



WORLD RECOGNIZES REFUGEE CRISIS IN SUDAN

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More than 10,000 people have died and an estimated 1 million people have been displaced in the growing humanitarian crisis in the Darfur region of western Sudan in Africa. Militias have targeted civilians in attacks that the United Nations has warned could rival the 1994 genocide in Rwanda in which more than 800,000 people died.

"The people of Darfur are suffering a catastrophe -- terrible crimes have been committed against them," U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan said at a recent news conference.

The killings of mostly black African Muslims have been blamed on an Arab militia, large loosely organized groups of armed civilians, known as the Janjaweed. Like their victims, the Janjaweed are Muslim, but they have been accused of brutal attacks, including destroying villages, conducting mass rapes and slaughtering men, women and children.

An ethnic conflict

Human rights groups and refugees have accused the militia of "ethnic cleansing" -- that is forcing people of one religion or ethnicity to flee an area -- and genocide -- the systematic and planned killing of an entire national, racial, political or ethnic group.

International leaders and aid agencies have accused the Sudanese government, led by President Omar Hassan Ahmed al-Bashir, of supporting Janjaweed.

"The government of Sudan is responsible for 'ethnic cleansing' and crimes against humanity in Darfur, one of the world's poorest and most inaccessible regions," a Human Rights Watch report said.

Sudan's government denies the charges and has promised to disarm its militias, though reports from aid groups in the region say widespread attacks continue.

The conflict in Darfur dates back to early 2003 when black Africans there rebelled against the country's Arab Muslim leadership, demanding a power-sharing government and an end to the economic disparity. The Sudanese government sent troops to quell the rebellion and reportedly organized and supplied the Janjaweed militia to combat the rebels.

The violence in the mostly arid desert region has driven hundreds of thousands of Darfur villagers from their homes. Most are in refugee camps in Darfur while some 200,000 have fled to crowded refugee camps in the neighboring country Chad.

The humanitarian crisis

The U.S. Agency for International Development has characterized the crisis in Darfur as the "worst humanitarian crisis in the world today." It estimates that at least 300,000 Sudanese refugees could die of starvation, disease or ethnic cleansing if aid does not arrive soon.

So far, few aid agencies have been able to penetrate the region because of continuing violence.

The few groups who are there have sent back alarming reports of impending starvation and mass death, sparking other human rights and humanitarian agencies to speed up plans to deliver aid such as food, clothing and clean water.

U.S. involvement

U.S. officials say they have identified the leaders of the Janjaweed militia and have threatened to impose targeted sanctions, or economic punishments, on Sudan if the government fails to intervene in the crisis, according to the State Department.

Secretary of State Colin Powell visited Khartoum on June 29, 2004 to press the government to improve access to the region and disarm the Janjaweed militia. He then traveled to Darfur to see the situation first-hand.

So far U.S. officials have been careful not to follow the lead of aid groups and declare the crisis genocide. Under U.N. law, member countries, including the United States, are required to intervene when genocide occurs.

Is it 'genocide'?

But, whether or not the Sudan crisis falls under the definition of genocide, is up for debate, according to Andrew Natsios, the administrator of USAID.

"What [genocide] means or does not mean is something that experts have to review," Natsios said in a NewsHour interview. "And in fact, there is a review going on right now of whether or not, from the U.S. government's perspective, this is taking place or not."

Jennifer Leaning, a professor at Harvard University and a board member of Physicians for Human Rights, contends the "targeted, systematic, mass killing of an identifiable group" is an "unfolding genocide."

"Everything we can see in terms of destruction of life and livelihood and claims to the land and capacity to stay there, and attempts to drive them [non-Arab Darfurians] thoroughly from the region, would suggest that we are looking at a genocide in action," said Leaning.

The United Nations is likely to take up the issue of what to do in Darfur in the next few weeks.

-- *By Kristina Nwazota, Online NewsHour*

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