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Darfur's Babies of Rape Are on Trial From Birth

By LYDIA POLGREEN

GENEINA, Sudan - Fatouma spends her days under the plastic tarp covering her tent, seated on a straw mat, staring at the squirming creature in her arms.

She examines over and over again the perfectly formed fingers and toes, 10 of each, and the tiny limbs, still curled in the form they took before leaving her belly five days before, and now encircled with amulets to ward off evil.

Everything about this baby, the 16-year-old mother declared, is perfect. Almost everything.

"She is a janjaweed," Fatouma said softly, referring to the fearsome Arab militiamen who have terrorized this region. "When people see her light skin and her soft hair, they will know she is a janjaweed."

Fatouma's child is among the scores of babies produced by one of the most horrific aspects of the conflict in Darfur, the vast, arid region of western Sudan: the use of rape against women and girls in a brutal battle over land and ethnicity that has killed tens of thousands and driven 2 million people from their homes.

Interviews with traditional midwives and aid organizations here indicated that there are probably two dozen such babies just in Al Riyadh, the displaced people's camp where Fatouma lives. It is one of scores of places where ethnic Africans have fled in Darfur and eastern Chad from attacks by government forces and their allied Arab militias.

A recent United Nations investigation into war crimes in Darfur laid out, in page after graphic page, evidence of widespread and systematic rape in the two-year conflict. In one incident, a woman in Wadi Tina was raped 14 times by different men in January 2003. In March 2004, 150 soldiers and janjaweed abducted and raped 16 girls in Kutum, the report said. In Kailek, it said girls as young as 10 were raped by militants.

The fruit of these attacks is now being born in Darfur, and will inevitably become a long-term legacy of the conflict. In a society where deep taboos surrounding rape persist and identity is passed, according to Muslim tradition, from father to child, the fate of these children and their mothers is uncertain.

"She will stay with us for now," Adoum Muhammad Abdulla, the sheik of Fatouma's village, said of the days-old infant. "We will treat her like our own. But we will watch carefully when she grows up, to see if she becomes like a janjaweed. If she behaves like janjaweed, she cannot stay among us."

The fact that he and the new mothers call the children janjaweed, a local insult that means "devil on horseback," underscores just how bitter the division between those who identify themselves as Africans and those who see themselves as Arabs has become, and points to the potential difficulty of acceptance and integration in the years ahead.

In a conflict that began over land but has been fueled by ethnic strife, these children will carry a heavy burden. Long after the fighting ends, they will endure as living reminders of war.

"To them, every Arab is a janjaweed," said one foreign health worker in Geneina who has worked with rape victims. The worker insisted on anonymity because the government has penalized aid organizations that speak out on the topic. "The hatred and animosity will be very difficult to overcome."

Some women have reported that their attackers have used racial epithets and declared that they wanted to make more Arab babies, leading some to conclude that the use of rape is part of a campaign of ethnic cleansing. But the United Nations investigation found that while rape was clearly being used to demoralize and humiliate the population, it did not conclude that it was genocidal in nature.

In Fatouma's case, the child she has borne marks her forever as a victim, and may spoil her chances at marriage, at having more children, at having a normal life if her family ever returns to its village, which was burned to the ground by Arab militants more than a year ago.

For her daughter, who remained nameless until the seventh day after her birth, as tradition here dictates, the future is even more uncertain.

"One day I hope I will be married," Fatouma said, casting her eyes down. "I hope I find a husband who will love me and my daughter."

Like so many women and girls here, Fatouma's ordeal began with a trip out of the relative safety of the displaced people's camp where she lives to search for firewood. Many women earn money by gathering firewood to sell in the market, which makes them vulnerable to attack by militants who roam freely around the camps. "The janjaweed chased us, but I couldn't run fast enough," Fatouma said. "They caught me, and they beat me."

Five men held her captive overnight, she said, raping her repeatedly under a tree. In the morning she ran away, stumbling into a nearby displaced people's camp, where she spent the night, then found her way back to Al Riyadh.

"When my mother saw me, she cried and she said, 'Look how they beat you,' "

Fatouma said pointing to a dark scar below her right eye. She told her mother, Tama, what had happened, though she herself was confused.

"They did bad things to me," she said, her eyes cast down. "Very bad things."

A few months later she began to feel a strange pain. At first she tried to ignore it, but as the swelling continued she started punching at the movement in her belly with her fists. Tama, suspecting that her daughter was pregnant, ordered her to stop, and took her to a health clinic. A test confirmed the truth.

"I cried for a long time," Fatouma said.

From the next tent, Tama whispered to a visitor: "She is so small. Look at what they did to my daughter. She is just a child."

When the labor pangs began Fatouma was wholly unprepared for the pain.

"I was so afraid, I thought I would die," Fatouma said.

After a night agony, a midwife placed a squirming baby girl in her arms.

Sudden motherhood has overwhelmed Fatouma. Her gray T-shirt was stained with ragged concentric circles of breast milk, and she had trouble figuring out how to feed and clean the infant. "I am very happy to be a mother," she said, after a long afternoon of sitting in her tent, staring at her daughter. "I will love her with all my heart."

But if her neighbors are any guide, Fatouma's prospects are dim. Ashta, a 30-year-old woman who lives on the other side of Al Riyadh camp, also spends her days alone in a bare tent with her 2-month-old son, Faisal. She absentmindedly rocks him, trying to quell his constant crying. He was born nine months after Ashta was attacked by a group of militants.

"Faisal changed my life," Ashta said. "Because of him I am sick. Because of him my life is ruined."

Ashta's husband, who has been in Libya for eight years, working as a cow herder, has cast her off, abandoning her and their two children. She lives in a tent next to her brother, who has taken her in.

She said she was raped as she fled her village, Bemiche. Two of her brothers were killed in the attack, and as she wandered in the desert looking for water, a group of bandits set upon her, she said.

One man "beat me with sticks, and said if I tell anyone they would kill me," Ashta said.

She does not know what to make of the child she has borne. She has no expectation of remarrying and stoically faces a long life of loneliness and hardship.

"Without a man you cannot have anything in life," Ashta said. "Your children suffer. Now we don't even have a bed to sleep on. We have no future."

Ashta's brother, Mohammad, said he refuses to blame his sister for what happened to her, despite taboos about rape.

"It is not her fault," he said. "She is a victim of war. We will take care of the child. It is very difficult to love a janjaweed, but we will try to accept him as our own."

While a Sudanese government report on atrocities in Darfur acknowledges that violence against women has taken place, Jamal Ibrahim, the Foreign Ministry spokesman, said in an interview that accounts of rape in Darfur have been wildly exaggerated.

"Human rights organizations and aid groups have to justify their work somehow, so they make these fictions," Mr. Ibrahim said. "If it has happened it is in isolated cases. This kind of thing is not part of our culture."

But in displaced people's camps, accounts of rape are common, and families struggle to deal with the legacy of sexual violence.

Kaltouma Adam Mohammed, a traditional midwife who said she had delivered eight babies to women who were raped, said that while rape is traditionally seen as a great shame on a family, in the context of this war families are more likely to forgive and accept the mother and child.

"I tell them: 'Sometimes we feel like we have the janjaweed here with us, but it is just a child. He doesn't know anything about this war. We cannot hate this child,' " she said. "We don't know what will happen when these children grow up. If they are like their fathers, they must leave us. But we will try to love them, to accept them. It is God's will that it be so."