

Darfuris Say Jailed for Talking to Foreigners

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By Nima Elbagir

KHARTOUM (Reuters) - Civilians in Sudan's troubled Darfur region say they are being routinely imprisoned or harassed by Sudanese authorities for talking to foreigners about the conflict in the remote western area bordering Chad.

Rights group Amnesty International said in a report on Tuesday that Sudan had rounded up scores of people who spoke to journalists and foreign leaders, including Secretary of State Colin Powell, on recent visits to Darfur.

One woman from Western Darfur state told Reuters she was imprisoned several times and routinely harassed after she translated for a recent visiting group of foreign diplomats.

"Nineteen security officers jumped down from two trucks and threatened me with weapons," said the woman, who was too frightened to give her name.

"They took me back to the headquarters and threatened me saying that they had scorpions and snakes and accusing me of mistranslating for the diplomats," she said.

Another woman, who works in development and declined to be identified, said authorities threatened to make her disappear one day after U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan visited Darfur.

Security officials told Reuters people were being questioned and some had been detained but that it was a matter of security and not a reprisal for speaking to foreigners.

Amnesty counted at least 50 people arrested, including 15 men detained at the Abu Shouk camp after Powell's June 30 visit, and another five taken from there after French Foreign Minister Michel Barnier's July 27 trip.

About 100 African Union (AU) monitors are deployed in Darfur to record and investigate attacks and the Dutch ambassador to Ethiopia said on Tuesday the Netherlands would on Saturday begin to airlift 154 Rwandan troops into Darfur to protect them.

The AU hopes to increase the proposed number of AU forces protecting the monitors from 360 to about 2,000 and extend their mandate to peacekeeping, which Sudan refuses.

FRESH ATTACKS

After long conflict between Arab nomads and African farmers over scarce resources in arid Darfur, rebels launched a revolt in February last year, accusing Khartoum of arming Arab militias known as Janjaweed to carry out a campaign of ethnic cleansing.

The Janjaweed, a term loosely derived from the Arabic for "devils on horseback," are accused of looting, burning, killing and raping. The United Nations estimates the death toll to be at least 50,000, with 1 million people displaced and 2 million in need of aid. The U.S. Congress has called the violence genocide.

Khartoum disputes the death toll and denies it supports the militias, which it calls outlaws, but under threat of possible sanctions it has said it will try to meet a U.N. Security Council demand that it disarm the Janjaweed.

Powell has said Sudan faces a difficult task to "turn off" the Janjaweed in Darfur, an area the size of France, where tens of thousands of men carry arms. One senior U.N. official said it was easier to buy a Kalashnikov than a loaf of bread in Darfur.

Under a joint plan agreed with the United Nations last week, Sudan also pledged to establish safe areas for the displaced and cease military operations by its troops and rebels around the safe areas.

But the U.N. refugee body in Geneva said on Tuesday Sudanese authorities were forcing traumatized refugees to return to unsafe villages, where they being attacked again by Janjaweed.

"We have interviewed people in hospital who tell us they have gone back to the villages, believing the government commitment, and have been shot by Janjaweed raiders," said UNHCR spokesman Peter Kessler.

"We can't tell if people are being led into a trap -- we would hope not," he added.

GENOCIDE QUESTIONS

U.S. Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist said on Tuesday the threat of sanctions was not enough to stop the violence in Darfur. He said he disagreed with a European Union mission, which said it had found no evidence of genocide there.

Frist visited southern Sudan and Chad, where about 200,000 Darfur refugees are encamped, but did not visit Darfur.

The rebel Justice and Equality Movement (JEM) said the EU report was hasty and that the Janjaweed, supported by the government, had burned 3,000 villages in Darfur.

The African Union said on Sunday rebels and Khartoum had agreed to peace talks in the Nigerian capital Abuja on Aug. 23, but the rebels said they had not received formal invitations and the date was unsuitable, although they welcomed the location.

Sudan has accepted talks without preconditions in Abuja mediated by Nigerian President Olusegun Obasanjo. Rebels have dropped preconditions including the disarmament of the Janjaweed and an inquiry into genocide, which caused talks in Addis Ababa to collapse in July.

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