

## Extra Feature Story

### Violence Reignites in Darfur

March 31, 2008

**People in Darfur, the western region of Sudan in Africa, remain the target of Arab militia attacks and Sudanese military strikes as the government tries to eliminate a rebel movement.**

The fighting started in early 2003 when black Africans from Darfur rebelled against the country's Arab Muslim leadership, seeking infrastructure improvements, oil revenues and a standing in the government. The government responded by sending in forces to quell the rebellion and reportedly financing efforts by the Janjaweed militia to fight the rebels. The roving bands of militia fighters burned villages, and raped and killed people in Darfur.

The conflict, according to the BBC, has led to more than 2 million people fleeing their homes in Darfur to live in refugee camps along the border with Chad, in a dry, isolated part of Africa where it is difficult for aid workers to reach them.

#### State of the crisis

The Darfur crisis is a complicated tangle of rebel groups, ethnic conflicts and international diplomacy.

When the conflict began in February 2003, there were two primary rebel groups: the Sudan Liberation Army and the Justice and Equality Movement.

Both groups have somewhat different reasons for opposing the government in Sudan's capital of Khartoum, but both groups consist of black Africans who oppose their treatment under the Arab Muslim government. The Sudanese government denies the claims that it uses its military to target its own people.

The international community, including the United Nations and United States, has turned attention on the violence in Darfur and imposed economic sanctions. President Bush declared the violence there "genocide".

But efforts to stabilize the country have been met with roadblocks from the Sudanese government, which until last year resisted calls to replace an overburdened African Union security force with an international peacekeeping force in Darfur.

As violence continued and international pressure increased, a new peacekeeping force of 26,000 African Union and United Nations troops is set to move into the country to replace the existing AU contingent of 7,000 people, according to The New York Times.

#### Obstacles to peace

Despite international efforts to stop the violence in Darfur, several factors have hampered creating a lasting peace in the region.

After years of negotiations, Sudan agreed to allow the new United Nations-backed peacekeeping force to protect vulnerable refugees living in the open desert. But Sudan has carefully dictated the terms of the operation.

U.N. representative Jan Eliasson told the U.N. Security Council that the delays in troop deployment and negotiations with rebel groups were making it hard for the people in Darfur to believe that the United Nations could help them.

"While the people of Darfur cannot wait forever, we will have to accept that the steps towards an eventual peace agreement will be incremental and will take longer than we have initially hoped," he told the Times.

Aside from a lack of cooperation from the Sudanese government, the conflict is complicated by other local, regional and political conflicts. Sudan's neighbor to the west, Chad, has been accused by the Sudanese government of arming rebel groups. Meanwhile, the rebel groups themselves have splintered into smaller groups with different demands, making it difficult to reach peace agreements.

Furthermore, China has been accused of helping the Sudanese campaign by engaging in economic trade with the country -- a link that led American filmmaker Steven Spielberg to withdraw from his advisory role to this year's Beijing Olympics. However, the Times reported that pressure put on China to change its stance toward Sudan has succeeded in convincing China to push for the peacekeeping force.

#### **Outlook for Darfur**

While diplomats, aid workers, soldiers and politicians work to stop the killing in Darfur, the region remains in a state of disarray and violence, with roaming bands of militias terrorizing villagers and threatening humanitarian efforts.

"The situation is not better than it was five years ago," Auriol Miller, head of the humanitarian group Oxfam in Sudan, told the BBC in February. "We would still say the situation is getting worse. Humanitarian workers are being targeted and attacked in a way that has got increasingly worse over the last few years."

The United States recently announced it has offered incentives to Sudanese President Omar Hassan Ahmed Bashir if his government cooperates in ending the conflict.

U.S. diplomat to Sudan Richard Williamson discussed lifting sanctions, removing Sudan from the list of countries that sponsor terrorism, and renewing diplomatic relations with the country if it cooperates, according to the Los Angeles Times.

"One thing that can contribute to stability is getting boots on the ground," Williamson told the newspaper. "Why aren't we doing it with a greater urgency? That is the question the U.S. wants answered."

**-- Compiled by Quinn Bowman for NewsHour Extra**

© 2008 MacNeil/Lehrer Productions