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Aid Groups Warn of Wider Darfur Crisis

By The Associated Press

KHARTOUM, Sudan — In a sweeping call for help, a wide range of U.N. aid agencies appealed Wednesday to warring parties to end the violence in Darfur, warning the relief keeping millions alive will be "irreversibly jeopardized" if it does not stop.

The humanitarian groups said a massive influx of foreign aid was the only thing "holding the line" for 2.5 million refugees and over 1 million other civilians in Darfur.

"That line cannot be held much longer," warned the statement issued by 14 United Nations agencies working in Sudan.

Aid groups and U.N. officials have for months been alarmed by the rapidly deteriorating conditions faced by civilians in Darfur, where over 200,000 people have been killed since rebels took up arms against the central Sudanese government in 2003, accusing it of neglect.

The government is accused of having retaliated against civilians with air raids and by unleashing the janjaweed, militias of Arab nomads blamed for the worst atrocities in the conflict.

"Villages have been burned, looted and arbitrarily bombed, and crops and livestock destroyed. Sexual violence against women is occurring at alarming rates. This situation is unacceptable," the statement warned.

The humanitarian groups said what pushed them to issue the appeal Wednesday was the increased targeting of aid workers in the region. The splintering of rebel groups into lawless factions without clear leadership, as well as government restrictions, is making it ever more difficult for aid workers to operate, they said.

"The humanitarian space that we operate in is shrinking," said Ted Chaiban, Sudan country manager for UNICEF, which signed with appeal. Other signatories included the World Food Program, the U.N. Development Program, and the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees.

With repeated military attacks and shifting front lines, December was the worst month in Darfur in over two years, the statement said. It followed six months of escalating violence, during which 30 U.N. and other aid compounds were attacked, forcing some 400 U.N. and other aid workers to relocate. During the same period, 12 aid workers were killed in zones controlled by rebels and government forces.

"Before, aid workers were being caught up in the violence. Now they're actually being targeted," said Alun McDonald, spokesman for the British aid group Oxfam in Sudan. "It's not the occasional vehicle getting lost, it's compounds being looted in coordinated attacks."

U.N. and other humanitarian groups say the turning point came on Dec. 18, when at least four aid organizations were attacked in the South Darfur camp of Gereida, the region's largest with 130,000 refugees.

Offices and housing compounds were simultaneously raided, cars and radio equipment plundered, some aid workers endured mock executions and assailants raped a female aid worker from the French aid group Action Contre la Faim.

"We're still trying to understand what happened," said the French agency's Sudan coordinator Philippe Conraud. "The fact that we can't assess why this took place is worrying us for the future."

Nearly all aid workers have evacuated Gereida, a zone reputed to be controlled by fighters from the faction of the Sudan Liberation Movement led by Minni Minawi, the one rebel leader who signed a peace agreement with the government last May.

Conraud said Minawi had provided "very little explanation," but had promised to investigate the incident.

"If the raids were a clear message that aid groups aren't welcome in Gereida anymore, then we'll have to move out permanently," he said.

Meanwhile, 130,000 people who depend on aid to survive in Gereida have not received food since mid-December. "The situation could become very alarming within a few weeks," Conraud said, pointing to World Food Program estimates that more than 170,000 people are now out of reach in South Darfur alone and are seriously at risk for malnutrition.

Deteriorating hygiene in the crowded refugee camps and the isolation of villages have triggered a new surge of cholera, the aid groups said, with 147 dead and more than 2,700 suffering from the epidemic in 2006.

"If this situation continues, the humanitarian operation and welfare of the population it aims to support will be irreversibly jeopardized," the U.N. statement warned.

The U.N. aid groups called on Khartoum's government and the rebels to "take concrete steps toward a peaceful settlement in Darfur and the respect of international humanitarian law and principles" and to hold the perpetrators of crimes accountable.

Pulling out of the region for good is not an option, the aid groups insisted. But the current violence "raises the question of whether we are having an impact that justifies those risks," said Chaiban of UNICEF.

U.N. agencies say Darfur has been their single largest humanitarian effort, with nearly 1 million tons of food delivered at a cost of over \$1 billion since April 2004, and the mobilization of some 15,000 Sudanese and international aid workers.

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