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Darfur: Aid Workers Are the New Targets

The newest targets in the territory's widening violence are the aid workers keeping its people alive.

By Rod Nordland

Last September 11 was a momentous day in Darfur, too. After unidentified militiamen attacked aid workers from the Nobel Prize-winning Médecins sans Frontières at a roadblock on that date, most of the international aid groups ministering to Darfur's 6 million people stopped using the roads. On December 18, in the southern town of Gereida, unrelated gunmen attacked the compounds of Oxfam and Action Contre la Faim. More than 70 aid workers subsequently pulled out of the refugee camp there—Darfur's largest, with 130,000 people—leaving only 10 Red Cross employees behind. Yet at the time no one revealed what had really sparked the dramatic pullbacks. In both cases, international staff, including three French aid workers, were either raped or sexually assaulted in territory controlled by the Sudanese government and its allies.

Rape as a weapon has become depressingly commonplace in Darfur, where 200,000 Africans have been killed and a third of the population have been sent fleeing into camps in three years of war. But the attacks on international aid workers herald a dramatic and dangerous new trend—the deliberate targeting of those helping to keep Darfur's millions of refugees alive. A dozen staffers from foreign NGOs have been killed in just the past six months, more than in the previous two years. There are an estimated 14,000 aid workers in Darfur now, the majority of them Sudanese, working for foreign NGOs and U.N. agencies and delivering $1 billion a year in aid. Just a few more horrific attacks could throw that massive operation into jeopardy. Last week 14 U.N. agencies working in Darfur issued a stark warning that "the humanitarian community cannot indefinitely assure the survival of the population in Darfur if insecurity continues."

Médecins sans Frontières country director Jean Vataux confirms that two MSF staffers, a Sudanese and a European, were subjected to a serious sexual assault on September 11 after being forced out of their vehicle near Zalingei, in an area under government control. While the women were not raped, Vataux says, "there was a clear desire to hurt and humiliate." The women were badly beaten as well. Vataux says MSF reported the incident to Sudanese authorities, who promised to investigate but so far have not reported any outcome. Action Contre la Faim's country director Philippe Conraud confirms that two Frenchwomen working for ACF in Gereida were raped by armed men, but would not provide details. In the Gereida attack, aid agencies' compounds were systematically looted, numerous vehicles stolen and staff terrorized at gunpoint for six hours.

The two incidents add to a pattern of increased violence since a peace agreement was signed last May between the government and some rebels. After that, rebel factions splintered further. In some areas, the government is working with rebel signatories; in others, it's fighting them, and in some places the rebels are fighting one another. The

version of the conflict that has seized the imagination of the world—and that prompted former secretary of State Colin Powell to describe the killing there as "genocide"—involved marauding Arab militiamen known as Janjaweed, often backed up by Sudanese military forces, laying waste to scattered villages. Now as many as 12 different groups are at each other's throats, tussling over control of huge refugee camps or angling for their share of promised government compensation. On January 10, New Mexico Gov. Bill Richardson announced he had brokered a 60-day ceasefire; so far, it has yet to start. "The ceasefire?" says a senior officer with the African Union peacekeepers in Darfur, who asked to remain anonymous for fear of offending Sudanese authorities. "That's like the peace. We haven't seen either."

Assaults on aid organizations have wide repercussions. After a December 8 attack on the International Committee of the Red Cross compound in Kutum, in northern Darfur, all but three of the international staff pulled out. Villagers driven from their homes by Janjaweed have since dispersed rather than seek refuge in the camp there. "We don't know where 30,000 people are," says Rebecca Dale of the International Rescue Committee. "Only about two or three thousand have shown up."

Khartoum has pledged to give aid agencies unfettered access to Darfur, and has frequently boasted of its cooperation with the international community. Yet the NGOs say their workers, especially those from Western countries, are frequently denied visas and travel permits, while key equipment and supplies are held up in Sudanese Customs. And they cannot complain too loudly. "We can't afford to be kicked out," says Dawn Blalock, spokesman for the United Nations' Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. The stakes are too high: Blalock points out that the aid groups have managed to lower the overall malnutrition rate in Darfur below the emergency level of 15 percent. Without them, no one knows how bad it could get.

Those who speak out have paid a price. The Norwegian Refugee Council, serving 250,000 displaced Darfurians, was expelled in November to hardly a murmur from the United Nations. Late last year the U.N. secretary-general's representative to Sudan, Jan Pronk, the highest U.N. mission official there, was thrown out by Khartoum after he complained publicly about continued Janjaweed attacks. He has yet to be replaced, leaving the U.N. mission leaderless. "The international community have been taken for a ride," says Pronk. And yet again, the ones suffering most are the people of Darfur.