

South Darfur Ousts UN Humanitarian Chief

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The governor of South Darfur ordered the U.N. humanitarian director to leave the state, which has been the scene of recent fighting and where the United Nations plays a key role in coordinating aid to almost 1 million people, the U.N. said Wednesday.

U.N. deputy spokeswoman Marie Okabe said the U.N. official has not been ordered to leave the country by the government in Khartoum, "but rather has been forced to leave South Darfur."

South Darfur, North Darfur and West Darfur states make up the region of Darfur, where fighting has left more than 200,000 people dead, and forced an estimated 2.5 million civilians to flee their homes for camps both inside and outside Sudan.

Okabe said the order was a serious concern because the U.N. Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, known as OCHA, "plays a pivotal role in South Darfur."

OCHA spokeswoman Stephanie Bunker said the director of the agency's office in South Darfur, Wael Al-Haj Ibrahim, a Canadian, left the state after receiving a letter from the governor this week and was now in Khartoum.

South Darfur's Governor Ali Mahmood Mohammed said in the letter that Ibrahim "was not complying with the Humanitarian Act," but he didn't elaborate, Bunker said.

Sudan's government has stepped up pressure on Darfur civilians to leave camps in the country, though Sudanese officials insist they are only encouraging people to return to their villages, because the camps have become too big, squalid and dangerous.

But late last month, U.N. officials said they had evidence that Sudanese government forces were chasing civilians out of at least one camp, Otash, home to 60,000 people on the outskirts of Nyala, the capital of South Darfur.

The Aegis Trust, a British-based organization which works to prevent genocide and has offices in Africa, said the governor warned last week that if U.N. officials opposed the dismantling of camps, he would ensure that those officials were expelled.

James Smith, the Aegis Trust's chief executive, said Ibrahim "was forced out essentially because he did his job so well. He was resisting a policy that amounts to further ethnic cleansing of Darfur's African population."

Violence erupted in Darfur in western Sudan in early 2003, when rebels from Darfur's ethnic African majority took up arms against the Arab-dominated government.

Critics accuse Sudan of retaliating by arming local Arab militias known as the janjaweed, and the government is blamed for widespread atrocities against civilians. The government denies any guilt, but a cabinet minister and a janjaweed chief have been charged with crimes against humanity by the International Criminal Court in The Hague.

The gravity of the situation was highlighted last month when a U.N. statement cited reports of dozens of civilians killed, injured or missing in the rebel-held town of Muhajeria in South Darfur that was attacked by Arab militias days earlier.

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