

Darfur Fears as Attention Shifts to South Sudan

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Concerns that international focus on referendum may be exploited by Khartoum to put squeeze on Darfuris.

The international focus on the upcoming South Sudan referendum could prompt Khartoum to forcibly return displaced people, activists and experts warn.

The January 9 referendum - in which South Sudan is likely to secede - is mandated by the Comprehensive Peace Agreement, CPA, which in January 2005 ended more than 20 years of civil war.

But while diplomatic attention centres on ensuring that the vote goes ahead and a fresh outbreak of north-south violence is averted, experts say this has exposed Darfuris to fresh dangers.

There are concerns that unless there's greater international scrutiny, Khartoum may forge ahead with efforts to dismantle camps for internally displaced people, IDPs, and force them to return to areas which are still far from safe, putting their lives at risk.

"There can only be a limited amount of international interest in Sudan and when the focus shifts onto the referendum, as it has done for over a year now, it limits the amount of energy, time and focus the international community can devote to Darfur and the weight it can put on finding a solution," said John Temin, from the United States Institute for Peace.

A particular worry has been an apparent change of direction regarding US policy towards Sudan.

"Right now, in the US administration, South Sudan is taking all the attention," said Laura Jones, of the Darfur advocacy group the Enough project. "They will pay lip service to Darfur but we don't seem to be seeing any change."

Activists say they were not reassured by views expressed by US secretary of state Hillary Clinton, who said last month that she remained "deeply concerned" about Darfur.

She told a meeting of the United Nations Security Council that "violence is intensifying; human rights violations continue; arms flow despite the embargo; journalists and activists are arrested, some merely for speaking to members of this Security Council; UN peacekeepers are kidnapped. This is all unacceptable".

Yet the US has also offered to take Khartoum off the list of state sponsors of terror list on condition that it cooperates with the referendum, rather than making this offer conditional on progress in Darfur as it has been in the past.

Experts say that this move is hugely significant, indicating a shift in focus that could have long-term consequences for the situation in the west of the country.

"If we start talking about engaging, incentivising, post-referendum arrangements - we can't leave Darfur off the agenda," Jones said.

Mohammed Eltom, deputy head of mission at the Sudanese embassy in London, acknowledged that the referendum was attracting much of the international community's attention but said this was largely because Darfur itself was stabilising.

"The situation in Darfur is improving dramatically," he said. "If there is any issue going on in Darfur it would have imposed itself on the agenda. All admit that Darfur is changing now considerably and things are getting better - there are minor conflicts here and there in some areas, but the overall picture is that Darfur is very secure now."

Eltom noted that United Kingdom secretary of state for international development, Andrew Mitchell, had recently visited Darfur, telling parliament on his return that he had found the situation there "much changed" since his previous visit in 2006.

"So I guess it's true the referendum is attracting more of the international community's attention, but still Darfur is off the focus because there is nothing to talk about in Darfur. As simple as that," he said.

But Mitchell had also told the British parliament that he underlined to Sudanese ministers and their advisers his concern about the security situation in Darfur.

He called for the release of four European nationals who have been taken hostage (a peacekeeper and

three world food programme workers), insisted on “full and unhindered access” for humanitarian workers and UN troops in the region, and urged all sides in the conflict to refrain from a military escalation.

“AN UNHAPPY STALEMATE”

According to the UN, some 300,000 people have died in Darfur and over 2.6 million have been displaced since 2003, with more than 4.7 million people affected overall.

Khartoum disputes these figures, claiming that some 10,000 have died and rejects claims that genocide was carried out in Darfur.

Sudan's president Omar al-Bashir is wanted by the International Criminal Court, ICC, for war crimes and genocide. Sudan does not recognise the ICC and Bashir denies the charges.

While the situation in Darfur has improved since the peak of the violence, Temin of the US Institute for Peace described the current situation as “a very unhappy stalemate”.

Along with high levels of poverty, kidnapping and general criminality in the IDP camps, sporadic violence continues including inter-ethnic clashes.

In addition, there was renewed fighting throughout November between the Sudanese armed forces and rebel groups, with Ibrahim Gambari, the head of the UN African Union Mission in Darfur, UNAMID, warning of rising violence in both south and north Darfur.

“Unfortunately, Darfuris are witnessing military build-up, movement of troops and clashes as the date of the referendum approaches,” he told reporters at a Khartoum press conference.

Human Rights Watch, HRW, recently reported that Sudanese government forces were continuing to carry out attacks in Jebel Marra, the mountainous rebel stronghold in central Darfur, resulting in civilian deaths, injuries and mass displacement.

There have been complaints the Sudanese government has been blocking the UN and other humanitarian agencies from accessing both camps and rebel-controlled parts of the mountainous region.

“Most of the Darfuris I speak to are very concerned that the government will become very aggressive in connection to the referendum,” said HRW Sudan researcher Jehanne Henry. “They say there has been a military build up in Darfur. I am hearing from people a heightened sense of anxiety, they feel things have turned a corner and they expect the situation to now deteriorate in Darfur, and that this is in part linked to the government of Sudan taking advantage of the timing of the referendum.”

CLOSING THE CAMPS

Among the main concerns of Darfur activists is that the focus on the referendum has allowed the government of Sudan to change tack on Darfur.

“I worry most that the international community is going to let Khartoum get away with implementing a new Darfur strategy without oversight,” Jones said.

Agreed by the cabinet in September, Khartoum’s latest plan for Darfur involves reducing the emphasis on the ongoing dialogue with rebel groups, known as the Doha peace talks, while urging IDPs to return to their former homes.

It also envisages international peacekeepers and aid groups shifting their work towards reconstruction projects to persuade displaced people to go back.

“The government now has started to implement its new strategy of trying to rebuild some of the areas that have been destroyed by the war so that the voluntary return of the IDPs can be started,” Eltom said.

But the aid community is concerned that Khartoum’s policy will amount to forced return. There are three million IDPs in camps within Darfur, as well as a further 300,000 refugees in Chad.

“You can’t develop [a region] while instability and war are ongoing and while the government of Sudan is using aerial bombardment and ground forces in Jebel Mara and other areas,” Henry said.

“There are differences between the communities, some but not all want to go back and it needs to be a very transparent process.”

Henry noted that the Sudanese government has stated “many times” that it wants to dismantle Kalma camp in south Darfur, home to some 80,000 IDPs.

One of the largest and oldest camps, Kalma has seen some fierce clashes, including an outbreak of violence in July this year between supporters of the Doha talks and opponents who felt they were being

excluded from negotiations.

Although the UN is currently cooperating with Khatoum to help some 1,600 people leave Kalma to return to their homes in west Darfur, humanitarian agencies are acutely aware of the dangers of any kind of forced return, warning that many IDPs simply have nowhere secure to go.

“You have to be really careful with returns in Darfur,” Jones said. “The government of Sudan and the armed Arab tribes which subsequently became janjaweed – nomads who wanted to take the land – are now occupying the fertile land.

“Talking about return is well and good in theory but where and to what land? The government understands the lexicon of human rights and have included the language in their new strategy. But these actions will have serious consequences if the government is trying to orchestrate forced movement on a massive scale.”

Eltom denied that the government was planning a policy of forced return, “If people do not feel secure or that their lands are secure enough for them pursue their normal life, then they won’t stay if you return them forcibly. So people here vote with their feet. They choose to go when they feel that it is safe, secure, that their normal life can be restored. People are looking forward to going back to their normal life; they are tired of fighting and misery.”

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