

30,000 More Sudanese Threaten to Cross to Chad - UN

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By Stephanie Nebehay

GENEVA (Reuters) - Some 30,000 Sudanese, victims of fresh attacks by Arab militia inside Darfur, have threatened to cross into Chad, already stretched with 200,000 refugees from the conflict, the United Nations said Friday.

Sudanese authorities are conducting propaganda campaigns on the radio and through village chiefs to prevent Darfuris from leaving their homeland, the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) said.

Jean-Marie Fakhouri, head of UNHCR operations for Sudan, this week met 30,000 Sudanese at Masteri, south of El Geneina in Western Darfur state, who reported recent rapes, killings and attacks by militiamen, spokesman Ron Redmond told a briefing.

The refugees demanded U.N. peacekeepers or other credible measures to make them feel secure in Sudan. "If they don't get international security guarantees, they said, they will all cross to Chad as soon as the rain-swollen river that marks the border with Sudan dries up," Redmond said.

UNHCR hoped to avoid at all costs an influx of 30,000 refugees into one area which would strain aid workers' ability to feed and care for refugees in its nine camps in eastern Chad, according to the spokesman.

"We have been worried all along that some more of the estimated 1.2 million people who are internally displaced in Darfur could move toward Chad if they don't get the protection and assistance that they need inside Darfur," Redmond said.

Some 7,345 Darfuris have been registered in Chad so far this month, and 18,000 remain camped along the border, UNHCR said.

So far 672 cases of hepatitis and 21 deaths have been reported in camps in Chad over the past month, the World Health Organization (WHO) said Thursday.

The World Food Program said it was seeking a further \$40 million from donors to buy extra food for 45,000 Darfuri children and mothers in Chad and 10,000 Chadians whose stocks had been depleted. "This is an effort to try to reverse the tide of malnutrition," a spokeswoman said.

Foreign Minister Mustafa Osman Ismail said Thursday that Sudan was confident it will prove to the U.N. Security Council it has made progress to protect the internally displaced.

Under a July 30 Security Council resolution, Sudan was given a month to prove it was making progress toward disarming marauding Arab militias known as Janjaweed and improve security in the remote western region, or face possible sanctions.

U.N. envoy Jan Pronk will report on progress in Darfur to Secretary-General Kofi Annan on August 30 after senior U.N. officials visit the area next week to assess security in camps.

Under the U.N. plan, the International Organization of Migration has been negotiating an accord with Sudan on the safe and voluntary return of displaced to their villages in Darfur. Ismail and IOM director-general Brunson McKinley plan to sign it in Khartoum Saturday, a spokeswoman said.

The U.N. estimates that up to 50,000 people have died in Darfur since two rebel groups took up arms there last year. Khartoum denies rebel charges of arming the Janjaweed to loot and burn African villages in a campaign of ethnic cleansing.