"Things are looking greatly better in Darfur"---Olusegun Obasanjo, March 4, 2005

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"Things are looking greatly better in Darfur"---African Union Chair and Nigerian President Olusegun Obasanjo, following discussion of the crisis with National Islamic Front President Omer Beshir, February 16, 2005

Eric Reeves March 4, 2005

"Things are looking greatly better in Darfur,' [Olusegun] Obasanjo said." (Agence France-Presse, February 28, 2005)

If we do not understand what lies behind these monstrously inaccurate words from Olusegun Obasanjo, President of Nigeria and current Chair of the African Union, then we will have little chance of understanding the full nature of international paralysis in the face of Darfur's deepening crisis. If we do not understand why Obasanjo is willing to lie in such shameful fashion about the realities of human destruction in Darfur, and the catastrophic threat posed by impending famine, then we will have little chance of bringing to bear the international pressures that will reverse his supreme and unforgivable expediency.

For Obasanjo's assessment is nothing so much as a response to immense pressure from Khartoum and the Arab League---most conspicuously Egypt and Libya---to define the Darfur crisis as an exclusively "African problem," and thus one that does not need assistance from the UN, the European Union, the US, or other international actors. To be sure, there is much in Obasanjo's own political attitudes and world-view that inclines him to such a conclusion. And there is throughout the leadership of African countries an understandable desire that the African Union be a source of strength and pride, both politically and ultimately militarily.

But the truths in Darfur are so clearly other than what Obasanjo has declared, and the current resources of Africa and the African Union so utterly inadequate to the critical security and humanitarian tasks at hand, that we must ask not about disposition or inclination, but about threats, political and international pressures, and geopolitical intimidation. These are what account for Obasanjo's crude mendacity, and his thuggish distortion of Darfur's realities.

For of course Nigeria, for all its complexity, has its own massive and conspicuous domestic crisis: a restive and increasingly militant Islam dominates in twelve northern Nigerian states and threatens to set off a civil war, a potential disaster for the continent as a whole. As Nigerian novelist and Nobel laureate Wole Soyinka has recently argued, "The roof is already burning over our head---the prelude to civil war." To confront this domestic challenge, Obasanjo is desperately in need of support not only from various domestic factions and other members of the African Union, but from both the Islamic and Arab world. And he clearly will do all that he feels is necessary to secure that support---even betray in deepest consequence the people of Darfur.

No matter that radical Islam in northern Nigeria increasingly threatens the very possibility of a democratic Nigeria; and no matter that Obasanjo's political expediency in confronting this threat is primarily in service of his own desire for a hand-picked successor or even self-succession in 2007. Obasanjo has decided that whatever must be done to secure international support for his policies of domestic control and self-replication will be done.

We catch a telling glimpse of this descent into an ultimately irrational appeasement in Obasanjo's yielding

to the Muslim clerics who prevented the UN's World Health Organization from administering polio vaccinations last year to children in northern Nigeria, thereby again letting loose this terrible scourge in central and eastern Africa---including in Darfur. A disease that preys primarily on children, and that was so tantalizingly close to being eradicated, is now reported throughout Sudan, in Ethiopia for the first time in years, in Saudi Arabia (just across the Red Sea from Sudan), and elsewhere. The polio infections in Sudan have been authoritatively identified as the Nigerian strain:

"[UNICEF] says an outbreak of polio in Sudan is spreading to other African countries and beyond, threatening millions of children. Sudan had been free of polio for three years before the current outbreak began there last May. Since then, the crippling disease that mainly affects young children has spread rapidly across Africa's largest country, infecting at least 124 people in 17 states."

"[UNICEF spokeswoman Joanna] Van Gerpen says a polio case in Saudi Arabia has been positively traced back to a strain from Sudan. On Monday, two children in Ethiopia were diagnosed with the disease, marking the first time the virus has been reported in that country in four years. Van Gerpen says UNICEF believes the polio virus in Ethiopia also came across the border from Sudan." []

"The first polio virus detected in Sudan originated in Nigeria, which now accounts for 60-percent of the world's polio cases. Health officials believe the virus made its way east from Nigeria to Chad, and then into the Darfur region of western Sudan, where a bloody, two year-old civil war has caused hundreds of thousands of people to scatter within and outside the country."

