

UN Downplays Darfur Resettlement Claims

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It says Chadian Arabs flooding into the region are fleeing violence - not part of alleged bid by Khartoum to Arabise the region.

The UN refugee agency, UNHCR, is downplaying claims by displaced Darfuris that the resettlement of Chadian Arabs on land from which they were expelled is part of a systematic campaign by the government of Sudan, GoS, to permanently change the demography of the region.

UNHCR believes that the tens of thousands of Chadian Arabs who've moved into the former villages of non-Arab Fur, Masalit and Zaghawa tribes have been seeking shelter from violence in their own country, rather than participating in a Sudanese government plan to turn west Darfur into an ethnically pure Arab region, as Darfuris in displacement camps claim.

Between 2002 and early 2005, 80-90 per cent of African or non-Arab villages in Darfur were destroyed by the government and allied Janjaweed militias - a scorched earth campaign in which men were killed, women raped, food stocks destroyed and cattle looted.

According to UN figures from August 2007, 2.4 million people have been displaced into camps within Darfur or over the border as refugees to Chad since the crisis began in 2003.

A July report by UNHCR and the Sudanese Commission of Refugees, COR, noted that large numbers of nomadic Chadians - an estimated 45,000 - were moving into the west Darfur regions of the Habila - Foro Baranga corridor, Beida and Um Dukhun.

"At present, it seems that arrivals settling along Wadi Azoum are settling permanently. Most interviewees were clear they did not intend to return to Chad under any circumstances," said the report.

This is a "disturbing development threatening the possibility of peace in the region", according to the report, because if these areas are occupied, the original residents, now in IDP (Internally Displaced Persons) camps in Darfur and refugee camps in Chad, may encounter "serious difficulties" returning home.

The movement of pastoralists across the Chad-Darfur border is centuries old, with nomadic tribes seeking water and grazing for cattle, more so since the 1980s because of periods of famine and drought.

But Darfuri IDPs are convinced that the new influx of Arabs from Chad, since the beginning of the year, is part of a government campaign to expel non-Arabs from Darfur.

Adam Yahia, chairperson of the Al-Salam camp in El-Fasher, north Darfur, said, "Janjaweed militias want to exterminate African tribes through genocide...expelling the black race to replace it with Arab tribes."

Yahia said the GoS is bringing Arab tribes from Niger, the Central African Republic and Chad to live in the villages previously occupied by non-Arabs.

Adam Ismail, spokesperson for IDPs in Zalingi, west Darfur, said, "There are many Arabs who took our village and are now living there. Many are from Chad and Niger. It is fact that we are targeted because we are not Arab."

He claims that Arabs from neighbouring countries have even been fighting alongside Janjaweed militias. "We know from their tongue that it is not a Darfuri language they speak, and they are not Arabs from Darfur," Ismail said of some of those who've attacked local villages.

The UNHCR report says its field teams confirmed that Chadians are occupying fertile land along the Wadi Azoum and Wadi Saleh areas that used to be Masalit villages before the Darfur conflict erupted in 2003.

It said there was some evidence that land occupation takes place with the assistance of Sudanese nationals who give specific directions to the new arrivals as to where exactly to settle.

"In a number of cases the interviewees state that they were met at the border by Sudanese community leaders and transported to the settlement place in trucks," according to the report.

But it points out that there is not enough evidence to conclude they left their homes because of invitation from Sudan or offers of land in west Darfur.

The 2006 Darfur Peace Agreement provides that IDPs and refugees are entitled to their property on their return, and UNHCR says the GoS should ensure that rightful owners can return to their villages.

But Hafiz Mohammed from the campaign group Justice Africa says the ruling National Congress Party wants to change the political map of Darfur to influence national elections in 2009. He believes that the government is promising Arabs from neighbouring countries land in return for votes.

The government wants to "count these Arabs as Sudanese because if they fail to do so, the whole [election] plan will fail", says Mohammed.

Khalil Tukras, a former NGO worker from El-Fasher, agrees the huge influx of Arabs into Darfur is because of the upcoming February census, which will determine who can vote in 2009 elections.

