

Terror in Sudan: when sex is a weapon of mass destruction

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By Deborah Gabriel

Photo courtesy Amnesty International

Last July Amnesty International produced a report which documented the incidence of mass rape, abduction and murder in Sudan. The findings are shocking and invoke feelings of anger and outrage. Surprisingly little has changed in the last ten months.

According to a group of women interviewed by Amnesty in a refugee camp in May 2004, the Janjaweed told them:

“You blacks, you have spoilt the country! We are here to burn you...We will kill your husbands and sons and we will sleep with you!”

A 50-year old woman also reported that her village was attacked in October 2003 by Arabs who told them: “Every black woman must be killed, even the children.”

However, although on the surface these reports suggest a simple case of Arabs against Africans, Amnesty cautions that sometimes “the distinction between the two groups is not always so clear cut.”

Tensions have always existed between different groups on the basis of competition for reduced grazing areas and land for farming between nomadic and sedentary communities.

Racial tensions have been exacerbated by the response of the Sudanese government. Amnesty also suggests that the motive for the attacks by the Janjaweed is the looting of cattle and seizure of the belongings of the nomadic groups. It is being used as a strategy to secure grazing areas.

When rape is used as a weapon of war it is to inflict humiliation and terror on communities. Women are singled out because of the perceived view of females as both property and as the preservers of culture and identity.

Devastating consequences looming for future generations

Amnesty caseworker Bashair Ahmed told Back Britain that in Darfur: “Rape is being used as a weapon to bring shame on the men and on the communities” and that far-reaching consequences lay ahead:

“Women are giving birth to babies conceived by rape and they do not know what name to put on the birth certificate as they have no idea who the father is. People are calling the babies ‘Janjaweed’ and these women are being ostracised by society.”

The victims face further risks as they become isolated from their families and communities. On top of the violence and humiliation of rape, they will never marry and

lack family support to help them bring up the babies.

Another potentially lethal consequence of rape is the risk of HIV and AIDS . With inadequate medical facilities and healthcare provision this poses a real danger to the refugee population in Darfur.

For those who seek justice or retribution there is the risk of the women themselves facing prosecution under Sudanese law for 'Zina' a crime of adultery or sex outside marriage.

The penalty for this 'crime' is 50 lashes for an unmarried woman whilst a married woman faces being stoned to death.

Ms Ahmed said: "There is also an identity crisis looming as questions arise over the ethnicity of the rape babies – are they from Arab or African tribes? These issues over identity will affect the society for generations to come."

Justice for sexual violence against women would serve both as a deterrent against future acts as well as punishing those who have violated women and destroyed communities.

Sexual violence during conflict is recognised as a crime against humanity under the Rome Statute. In addition Article 3 of the 1949 Geneva Convention prohibits acts against civilians including: "violence to life, torture and outrages upon personal dignity."

Protocol 1 to the 1949 Geneva Convention also states that "women shall be protected in particular against rape, forced prostitution and any other form of indecent assault."

Despite the backing of International law, Ms Ahmed told Black Britain that: "The Sudanese government has failed to protect the women and failed to prosecute anyone for these crimes, allowing the aggressors to act with impunity."

We are calling on the Sudanese government to fulfil its responsibility to protect its civilians. We are also calling on them to disarm the Janjaweed militia who are thought to be responsible for most of the violence."

The African Union: we are best placed to handle situation in Darfur

With increased attacks taking place the African Union (AU), whose troops are deployed as peacekeepers has faced recent criticism from the relatives of victims who have complained that they are doing little to stem the attacks.

Black Britain spoke with Mr Baba Gana Kingibe, Head of the African Union Mission in Sudan to discuss what action is being taken.

Mr Kingibe said: "The African Union has a responsibility for bringing about peace and security in Darfur but many people do not fully appreciate the sheer enormity of this task. The sheer size of the physical space we have to cope with is immense."

Part of the problem, said Mr Kingibe is that: "We cannot operate outside the boundaries of our remit as a peacekeeping force.

The responsibility for policing in Sudan rests with the government. The African Union is not in Sudan to substitute the Sudanese police. It still remains the responsibility of the Sudanese police to uphold law and order."

Mr Kingibe said that the reason women were at risk: "is because the families fear graver consequences for the men if they venture out of the camps, that they will almost

certainly be killed.”

“They feel that the worst thing that can happen to a woman is that she will be raped. They perceive it as a lesser risk than a loss of life. It is a sad reality but it is a family survival strategy.”

According to Mr Kingibe, the attacks on women in Darfur are not on an organised mass scale but are opportunistic ambushes by lone operators or small gangs of up to four militias.

In response to the increasing violence the African Union are increasing the number of peacekeeping troops to 7000 by September. In addition, African Union police personnel are being boosted from 244 to 1500.

The increase in personnel will mean that a police officer can be placed in every one of the 25 refugee camps as well as in villages. AU police will operate on a 24-hour basis and will work alongside troops to patrol the parameters of camps.

The African Union is developing a system whereby women who need to leave the camps temporarily are being escorted by AU policemen. Police stations are also being built inside camps so that complaints can be made in-house.

“We have asked the countries that are sending police to send as many policewomen as possible, because female victims will not speak to men but feel comfortable talking to women police officers.”

Mr Kingibe stated that the role of the African Union is to act as a deterrent but insisted that they followed up on cases where perpetrators had been handed over to the Sudanese authorities.

He said: “The specific cultural environment in which we are operating and the social and political dimensions are very complex. This is not a straightforward operation.

In many ways the African Union personnel are better able to cope with these challenges, because we are also part of the wider environment. Some of the peacekeeping troops are from Rwanda, and they have firsthand experience of some of the things that are now happening in Darfur.”

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