(Voice of America [Nairobi], March 1, 2005)

An apt account of this irrationally destructive view of modern medicine was recently offered by, again, Wole Soyinka---the great conscience of Nigeria--in the form of a comparison between South African President Thabo Mbeki's view of HIV/AIDS and the resistance of northern Nigeria's Islamic clerics to polio vaccination:

"[Soyinka] likens South Africa's president, Thabo Mbeki, who spent years denying the realities of AIDS --even as the epidemic's toll exceeded the number of people shipped from Africa in the trans-Atlantic slave
trade---to the imams who fought a WHO campaign to eradicate polio: 'I find his position virtually as
illiterate as the position of Muslim fundamentalists here in Nigeria who say that they read somewhere in
the Koran that polio immunization is anti-Islamic." (Henry Louis Gates in The New York Times, August 5,
2004)

Islamic fundamentalism, irrationalism, and political myopia are the real context for Obasanjo declaring that, despite all evidence from humanitarian organizations, human rights organizations, the UN, and international journalists, "things are looking greatly better in Darfur." This is also the context in which to understand why in October 2004 Obasanjo---with the presidents of Libya, Chad, Egypt, and Sudan (meeting in Tripoli)---declared "in a joint statement issued after the overnight meeting [that] the regional leaders stressed their 'rejection of all foreign intervention in this ***purely African question*** [emphasis added]" (Agence France-Presse, October 18, 2004).

Obasanjo is not interested in the people of Darfur, or whether "things are better" or not: he is interested in making common regional cause with countries that can be of domestic political use to him. He is not interested in considering the implications of genocide in Darfur (which he crudely dismisses as a possibility), but in doing as little as possible to offend the Ghaddafis, Mubaraks, and Beshirs of this part of world. How else can we possibly explain Obasanjo's being "reassured" about the status of Darfur by National Islamic Front President Omer Beshir two weeks ago?

DARFUR'S REALITIES

The vicious absurdity of Obasanjo's judgment is as much in evidence whether we consider Darfur from a

humanitarian, security, or diplomatic perspective. On the latter score, as John Prendergast of the International Crisis Group rightly declares, "diplomatic efforts to end the Darfur crisis are 'in tatters'" (Associated Press, February 25, 2005). There has been no progress in months, and it is not clear when a date will be set for resumption of talks that were slated to begin March 5, 2005 in Aswan, southern Egypt (Agence France-Presse, February 28, 2005).

December's Abuja (Nigeria) negotiating session, under exclusive African Union auspices, was completely undermined by the massive military offensive Khartoum had launched on the very eve of these renewed talks. The absence of any but AU auspices may reflect, on the part of some African nations, pride of diplomatic ownership; but in Khartoum's view, such singular auspices mean only that there is no true mechanism of accountability. No matter what agreements the AU may secure, the National Islamic Front regime will feel free to renege.

Thus we should hardly be surprised at Khartoum's continued reiteration of support for the AU, or the terms in which AU engagement is defined:

"Magzoub Al-Khalifa [political secretary to the National Islamic Front/National Congress] said the declared stance of the African Union internationally and regionally with respect to Darfur problem is that it should be solved in the African framework without any external interference in a manner that maintains Sudan's unity and sovereignty." (Sudan Tribune, February 27, 2005)

If Obasanjo will accept Khartoum's characterization here of what is represented by African Union diplomacy; if he will accept Khartoum's ongoing limitation of the operational mandate for AU monitoring forces deployed in Darfur; and if will accept Khartoum's declared view that "things are looking greatly better in Darfur," then he can count on unlimited political support from the National Islamic Front (NIF). This is the ghastly deal that Obasanjo has cut; and as This Day newspaper (Lagos, Nigeria) reports, Khartoum has rendered initial payment in the form of unstinting praise from Khartoum's First Vice-President Ali Osman Taha (one of many NIF members currently under sealed indictment for massive "crimes against humanity" per the investigation of the UN Commission of Inquiry on Darfur):

"President Olusegun Obasanjo yesterday received the report of [Khartoum's] National Commission of Inquiry on Darfur from the First Vice President of Sudan, Ali Usman Taha. Senior Special Assistant on Media Matters to the President, Mrs. Oluremi Oyo, told State House correspondents, that 'the First Vice president of the Sudan led a team of his country's delegation as a follow-up to the meeting President Obasanjo had with President Omar El-Bashir of Sudan 10 days ago."