El-Fasher Camp worker, Layla (name changed for security), recently traveled to the town of Tulus in south Darfur, and saw Chadian Arab farmers working on Masalit land. She said they told her they had been given it by Chadian Arabs.

Layla subsequently spoke to displaced Masalit, now living in towns in the region, and asked why they were not cultivating their own land.

"[They told me] 'we can't go back and cultivate our land. We can't live in our homes or we will be killed. The Arabs stole our land and if we go back they will arrest and kill us'," she said.

Annette Rehl, a spokeswoman for UNHCR, is keen to stress that many of the Chadian Arabs arriving in Darfur are refugees fleeing violence in their own country, and are not part of a Khartoum systematic resettlement plan.

Chadian Arabs in Darfur questioned by the UNHCR and the COR said they left their homes because of inter-tribal violence, and fighting between the Chadian government and local rebels. Some said uniformed soldiers and militia groups entered their homes, searching for weapons and accusing them of supporting rebels.

“Searches often turned violent with looting, beatings, arrest, murder and rape committed by these groups...many people cited general insecurity caused by the ongoing fighting between the government and rebels,” said the UNHCR report.

However, the report also said that a number of refugees had been informed by community leaders that they were to “receive Sudanese nationality in an accelerated manner” and that “some were under the impression that they were in the process of obtaining Sudanese nationality and would permanently stay in Sudan”, muddying the issue of whether Chadian Arabs were fleeing violence, or entering Darfur on a promise of land.

Rehl believes that any organised resettlement is based on tribal affiliations rather than some grand plan by the Sudanese authorities. She insists that a number of the 30,000 Chadian nomads who arrived in February were guided to empty Darfur villages and invited by local sheiks to live there - because they belong to the same tribe.

This may be because these community leaders don’t want the African Darfuris back, but UNHCR does not have concrete evidence that this is the case.

Rehl said there is no evidence of an overarching GoS campaign to change the demography of the region, and that, as far as UNHCR is aware, nobody has offered the Chadians Sudanese citizenship.

Adrienne Fricke, an independent human rights consultant, who in August 2004 worked for the Atrocities Documentation Team, A US government fact-finding mission which interviewed Darfuri refugees in Chad, told IWPR that Sudan would not openly grant citizenship to the refugees.

“What is apparently happening is that documents are being offered to these people so they can make a claim to the land, in order that the land no longer belongs to the people who were displaced,” she said.

Fricke took oral testimonies from victims who told her that attackers said "this land does not belong to black people", and that as women were being raped their abusers told them "I am going to give you an Arab baby who will take your land".

If, as displaced Darfuris maintain, Khartoum is seeking to Arabise the region, this will have implications for the ICC case against Sudanese officials suspected of war crimes.

The Darfur situation was referred to the ICC by the UN in 2005 and, so far, prosecutors have accused government minister Ahmed Harun and Janjaweed leader Ali Kushayb of committing 51 counts of war crimes and crimes against humanity.

The charges include persecution, murder, rape and the forcible transfer of Fur, Zaghawa and Masalit civilians in west Darfur.

Arrest warrants specify that 20,000 Fur were displaced from Kodoom and 34,000 Fur from Bindisi in August 2003, and 7,000 Fur from Arawala in December 2003.

ICC prosecutors say they are aware of allegations surrounding the resettlement of the land which IDPs had been forcibly removed from, and say they will confront the issue in an upcoming report to the UN Security Council on December 5.

"We will address information on a number of other forms of attacks on the civilian population, especially the displaced, in the context of analysing ongoing crimes," said prosecutors.

Analysts say that evidence of a systematic bid by Khartoum to resettle Arabs from neighbouring countries on land from which non-Arabs were expelled would help strengthen claims that there was a clear intention to remove the latter permanently, which would help to prove that genocide took place.

But Leslie Lefkow from Human Rights Watch says that concrete evidence of a systematic resettlement plan by the authorities has yet to emerge. Some government actions clearly favour Arabs, but "it is the ICC's job to put this evidence together to prove intent".

According to Fricke, "What would have to be shown is the GoS knew or was involved in the extension of the instrumentalities which would allow people to be resettled. You would have to prove that some member of the government...was providing, with the knowledge of the government, documents allowing non-Sudanese to take up residence in Darfur".

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