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Thousands of Refugees Reported to Be Fleeing Sudan for Chad

By SOMINI SENGUPTA

DAKAR, Senegal, Jan. 23 — The United Nations refugee agency said Friday that it was investigating reports that as many as 18,000 Sudanese refugees, fleeing fresh attacks on their villages over the last week, had crossed over into the neighboring central African country of Chad.

The latest influx, adding to the 95,000 Sudanese refugees already camped out near the Chad-Sudan border, suggests that fighting in the western Sudanese region called Darfur continues to intensify, even as peace talks seek to end Sudan's other war, which has been going on for 20 years, between the government in Khartoum and rebels in the country's south.

According to news agency reports, the chief mediator for the talks said Friday that negotiations between the government and the southern rebels were inching forward and that they had reached agreement on the control of two out of three disputed areas — vital for any final accord.

Ending the conflict in Sudan, Africa's longest-running civil war, has become a top foreign policy priority for the Bush administration, which has said it will consider lifting sanctions against Khartoum if an accord is signed.

To complicate matters, a second war, in the Darfur region, erupted last February between Sudan's Arab-dominated government and insurgents who claim to represent Africans in the west.

Conditions inside Darfur are almost impossible to verify because the government has barred aid agencies from much of the western part of the country, citing security. Last week, the aid group Doctors Without Borders said the government had shut down a camp for displaced people in the Darfur town of Nyala and forced its residents to move to an area the group called unsafe.

In Chad, the latest refugees from the Darfur fighting told United Nations officials that Sudanese troops had attacked their villages, starting Jan. 16, burning houses, blowing up wells and driving out villagers.

Thousands of them are camping out in a dry riverbed near the Chadian town of Koulbous, about 14 miles inside Chad. They face acute shortages, agency officials said.

Officials told the refugee agency that 10,000 others had crossed over into Chadian hamlets farther south, the United Nations reported.

The two countries share an 845-mile border, where temperatures swing from hot to frigid every day. Reporting attacks on their villages by Arab militiamen on horseback, Sudanese peasants have been trickling across the border for several months and setting up makeshift camps of straw and desert reeds.

They have not always found a safe haven there. Refugees interviewed earlier this month reported bombings and cross-border attacks inside Chadian territory. The United Nations has begun relocating the refugees to more formal camps at least 34 miles from the border.

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