"The visiting Vice President thanked President Obasanjo for his wise leadership, especially [] for the help that he is bringing to bear on the situation in the Sudan, especially in the Darfur region." (This Day [Lagos] [dateline: Abuja], March 1, 2005)

But if we leave aside the propaganda fantasy that emerges from Khartoum's "investigation" of itself for genocide and crimes against humanity, what do we really find in Darfur? What do the most current reports from the region suggest about whether or not "things are looking greatly better"? And what of the African Union in particular? If the AU diplomatic process is "in tatters," if the Chair of the AU is being praised by Khartoum's most powerful genocidaire for his "wisdom," what of the AU monitoring effort on the ground in Darfur? And what of the latest reports concerning the humanitarian crisis? For the truth we must of course turn to voices other than that of Olusegun Obasanjo.

THE CURRENT STATE OF THE A.U. MONITORING FORCE

There are currently, according to various reports, approximately 1,800 AU personnel on the ground in Darfur, an area the size of France. The AU force has been, at best, marginally effective in pockets of Darfur. But months after an October 2004 commitment to reach approximately 3,500 personnel, there

are no indications that this force is deploying with sufficient urgency or political commitment. Moreover, it has deployed with inadequate resources, a weak mandate, and---most tellingly---an unwillingness to ask for help.

In short, though many of the AU personnel in the field are highly dedicated professionals, doing all they can in virtually impossible circumstances, the larger political and military picture is one of a hopelessly inadequate force. The various security and humanitarian capacity needs represented by the Darfur crisis are far beyond even the most robust deployment of which the AU is currently capable. Certainly if we bear in mind the assessment of Lt-Gen. Romeo Dallaire, very recently reiterated during a tour of South Africa, the inadequacy of the AU force is starkly evident. Dallaire, the UN force commander in Rwanda during the genocide in 1994, has again insisted that "44,000 troops are needed to bring peace to the Darfur region of Sudan rather than the 3,340 the African Union intends sending to the region, [Dallaire said]" (Business Day [Johannesburg], February 25, 2005).

Darfur, Dallaire argued at the Institute for Security Studies in Pretoria, is a "perfect example" of a "lack of political will to prevent crises developing." This lack of "political will" characterizes both governments and nongovernmental organizations, as well as the UN; and the refusal to speak months ago about the basic truths defining the security crisis in Darfur has done much to lead to the current catastrophe. Dallaire's assessment of the AU mandate should have been clear to all in October 2004:

"Dallaire said the AU mandate [in Darfur]---which is similar to a UN Chapter VI-type 'observe and monitor' mission---was far too weak and would result in its being ineffectual. He said the mandate should be more robust and allow for the protection of civilians and the disarmament of militias." (Business Day [Johannesburg], February 25, 2005)

Though Dallaire's voice continues to be the most truthful and direct, there are many echoes of this basic assessment, as various nongovernmental organizations have slowly found their voices on the need for massive, urgent humanitarian intervention in Darfur.

Human Rights Watch has recently (February 25, 2005) grown much more emphatic:

"New eyewitness accounts from Darfur of rapes, torture and mutilation by government-backed militias underscore how the UN Security Council must take urgent action to protect civilians and punish the perpetrators, Human Rights Watch said today. Last week, eyewitnesses in South Darfur told Human Rights Watch how government-backed Janjaweed militia attacked villages in the Labado area in December and January, and singled out young women and girls for rape. Male relatives who protested were beaten, stripped naked, tied to trees and forced to watch the rape of the women and girls. In some cases, the men were then branded with a hot knife as a mark of their humiliation." (Human Rights Watch, "Darfur: New Atrocities as Security Council Dithers," February 25, 2005)

And Human Rights Watch draws precisely the appropriate conclusions:

"Increasing the international protection force in Darfur is urgently needed to stop the violence,' said [Peter] Takirambudde [Africa director at Human Rights Watch]."

"The African Union, which currently has a ceasefire monitoring force of approximately 1,800 personnel on the ground in Darfur, remains mainly based in the state capitals and larger towns of Darfur. It lacks sufficient numbers of armed troops to adequately patrol and investigate ongoing violations in the rural areas."

