

In Darfur's Death Grip

Villagers Tell of Three Days of Brutality and Killing As Sudanese Troops, Allies Step Up Attacks in Region

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EL FASHER, Sudan, Sept. 5 -- Adouma Ahmed Khames, 35, had no illusions of heroism that July morning. When gunmen appeared by the hundreds in his village, riding on camels and horses and in sleek Toyota trucks, he dived for cover under a rotting, stinking pile of grass, he said.

By the time he climbed out, night had fallen and the village, in Sudan's western Darfur region, was full of dead young men, dispatched in their own huts with bullets to their heads. Khames counted 58 bodies from the rampage, which he and other witnesses said was carried out by a former rebel faction, along with Sudanese troops and government-allied militiamen called Janjaweed.

Over the next several hours, he and his wife, Kaldoum Adam Ahmed, 32 and nearly due to deliver their sixth child, helped dig mass graves to bury their friends, neighbors and relatives. Then as dawn approached, Khames returned to his hiding place -- the grass gathered months earlier to feed the family's donkeys -- and burrowed under in hopes of living another day.

He did, remaining in hiding long enough to see his village -- called Deker -- looted and to learn of at least four rapes.

"They destroyed everything," said Khames, who has a coffee-colored, triangular face that comes to a point at his goatee. Deprivation had shrunk his body to the point that a copper ring on his left hand dangled from a bony finger.

According to witnesses and an Amnesty International report, the killing spread across three days and devastated Deker and several other villages, as well as the town of Korma, about 45 miles northwest of El Fasher, the capital of North Darfur state.

The incident, in the first week of July, is among dozens reportedly involving civilian casualties as the three-year-old war in Darfur has moved into a newly lethal phase since the signing of a peace deal in May. Under the agreement between Sudan's government and one of three Darfur rebel groups, the government is sending about 30,000 troops and police officers to Darfur, where they are joining forces with the rebel group that signed the peace deal.

These new forces, armed with expanded weapons stocks and backed by government planes making bombing runs, are augmenting the Janjaweed militias that already were raping, looting and killing their way through Darfur, a vast, arid region the size of Texas. Since the fighting began in 2003, war and disease have killed as many as 450,000 people in Darfur and driven more than 2 million from their homes.

The exact number of dead in the early July attacks near Korma is impossible to determine, though those who have visited the area report several mass graves. Amnesty International, which said the United Nations also investigated the attacks, put the number of dead at 72, mostly males, including 11 students and a teacher at a school in the village of Dalil.

Among the dead, Khames said, were two of his nephews in their twenties and a cousin, 75, who had three wives and 22 children. All died in Deker, where several hundred people once lived, a few miles from Korma.

Other older villagers in Deker were not spared violence either. Hamid Ibrahim, who appeared to be at least in his sixties, displayed a dark slash across his right shoulder where he said three men beat him with sticks. He made it to al-Salam refugee camp on a donkey, after riding for three days. Few residents of any age are left in Deker.

"Everybody has gone away," Ibrahim said.

Amnesty also reported 39 rapes and 103 injuries, and it said the main attackers were members of the rebel group, headed by Minni Minnawi, that has sided with the government since signing the peace accord. Minnawi, who is now a senior adviser to Sudan's president, Lt. Gen. Omar Hassan al-Bashir, visited President Bush at the White House in July.

The Amnesty report said the attackers told their victims, who were unarmed, that they were being punished for not supporting the peace agreement.

Khames said: "All the people are only farmers. There are no rebels there."

But he also said he supports rebel leader Abdel Wahed, who did not sign an accord that Khames and many others in Darfur call flawed. "This peace is not going to give us our rights," he said.

Most of the victims of the attacks near Korma have gone to El Fasher. Khames and his family ended up at rapidly growing al-Salam camp, where 42,000 Darfuri civilians live on the outskirts of the city in tiny huts built with mud and thatch and covered with white plastic sheets bearing the logos of the international aid groups -- USAID, UNICEF, Oxfam -- that donated them.

Khames and three other witnesses, giving similar accounts, said they believed that government soldiers, Minnawi's former rebels and the Janjaweed worked together in the attack on Deker, Korma and the surrounding areas. Some of the gunmen, they said, were in the green camouflaged uniforms of the Sudanese army, others in brown police uniforms. Some wore white turbans, others soldiers' caps. Khames said he counted 10 Toyota Land Cruisers and four heavy trucks in Deker. The horses and camels numbered in the hundreds, he said.

Deker had been attacked by Janjaweed once during the war, Khames said, but never before had he seen the uniforms of his own country's soldiers.

Khames survived mainly because of the determination of his wife, Ahmed, who recounted the violence with her face flat and expressionless. A yellow cloth covered her head and a piece of white linen wrapped her baby, 15 days old.

Ahmed said that as Khames hid in the grass, six men in green uniforms and soldiers' caps visited the family hut, a few steps away. On two occasions, the soldiers beat Ahmed -- then visibly pregnant -- with whips as they demanded to know where Khames was.

"He is not here," she told the men.

"You must tell us where he is!" a soldier demanded.

"I don't know," Ahmed said again. "If you want to kill me, you can kill me."

They let her go instead. At day's end, they left the village. In the morning, they returned.

On the first and second nights of the attack, Ahmed walked carefully through Deker to make sure the gunmen were really gone. Then she brought millet porridge and water to her husband. On the third night, after another walk around the village confirmed that the gunmen had left for the night, she delivered advice as well.

"You must go," Ahmed told her husband, fearing she would never see him again. "Maybe they are coming again."

Khames obeyed, walking northwest with two of his brothers, who had survived by hiding in an old, unused hut. They walked all night to the town of Kutum.

Ahmed left the village soon afterward, heading in the opposite direction, toward El Fasher, with her five children and bulging stomach. They walked for four days, eating small amounts of porridge they had brought along and food offered by passersby on the road.

By the time the family reached al-Salam camp, every part of Ahmed's body hurt, she said. Eight days later, Khames arrived as well on a bus from Kutum. Ten days after that, tiny, squirmy Rihab was born at al-Salam camp.