by the rebel groups, the overwhelming majority of these violations still remains the responsibility of government forces and government sponsored militia groups. Civilians, who stand in the middle of this conflict, bear the overwhelming brunt of human rights violations; something which they have little means to defend themselves against.

The nature of the crisis

Over the course of the last year, the escalating violence has disproportionately affected "African" tribes in the area such as Fur, Zaghawa and Massalit. These tribes have complained for some time about indiscriminate attacks by nomadic groups, mainly based around access to resources and grazing rights. In the last year however, the crisis has taken on a far more overtly political and pernicious tone, with insecurity increasing as one side have found governmental support for their efforts to drive the indigenous tribes from their lands.

On 3 September 2003 in Abachi, Chad, an agreement between the Sudan Liberation Army (SLA) and the Government of Sudan (GoS) looked set to improve the situation. The agreement documented the need for ceasefire, the release of prisoners of war involved in events in Darfur and the cessation of all operations that contributed to the deterioration of security in the region. As a result, around 100 political prisoners were released in Khartoum and Darfur; a move that SOAT welcomed and encouraged.

However, while these initial steps seemed promising, the situation in Darfur subsequently took a turn for the worse and continued to deteriorate with the collapse of the peace talks between the SLA and the GoS in N'djamena, Chad. The fighting resumed even with the extension of the ceasefire agreement. The conflict now continues with pitched battles ensuing between the government and government-sponsored militias on side and rebel groups such as the SLA and JEM on the other.

To quell the armed political groups, the GoS launched a military campaign using its own forces and armed proxy militia, the Janjaweed (armed men on horses). The Janjaweed, supported by GoS, launched a terror campaign against those who are suspected of supporting the SLA or JEM - alleged to be African tribes - such as the Fur and Zaghawa, as well as Arab tribes that are not cooperating such as the Dorok.

The move to attack non-combatants escalated the crisis exponentially. According to UN estimates (IRIN, 8 December 2003), the crisis now affects more than one million persons, with 3,000 reported killed, 670,000 internally displaced, with approximately 100,000 living as refugees in neighbouring Chad. There have been numerous reported cases of well-coordinated attacks on towns and villages and areas thought to be rebel strongholds by well-armed government militia & government forces.

Where the ground based attacks are concerned, there has been a sustained campaign which targets civilians and civilian infrastructure. Typically raids take place in the early hours of the morning, often burning entire villages to the ground. In addition, cattle are killed or looted, crops destroyed and the inhabitants forced to flee for their lives. The stated aim of such action according to local inhabitants is to destroy the livelihood of those living in the area and to make difficult the survival of those who become refugees.

Indiscriminate aerial bombardment of towns and villages by government Antonov aircraft also augment such attacks. These bombings take place in areas where the opposition to the government and militia are thought to be strongest, although there is no effort to distinguish civilian from non-civilian targets. As Amnesty International has pointed out, the bombings usually consist of shrapnel filled boxes being ejected from the back of planes. In addition helicopter gunships also shell villages and their inhabitants. Taken together such bombardments can be extremely destructive, levying high and indiscriminate amounts of damage.

Where human rights are concerned, emerging reports show that human rights abuses are rife in the region. The overwhelming majority of the atrocities committed stem from Janjaweed and GoS sponsored action. Civilians, primarily due to the indiscriminate way in which GoS action is pursued, inevitably make up the overwhelming majority of the casualties. There have also been some reports of abuses lead by the SLA and JEM, but these are relatively few relative to those sponsored by the GoS and militia at the time of writing

All of these problems have compounded an already difficult humanitarian situation. There is clear evidence that the GoS is imposing severe restrictions on humanitarian relief organisations and that IDP's and refugees are being placed in an extremely vulnerable and dangerous situation. The states of Darfur are naturally geographically remote which make the reporting of human rights violations difficult. This situation and the dearth of information is however being compounded by GoS attempts to place reporting restrictions and restrictions on the media in the area.

The government, which views the insurgency as a security threat, has called on Darfur's tribes to "defend" their homes and property, and support the government's attempt to fight the rebels. This stands at odds however with the ongoing terror campaigns and the large humanitarian toll being exacted on the inhabitants of the region.

SOAT condemns the extra-judicial killing of the 168 individual and urges the Government of Sudan to:

i- Conduct a thorough and impartial investigation into the circumstances of these events, in order to identify those responsible, bring them to trial and apply the penal and/or administrative sanctions as provided by law.

ii- Guarantee that adequate reparation is provided to the victims of these abuses

iii- Guarantee the respect of human rights and fundamental freedoms, including freedom of association throughout Sudan in accordance with national laws and international human rights standards.

The above recommendations should be sent in appeals to the following addresses:

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His Excellency Ambassador Mr. Ibrahim Mirghani Ibrahim,
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SOAT is international human rights organisation established in the UK in 1993. If you have any questions about this or any other SOAT information, please contact us:

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