"With so few troops in Darfur, the AU force today simply cannot protect civilians,' said Takirambudde. 'The United Nations must work with the African Union to come up with a plan to vastly increase the force in Darfur." (Human Rights Watch, "Darfur: New Atrocities as Security Council Dithers," February 25, For its part, Oxfam International has declared this week that:

"The world has failed to take sufficient action to protect civilians in Darfur, international aid agency Oxfam warned today. Horrifying atrocities have been committed on a massive scale and more suffering is being inflicted on a daily basis."

"Every morning in hundreds of camps and towns across Darfur, nearly 2 million people made homeless by fighting wake up to another day of harassment, robbery and violent attacks. Every week there are reports of women and girls being viciously beaten or raped while collecting water and firewood. Some of them die as a result of their injuries. As the violence continues to rage, the international community and parties to the conflict must urgently step up efforts to protect civilians in Darfur." (Oxfam International, "International community failing to protect civilians in Darfur," February 28, 2005)

Adrian McIntyre, a spokesperson for Oxfam, recently

"returned from a 1,000-km road trip through South and West Darfur, where the level of violence and suffering is appalling. In the Wadi Salih province, armed militias prowl the countryside while displaced people are living in fear, effectively imprisoned in the camps and towns where they have sought refuge. Men can't go outside these settlements for fear of being killed. Women agonise over whether the need to collect water and firewood so they can cook for their families outweighs the threat of being beaten or raped,"

"The AU mission in Darfur has a vital role in ending violence against civilians, [but] the scale of the crisis in Darfur exceeds the capacity of the current AU mission to respond. To date, only half of the 3,320 personnel promised for Darfur have arrived. Shortages of funding, logistical support, communications equipment, accommodation and transport have also hindered the mission. The AU has never even visited some of the places where threats to civilians are greatest. Delays in deploying to the most volatile areas of Darfur mean that hundreds of thousands of people remain vulnerable to attack."

"The current AU mission needs more resources and personnel to do the job properly. A fully expanded AU mission in Darfur---including additional troops, ceasefire monitors and civilian police---must be deployed at once. The international community must do whatever it takes to strengthen the ability of the AU mission to protect civilians in Darfur from violent attacks,' said Caroline Nursey, Oxfam's Regional Director." (Oxfam International, "International community failing to protect civilians in Darfur," February 28, 2005)

Though more praising of the marginal achievements of the African Union efforts, Refugees International (RI) notes that even AU successes "highlight the need for a bigger force with more logistical and financial support from the donors who are financing the AU deployment."

"The small size of the force limits its capacity to deter attacks. In addition, it has no real ability to collect signals or utilize aerial or other sophisticated intelligence that could alert it to planned attacks and early troop concentrations." (Refugees International, February 25, 2005)

Moreover, RI speaks honestly about the AU's lack of success in the camps for displaced persons:

"[The AU force in Darfur] generally gets low marks from residents of camps for the internally displaced; they see no improvement in security from the AU troops. A sheik representing internally displaced people in Masteri south of El Geneina said of [the AU mission]: 'They come and go, but we do not see any results. The last time they were here we thought they would help, but we found them useless and they did not even greet us. They are just like the others."

Most disturbing is the Refugees International finding that, "AU reports often appear months after the event and are sometimes watered down, since the parties [including the Khartoum regime] have to agree on the facts in the report. What's more, there is no clear mechanism for enforcing recommendations."

This reflects the deeply misguided political and diplomatic strategy underlying not only AU efforts, but those of the UN and other international actors as well:

"The African Union is handling many of its differences with Sudan through negotiation, rather than confrontation. For example, [the AU mission] has assembled a large library of photos to document atrocities, including executions, castrations, rapes, pillaging and burning of villages. Most of these atrocities have been committed by militias associated with the government, and [yet the AU mission] refuses to make the photos public, although some were recently leaked to The New York Times." (Refugees International, February 25, 2005)

The spokesman for another humanitarian organization, speaking on condition of anonymity, reports to Inter Press Service other telling weaknesses:

