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Arab Gunmen Kill Hundreds of Villagers in Chad

By Lydia Polgreen

DAKAR, Senegal — Hundreds of Chadians have been killed by roving groups of Arab gunmen in dozens of villages over the past 10 days, according to aid workers and human rights officials along Chad's troubled border with Sudan.

At least 220 people have been killed, and dozens of wounded people have overwhelmed small, poorly equipped local hospitals, the United Nations said Tuesday. Chad's government has declared a state of emergency over the attacks and has accused Sudan, its neighbor to the east, of fomenting a crisis in Chad.

“By exporting its Darfur conflict to Chad, Sudan wants to weaken Chad by making different Chadian communities fight each other,” Hourmadji Moussa Doumgor, a government spokesman, told The Associated Press on Monday. “All this is to prepare the ground for a large-scale war.”

For more than two years, Chad and Sudan have traded accusations about support for insurgents across their shared border. Sudan is fighting non-Arab rebel groups in the western region of Darfur that seek greater autonomy, while Chad is fighting rebels seeking to overthrow the government of President Idriss Déby.

The conflict in Darfur, which pits the non-Arab tribes against the Arab-dominated government, has been marked by brutal intertribal violence in which the Sudanese government has armed Arab militias to fight the non-Arab insurgents. At least 200,000 people have died, and more than two million have been driven from their homes. That ethnic warfare has spilled over into Chad, inspiring copycat violence among Chadian Arabs and cross-border raids on villages by Sudanese militias.

The recent violence has been particularly brutal. One man's eyes were gouged out with bayonets, said David Buchbinder, a researcher with Human Rights Watch who is traveling in the region affected by the attacks. Two women were burned alive in their hut, he said.

“It is extremely horrific violence,” Mr. Buchbinder said. “It is as if it is driven by hatred. It is a coordinated action over a large part of eastern Chad, and not always with theft as a motive. Sometimes the motive is only to kill.”

The attacks represent a sharp escalation of the violence in the volatile region around Darfur and threaten to further destabilize one of the most dangerous and lawless corners of the world.

The attacks appear to be the work of Arab militias from both sides of the Chad-Sudan border, and because they are occurring deep inside Chad, about 60 miles from the border, the violence is particularly ominous.

While the initial clashes between non-Arab villagers and Arab raiders appeared to involve mainly local tribes, the fresh set of attacks appears to be linked directly to the fighting in Darfur and involves a mix of Chadian and Sudanese Arabs. But even that distinction is largely academic — the porous border has little meaning for most villagers, who move back and forth freely.

The United Nations Security Council has approved a United Nations peacekeeping force to stanch the violence spreading out of Darfur and replace the largely ineffective and undermanned African Union force currently working there. But Sudan has adamantly refused to allow the new force to deploy. The United Nations plans to convene a high-level meeting on Thursday in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, the headquarters of the African Union, to discuss ways to end the violence.

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