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Civilians Bear Brunt of the Continuing Violence in Darfur

By LYDIA POLGREEN

LABADO, Sudan, Jan. 22 - The sounds of terror arrived with agonizing certainty - the whisper of camel hoofs on desert sand, the clap of gunfire, the crackle of a thatched roof set aflame.

Aisha Abdullah gathered her five children on Thursday, buried her most valuable possessions - some metal bowls, a cooking pot, a few tin cups - and ran as fast as she could.

"They have destroyed everything," she said as she returned Friday to her village, Kadanaro, in southern Darfur, to survey the destruction. Her family's compound had been reduced to tidy circles of smoldering gray and black ash by marauding Arab militiamen, she said.

Even as Sudan celebrates the recent end of the 20-year conflict between the country's Muslim north and the mostly Christian south, promising peace throughout this troubled country, the ethnic violence that has devastated villages in the western region of Darfur continues unchecked while the world's eyes are elsewhere.

A two-day journey through a restive corner of Darfur offered a chance to witness a game of cat-and-mouse playing out as territory shifted between African rebels and government soldiers with their Arab militia allies. Villages have become battlefields on which the armies never meet, chasing each other away and then taking a grievous toll in burned huts, hungry children, looted livestock and naked terror.

While the rebel groups that once controlled this territory have been driven to a distant stronghold far east of the regional capital, Nyala, the villagers here have been chased away, too. Once dotted with bustling settlements of sorghum and peanut farmers, it is now an eerie wasteland of empty villages. Some people are able to reach squalid refugee camps, where there is at least food and shelter provided by relief agencies. The rest simply shiver under the cloudless desert skies.

"We sleep outside in the cold," Ms. Abdullah said as she hastily retrieved her buried belongings on Friday afternoon. "We fear we will be attacked again."

Despite assurances that peace is at hand, and despite the presence of a small African Union peacekeeping force that is monitoring a frequently broken cease-fire, attacks on

villages have persisted. As many as 25 have been burned to the ground in recent days in this restive patch of Darfur, a vast arid region roughly the size of France.

Leaders of the main rebel groups, the Sudan Liberation Army and the Justice and Equality Movement, are to meet with Vice President Ali Osman Taha in Nigeria next month to negotiate a settlement to the crisis. But cease-fire agreements reached in the past have quickly been broken, and it is unclear whether the political leaders of the warring factions still control their militants.

On Jan. 14, an attack on the town of Hamada left more than 100 people dead, including many women and children, said foreign military and aid officials in Darfur. Thousands more have fled their homes, adding to the two million people pushed into tattered camps in Sudan and neighboring Chad by the conflict.

And the conflict in this part of Darfur is just a small piece of a vast tableau of suffering. Clashes between rebels and Arab militias continue across Darfur, and increased banditry has stymied efforts to bring aid to the millions of people who have fled their homes. Once coherent rebel groups have splintered, with some engaging in outright robbery, and the militiamen harass and attack aid workers.

A bad harvest brought on by drought and war promises months of hunger, and with it clashes between the mostly African camp residents and their Arab neighbors, whose food supplies are running low, particularly in western and northern Darfur, according to the World Food Program.

But here in southern Darfur, where the government recently completed a scorched-earth campaign to force rebels from villages and towns they had occupied for much of the conflict, the full brunt of the war was on display. From Umm Zahefa, which was attacked in mid-December by soldiers suspecting that rebels from the Sudan Liberation Army were hiding there, to Labado, once a rebel stronghold, it is the villagers who have paid.

Government soldiers began moving on Labado in early December, camping several miles outside of town. Then, according to the commanding officer of the troops that took the town, S.L.A. rebels mounted a surprise attack on their camp, killing several soldiers. On Dec. 16 the soldiers retaliated, pounding Labado with helicopter gunships and mortar fire. When the smoke cleared, nearly 100 people were dead, according to village leaders. More than 20,000 town residents fled with the 20,000 residents of a refugee camp at the edge of town.

What happened next is unclear, because few residents remained to witness it, but today the town is in ruins. Its school and hospital are destroyed. All of its shops and homes have been looted. Nearly every hut has been burned.

Maj. Morhi el-Din, a senior officer of the government force that led the charge on Labado, said the fires that burned the huts had been started by bullets fired at S.L.A. fighters hiding in the town - an explanation that seemed to defy logic.

"We shot at them in self-defense, and that started the fires," Major Din explained. "We did not start these fires."

S.L.A. commanders, who along with their compatriots in the Justice and Equality Movement, have been pushed farther east, to a town called Muhagiriya, said they had not even been in Labado.

"We left the town so we would not endanger the population there," said Nur el-Din Elyass, the 27-year-old dreadlocked commander of the ragtag S.L.A. force garrisoned in Muhagiriya.

But residents of Labado tell a different story, as do the many placards and graffiti indicating the S.L.A.'s presence here. Moussa Ahmed Ibrahim, the sheik of the town, said the rebels had been there, living among them, but had fled at the first sign of an attack by Arab militiamen, known as the janjaweed.

"We are angry at the S.L.A. because they cause us this bad situation," Mr. Ibrahim said. "All of our wealth and our homes are taken, but they run away and don't defend us. But we are also angry at the janjaweed, because they steal from us and burn our houses."

In Muhagiriya, Ran van der Wal, coordinator for the health program run by Doctors Without Borders here, said virtually all of the patients treated for war wounds were civilians.

"We are seeing women, we are seeing children with shrapnel wounds," Ms. Van der Wal said. "It is not a war between armies. It is a kind of war on civilians."

Maj. Omar Bashir, the commanding officer of 200 government troops garrisoned in the town of Marla, has blamed "tribal conflicts" for a recent rash of attacks on nearby villages, and he said that when his men went to the villages to investigate, "they find neither the burned nor the burners."

Caught in the middle, frightened villagers say they do not care who the perpetrators are - the rebels who fight in their name, the government that attacks their towns, or the Arab militiamen who terrorize them.

Adam Muhammad returned with his wife and four children to Labado on Friday after spending more than a month hiding in the desert, only to discover that his house had been burned. The family settled under a tree, close to the African Union camp set up here less than a week ago, hoping that the proximity to the peacekeepers would bring them a modicum of security.

"We need to have peace," Mr. Muhammad said, cradling his infant daughter, Maysoona, in his arms. "We have suffered too much for this war."