"And it's not just troops that are needed: better management, planning and use of information to get the AU mission up to snuff. We're told that there simply isn't the administrative capacity in Addis Ababa (the headquarters of the AU)---not to mention at the field level---to manage a mission of the size/scope requires,' he added. The AU also needs to overcome its pride and be willing to ask for help. The slogan 'African solutions for African problems' is great, in principle, but only if the solutions available stand a chance of addressing the scale of the problem, he said." (Inter Press Service, March 1, 2005)

POLITICAL IMPORT OF AFRICAN UNION ATTITUDES

Another dispatch yesterday from Inter Press Service [dateline: Berlin] offers important insight into the political stalemate that Obasanjo and others in the African Union have created. Speaking about more insistent EU and US involvement in Darfur, German deputy foreign minister Kerstin Müller declared,

"this is not feasible. 'For me it is hardly imaginable to tell the AU right from the beginning that they cannot do it, if they are talking about a test case in which they try to solve their own conflicts." (Inter Press Service, March 3, 2005)

But as the same dispatch makes painfully clear, this leaves the spectacle of the AU refusing the offered help that is so conspicuously needed:

"Lotte Leicht, director of the Brussels office of Human Rights Watch, argued at the [Darfur] panel discussion [in Berlin] that the AU had failed to protect the people in Darfur. The AU should accept help from the EU, she said. 'I have never seen that 25 foreign ministers are almost down on their knees, begging the AU to take more help from the EU."

The basic moral and practical truth of this situation must be rendered as explicitly as possible:

There can be no improvement in security on the ground in Darfur without massive increases in the size and capabilities of the deploying force---increases far beyond the present abilities of the African Union. Nor can there be an adequate humanitarian response without vast increases in humanitarian capacity and logistics, increases that will ultimately require military support. And yet, despite the current extreme vulnerability of many hundreds of thousands of African Darfuris, the African Union refuses to ask for the help Darfur clearly needs, and allows brutally expedient leaders such as Obasanjo to define both the nature of Darfur's catastrophe and its "purely African" character.

This is Africa betraying itself. And this is the international community refusing to declare such deep betrayal for what it is. The phrase "African solutions for African problems" is well on its way to becoming a terrible synonym for acquiesce before genocide in Darfur, another African legacy that will be as appalling as it is now inescapable.

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Appendix: Darfur Humanitarian Update, March 4, 2005

THE FOOD CRISIS

According to authoritative UN sources, the World Food Program (WFP) reached 1.4 million people in Darfur in February 2005. While this is an increase of 100,000 from January, it still represents a decline of 100,000 from the number who received food aid in December 2004 (1.5 million). This is the context for the extraordinarily important recent comments by UN Undersecretary for Humanitarian Affairs Jan Egeland:

"Since [the world belatedly awoke to the Darfur crisis] the number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) has doubled to between 1.8 million and 1.9 million 'and it's growing by the day.' The number of IDPs and the many hundreds of thousands of others now outside of the camps who are in desperate need of assistance is bound to increase, he warned, adding: 'Some are predicting 3 million, some are predicting 4 million, some are predicting more than that, of people in desperate need of life-saving assistance as we approach the hunger gap in mid-year...whose lives will be at stake." (UN News Center [New York], February 18, 2005)

These numbers represent a crisis that will overwhelm currently available humanitarian food resources in this remote and extremely difficult theater of operations, and the result will be famine---famine engineered by Khartoum and its Janjaweed militia allies, entailing near-total destruction of the agricultural resources of the non-Arab or African tribal populations throughout Darfur.

Warnings of famine have already come from the US Agency for International Development, the International Committee of the Red Cross, and the UN's respected Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO):

"All the indicators are there for a famine,' says Marc Bellemans, the Sudan emergency coordinator for the UN's Food and Agriculture Organization. In a report to fellow UN agencies late last year, the FAO warned 'a humanitarian crisis of unseen proportions is unfolding in the Darfur region." (The Wall Street Journal [Dateline: Fur Baranga, Darfur] February 7, 2005)

The food crisis in Darfur is of course in many ways a security crisis, a fact highlighted repeatedly by Egeland, even as he made insistently clear the woeful inadequacy of the present AU force:

"Egeland criticized world leaders for leaving aid workers to apply a 'bandaid' instead of taking political action to resolve the conflict. 'You cannot have this kind of situation and put in 10,000 unarmed men and women with blankets and foodstuffs and field hospitals and say, "You stop this war." We cannot. Others have to help us,' Egeland said."

