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Fighting threatens civilians in Sudan's Kordofan region

Chris Herlinger | Jun. 13, 2011

Sudan's President Omar al-Bashir, center, waves to the crowd during a visit to North Kordofan state Feb. 8. Celebrations for a new nation rippled throughout Southern Sudan as election officials confirmed that nearly 99 percent of voters in the referendum had chosen independence. (CNS photo/Reuters)

A major humanitarian catastrophe is unfolding in Sudan's oil-producing South Kordofan state, with church and humanitarian officials saying some 300,000 persons are trapped, cut off from relief aid and unable to flee fighting between forces of the Sudanese government and members of the Sudan People's Liberation Army, the former rebel group based in Southern Sudan.

In recent days, there have been growing reports of civilians fleeing to the Nuba mountains in South Kordofan, where officials of the Sudan Council of Churches say civilians are, according to one source, "being hunted down like animals by helicopter gun-ships."

Among those targeted are clergy and humanitarian workers, including Roman Catholics, who have been prominent in civil society work, voter education and in providing emergency and development assistance.

One humanitarian worker with long experience in Sudan was told of "two verified extra judicial, deliberate and targeted killings" of church-based personnel in the Nuba region of South Kordofan.

On Friday, (June 10), the White House issued a statement condemning "reported acts of violence in Southern Kordofan that target individuals based on their ethnicity and political affiliation."

"The government of Sudan must prevent further escalation of this crisis by ceasing immediately its pursuit of a military solution to disarm the Sudan People's Liberation Army in Southern Kordofan and to dissolve the Joint Integrated Units established under the Comprehensive Peace Agreement," said White House spokesman Jay Carney.

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"Accounts of security services and military forces detaining, and summarily executing local authorities, political rivals, medical personnel and others are reprehensible and could constitute war crimes or crimes against humanity."

Southern Sudan is expected to become an independent nation on July 9, following a Jan. 9 referendum in which southern Sudanese voted overwhelmingly for independence from northern Sudan. A 2005 peace pact, known as the Comprehensive Peace Agreement, declared that South Kordofan cannot join Southern Sudan and will remain under the control of the Khartoum-ruled north.

One humanitarian official described the current crisis as an attempt by Khartoum to "change the facts on the ground" before the expected July 9 declaration of independence

Government security forces are reportedly targeting civilians, including women and children, because of their ethnicity, said John Ashworth, advisor to the Sudan Ecumenical Forum, a church-based alliance that has promoted peace-building in Sudan since 1994.

Ashworth, based in Juba, Southern Sudan, told NCR that people are fleeing to the government town of El Obeid, outside the zone of fighting, but are reportedly still being targeted if they are Nuba, a Sudanese ethnic grouping of several peoples. "Many others have fled into the hills where they feel safe among the SPLA troops, even though they are being bombed and shelled and face great hardships," he said.

Church officials are calling for international efforts to stop what they fear will be a repeat of earlier atrocities, in the 1990s, in Nuba, and more recently in the western region of Darfur.

?A humanitarian crisis on an enormous scale is unfolding in South Kordofan state. We appeal to the world leaders and governments to pay attention to this situation and urgently protect people," the Rev. Eberhard Hitzler, co-chair of the Sudan Ecumenical Forum, said in a June 10 statement.

Unless an immediate ceasefire is called and humanitarian workers are permitted to deliver relief in the affected area and the United Nations Mission in Sudan is allowed to fulfill its mission of protecting civilians, the killing will continue, Hitzler predicted. Both government and non-government forces have a responsibility to protect civilians, he said.

Some are calling the targeting of civilians a possible prelude to "the next Darfur." However, repression in the Nuba region by Sudanese military forces in the early 1990s has sometimes been called the precursor to government-sponsored violence in Darfur beginning nearly a decade ago. In both locales, Antonov fighter plans conducted aerial bombardments in areas with large numbers of civilians.

In the most recent incidents, church sources say bombardments have taken place in the South Kordofan cities of Heiban and Um Dorain; shelling has occurred in the area around the town of Kauda; and low-flying MIG fighter planes have tried to disperse displaced persons who have sought shelter around the United Nations Mission in Sudan compound north of Kadugli, the capital of South Kordofan.

In all, more than 50,000 persons have reportedly fled the fighting between the Sudanese government troops, called the Sudan Armed Forces, known as the SAF, and the Sudan People's Liberation Army, known as the SPLA, in Kadugli.

The fighting has all but stopped humanitarian efforts in and around Kadugli. Church sources say they have been told by independent eyewitnesses that government forces are carrying out "house-to-house" searches for government opponents who are being pulled out of homes and, in some cases, killed on the spot. At the same time, eyewitnesses have told church sources that the SPLA is also committing atrocities, as well as failing to protect civilians.

Galvanizing public awareness and support is needed, church sources said, because humanitarian groups and the United Nations cannot say much publicly now out of fear for the safety of Sudan-based staffs.

Hitzler said the violence poses a serious threat during the coming weeks of transition between north and south Sudan and said it could become a repeat of mass atrocities, war crimes and protracted humanitarian crises that have occurred in Nuba and Darfur and which are also reportedly occurring now in Abyei, a key border area.

"The international community, led by the UN Security Council, with the explicit and unwavering support from particularly China, the United States, the African Union, the Arab League and the European Union, must urgently take all measures to stop hostilities, protect civilians and allow humanitarian access to all parts of South Kordofan, as a first step to re-engaging the opposing political and military parties in the search for a negotiated solution," Hitzler said.

In explaining the background to the current crisis, Ashworth said South Kordofan is part of northern Sudan, but the Nuba people, who live in South Kordofan, ethnically and culturally identify with the south and fought alongside the south during the civil war.

"It's important to note that these are not southerners -- they are indigenous Nuba," he said. "They fought back, and fighting continues, with the SPLA holding the mountainous areas and the government the towns and low ground."

The peace agreement between northern and southern Sudan did not give the Nuba "a referendum nor the opportunity to join the south, only a 'popular consultation' on their exact form of governance in the north (which hasn't happened yet)," Ashworth said. Others who live in South Kordofan are so-called "Arabized" groups who identify more with Khartoum.

Asked by NCR if the Darfur situation is the best prism through which to understand the current crisis, Ashworth noted that that the current crisis is directly related to the long-standing tensions between northern and southern Sudan. "It's related to the southern war in that the Nuba supported the south during the war," he said. "But it bears similarities to Darfur in that this is a war taking place within the north, and the Khartoum regime is targeting its own citizens."

[Chris Herlinger, a writer for the humanitarian agency Church World Service, is a New York-based freelance journalist who reports frequently on humanitarian issues for *NCR*. He is the co-author of the book, *Where Mercy Fails: Darfur's Struggle to Survive*, published by Seabury Books.]

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