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Aid Chief Warns of Sudan Catastrophe

By Julian Borger

The forced withdrawal of aid organisations from Darfur could leave more than two million civilians facing catastrophe, vulnerable to militia attacks, starvation and disease, a leading human rights activist has warned.

Lawrence Rossin, a former US ambassador now acting as international coordinator of the Save Darfur Coalition, said that even after the deaths of an estimated 400,000 people in the region, most at the hands of the government-backed Janjaweed militia, the situation could still get worse. "The genocide may not be done," he said. "There are still plenty of people to kill."

The warning came as more evidence emerged of Sudanese government harassment of aid organisations.

The UN secretary-general, Ban Ki Moon, called on the government to investigate a police assault on 20 UN staff and humanitarian workers in the South Darfur capital of Nyala, in which several UN staff were seriously injured. Action Against Hunger, a French agency, said that one of its staff was raped in Darfur, one was subjected to a mock execution, and others were sexually assaulted at its compound in Gereida, a town that was comprehensively looted in December. Several aid officials said they believed that a faction under a former rebel leader, Minni Minnawi, now collaborating with the Khartoum government, was behind the Gereida attack.

The raid is the latest in a string of attacks on humanitarian organisations by Janjaweed militiamen and rebel groups, in which a dozen aid workers have died. The onslaught prompted an unprecedented joint statement this month by UN agencies in the western Sudanese province, saying that the aid operation there, the world's largest, was under threat. Aid officials say the government of Omar al-Bashir is also holding up visas and customs clearance for their supplies.

All but a handful of aid workers have been withdrawn from the most vulnerable refugee camps. One agency, the Norwegian Refugee Council, has been forced out, and others may follow.

"It's at breaking point, and we can't continue much longer in this environment," an aid official said.

If the aid workers left, Mr Rossin said: "You'd have a terrible, catastrophic situation, in several different ways". The provision of food, water and medical aid would be cut off and the 2.5 million civilians in the camps could disperse, which might be Khartoum's

intention, he said. The departure of western witnesses to the crisis would also make Darfur civilians more vulnerable to attack.

The Sudanese government breached a UN-brokered ceasefire agreement in recent days by conducting air strikes on Darfur villages, according to African Union observers. Mr Bashir told the BBC that his forces had carried out bombing in northern Darfur, but said the truce had first been broken by rebel forces.

Mr Bashir has agreed to allow UN peacekeepers into Darfur to support a small force deployed by the African Union, but only 40 have arrived, and Khartoum is dragging its heels over further deployments.

British and US officials have threatened punitive measures against Khartoum, but aid officials are concerned the pressure on Khartoum has fallen away recently.

In his state of the union address on Tuesday, President George Bush said he would "continue to awaken the conscience of the world to save the people of Darfur". But, said Mr Rossin: "We've all raised consciousness about Darfur. That's not the president's job. It's the president's job to do things."

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