"We're front row witnesses to more massacres. We're front-row witnesses to more displacements. We are front row witnesses to massive misery and suffering of Darfur and we shouldn't be,' [Egeland] said. 'The armed men in militias are getting away with murder of women and children and it is still happening. Those who [i.e., Khartoum's genocidaires---ER] direct the militias [i.e., the Janjaweed---ER]...these forces are also getting away with murder. It's impunity what we have seen taking place in Darfur,' he said." (Associated Press, February 19, 2005)

"Humanitarian workers are frustrated and angry with the situation. Many of them feel that we are alibis or a substitute for the political action and the security action that the world is not taking,' [Egeland] said." (Reuters, February 18, 2005)

"The basic lesson of earlier crises like Bosnia, Kosovo and Rwanda is 'that too often the world sends us, the band aid, and the world believes that we keep people alive and then they don't have to take a political and security action. This is wrong and that's why we are really tired of being that kind of a substitute for political and security action,' [Egeland] said." (UN News Center, February 18, 2005)

Moreover, it must be noted that even in its commitment to humanitarian assistance, the international community is failing badly. Oxfam International reports that "the international community has provided \$500 for each individual affected by the tsunami, but [] for Sudan, [where the UN has appealed for \$1.5 billion], the [international organization] has so far received only 5% of this total. This amounts to just \$16. per person." (Oxfam International [Boston], February 25, 2005)

THE REPORTING CRISIS

Despite the overwhelming evidence of massive food shortages throughout Darfur (and, significantly, in neighboring Kordofan Province), Khartoum's state-controlled SUNA declared (according to the UN Daily Press Review, March 2, 2005) that "[the UN] World Food Program representative in Sudan said that reports my some international mass media of a food shortage in Sudan were just baseless rumors." This preposterous lie is of course not at all out of character for SUNA, which is entirely a creature of the National Islamic Front, and designed for domestic audiences.

But the attack on "international mass media" is all too revealing, and the consequences of this hostility are now increasingly in evidence. For Khartoum continues to shut down not only humanitarian access to Darfur but news access as well, as Human Rights Watch reports (February 25, 2005):

"Meanwhile, as the Sudanese government's offensives in December and January, aid agencies working in South Darfur came under increasing harassment from government officials and rebel groups. In January, staff from several international non-governmental organizations were detained by government officials often based on unfounded allegations."

"Members of the international media and human rights groups have also found it increasingly difficult to acquire visas for Sudan and Darfur, an indication of the Sudanese government's efforts to reduce international exposure of its 'ethnic cleansing' campaign in Darfur." (Human Rights Watch, "Darfur: New Atrocities as Security Council Dithers," February 25, 2005)

OTHER HUMANITARIAN ISSUES

Often lost amidst the welter of reports and statistics on Darfur are important developments that are of the gravest significance unto themselves. A good example is Khartoum's quiet return to a policy of forcing displaced persons from the camps where they have sought refuge. This policy has been in clear evidence for over eight months, and still the international presence in Darfur is not sufficient to rescue these most vulnerable of civilians. An exceptionally important account comes again from Refugees International, which has just returned from Darfur (excerpts):

"The pressure for [Internally Displaced Persons to] return [to their villages] is apparent at both the national and the local level."

"Some people who believed the government's claims of security learned the hard way that their return was premature. A small number of families accepted government assistance to return home to Mabruka, but they were attacked within a month and all of their livelihood materials were stolen again. Government-supported paramilitary forces, known as the Janjaweed, bandits and rebel forces continue to prey on villages. Other displaced people say they are unwilling to return home to villages that were burned and pillaged because they have no way to earn a living there."

"A wave of returns would help the government convince the international community that the crisis of killing and displacement is receding, perhaps reducing calls for new sanctions and other pressure on the regime."

"Internally displaced people report direct threats by government officials in order to pressure them to go home. In Riyhad camp just outside Al Geneina, residents say that men on foot or horseback dressed in khaki uniforms and carrying guns and knives come into the camp at night in an attempt to scare them into leaving. A woman who came to the camp from Nouri more than a year ago said, 'A month ago, the soldiers came into the camp and said to me, "If you do not go back, we will come back soon and shoot you."" 'Even this camp is not safe, how can I go home?' a woman displaced from Dounta asks."