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Parts of Darfur See Stability, but Others Are Seething

By JEFFREY GETTLEMAN

NAIROBI, Kenya — It was a scene that seemed to belong to a different time, say, early 2004, when war was raging across Sudan's vast desert region of Darfur. Hundreds of armed men — on horseback, camels, donkeys and in four-by-four trucks — some in street clothes, some in camouflage fatigues, swept into the Kassab displaced persons camp and began looting, burning, raping and shooting.

In the span of a few hours, several people were killed and tens of thousands were sent running for their lives.

But this was not 2004. It happened this month, this year, and United Nations officials and aid workers said it was among the more troubling violence Darfur has experienced in years.

"We haven't had a crisis like this in awhile," said Christopher Cycmanick, a spokesman for the United Nations-African Union peacekeeping mission in Darfur, known as Unamid.

Nearly a decade after war first arrived, Darfur is a land of mixed signals.

Some areas have become stable — even peaceful, many residents say — like parts of western Darfur, where thousands of families are finally returning home.

But at the same time, other areas are seething.

The overall trend for the past couple of years had been one of cautious improvement, United Nations officials say, with civilian deaths gradually declining. But this year is on track to be a setback, they warn, with more criminality, rebel attacks, rapes, displacements and assorted mayhem than in the recent past.

Activists contend that official pronouncements of progress have long been misleadingly rosy, and they are increasingly fed up with the huge, \$1.5-billion-a-year peacekeeping mission in Darfur, saying that it is failing at its core mission: protecting civilians.

"This is probably the least cost-effective peacekeeping mission in U.N. history, but it's simply not possible to say that out loud, given A.U. sensitivities," said Eric Reeves, a Smith College professor and a prolific blogger on Sudan. "There are factitious claims about 'improved' security, and woe to the man who disputes the U.N./Unamid line."

In the case of Kassab, many of the victims begged for help when the marauders stormed into the camp, but because of the intensity of the violence and some flooding along the roads, United Nations peacekeepers did not arrive until three days later. When they did get there, they pulled back because government forces were still battling the militia fighters. It took several more days before government troops were able to restore a semblance of control.

Government forces in Darfur are stretched thin these days, but beyond that, they seem to be living up to their history as some of the worst perpetrators. Just this Friday, there were reports of renegade soldiers ransacking the market in Tabit, breaking into shops and shooting civilians.

In the past few months, there have been heavy bombings in eastern Jebel Marra; deadly protests in Nyala; vicious clashes near Tabun; and further attacks on displaced people in several other camps across Darfur.

It all seems symptomatic of a broader problem, which may help explain why Darfur is sliding into an especially rough patch right now. Sudan as a whole is under more distress than it has been for years, racked by several major, simultaneous rebellions at the same time its economy has fallen on its knees.

When South Sudan broke off last year, after years of guerrilla struggle, it took most of Sudan's crude oil with it. The two sides could not agree on how to split oil profits, and earlier this year, the South abruptly shut off the pumps, eliminating the main source of hard currency for both north and south.

Inflation spiked, subsidies were erased and the economic pain began to bite into every sector of the society.

Though the two sides agreed in early August on a formula to share oil profits, it has yet to be put in place and the pumps are still off.

Some activists, United Nations officials and academics say that Darfur's violence may be directly linked to the economic malaise: many heavily armed men have not been paid recently.

"The militia did this in order to get stuff," said Susan Burgess-Lent, an American writer who has been working closely with a women's center in the Kassab camp.

She explained that everything at the center had been completely stripped, down to heavy metal doors that were wrenched from their hinges. She also says her contacts among various women's groups in Darfur say that there has been a sharp increase in rapes across the region, but that most go unreported. United Nations officials agree that criminality is on the rise in several places, but, as Mr. Cycmanick said, "undoubtedly if Unamid weren't here, the place would be far worse."

Some United Nations officials concede that they have to be extremely careful about what they say publicly, because if they paint too negative a picture of Darfur, then the Sudanese government could kick out the entire peacekeeping mission, which would put even more lives at risk.

Darfur has long been a violent, unruly place where personal and ethnic disputes are settled with the business end of a gun. Some markets even specialize in selling three-foot-long heavy steel swords, and not as decorative items.

The trouble in Kassab began on Aug. 1 after a local official was shot dead in a market, part of a continuing feud between two Arab militias that used to work closely with the government.

The residents of the camp are not Arab and were not connected to the feud, save for the fact that the local official's bullet-riddled car was found near the camp. They became easy prey, though, because they were unarmed and among Darfur's historically oppressed peoples.

“The janjaweed came and destroyed everything. They took everything!” said one resident of the camp, who refused to be identified because he was too scared. He used the term janjaweed, meaning horseback raider, a word that had been losing currency and dismissed as outdated by some Darfuris but recently seems to be making a comeback.

The camp dweller went on: “When they came, I just surrendered. They hit me with a whip and told me to get out of here. I saw them kill a man who refused to get in a truck with them.”

It is not clear when the current burst of violence is going to let up. The Darfur rebels seem reinvigorated and are taking advantage of Sudan’s forces being spread thin between Darfur, the Nuba Mountains (where another marginalized ethnic group has begun an insurrection) and the heavily militarized border between Sudan and South Sudan.

Mr. Reeves says that the army is “demoralized” and that all the armed groups that used to be part of the government alliance are now “fighting among themselves for some piece of an increasingly small pie.” For example, after the militia fighters finished their pillaging and killing in Kassab, they proceeded to a nearby police station, where they besieged their former patrons.

Isma’il Kushkush contributed reporting from Khartoum, Sudan.