

Sudan Blocks U.N. Official From Darfur

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NAIROBI, Kenya, April 3 — The government of Sudan has blocked Jan Egeland, the United Nations' top emergency aid official, from visiting the western Darfur region this week, prompting Mr. Egeland to accuse Khartoum of trying to hide the dire conditions there.

The Sudanese government offered various explanations for its decision not to allow Mr. Egeland, the under secretary general for humanitarian affairs and the United Nations' emergency relief coordinator, to visit Khartoum, the capital, or Darfur beginning Monday.

Jamal Ibrahim, a Foreign Ministry spokesman, said the visit was merely postponed because it would have coincided with the Prophet Muhammad's birthday. He also said in an interview with the BBC that it would have been unsafe for Mr. Egeland, a Norwegian, to visit Sudan given the recent controversy over cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad published in a Danish newspaper.

But the United Nations said that the trip had been planned in advance and that the decision by Sudanese authorities not to approve his flight appeared to be politically motivated.

"They said I'm not welcome," Mr. Egeland said in a telephone interview from Rumbek, in southern Sudan, which operates semi-autonomously and did approve the visit. "My interpretation is that they don't want me to see what I was planning to witness in South and West Darfur, which is renewed attacks on the civilian population."

In the latest wave of attacks in Darfur, Mr. Egeland said thousands of people had been chased from 60 villages by government-backed militias known as the janjaweed. He said the deteriorating security environment had made it increasingly difficult to provide

assistance to the estimated three million refugees living in camps in Darfur and across the border in Chad.

Mr. Egeland said the governor of South Darfur, where Mr. Egeland had been scheduled to visit, had opposed his arrival there and suggested that it might not be safe for him to visit. In addition, he said that Sudan's representatives to the United Nations had informed his office in New York that he would not be welcome in Darfur or Khartoum.

"We are having an endless nightmare of administrative obstacles to our work in Darfur," Mr. Egeland said. "We have a feeling that the people we are trying to assist are being increasingly attacked. My feeling is the government should help us help their people."

Relations between the Sudanese and the United Nations are particularly delicate now because of plans for the United Nations later this year to take over running of the African Union mission now under way in Darfur. Under-financed and limited in its ability to quell the violence, the 7,000-strong African Union force is viewed as more neutral by the Sudanese, who oppose the arrival of any Western troops in Darfur.

Prompted by the government, Sudanese citizens have taken to the streets on several occasions to protest against a United Nations force, which they often equate with an American role in Sudan.