

The Debating Chamber - Darfur's invisible violence

By Eric Reeves | 08/28/2012



Women return home after farming during the rainy season, outside Gereida (South Darfur), Sudan, July 25, 2012. REUTERS/Albert Gonzalez Farran/UNAMID/Handout

Over the past month violence against civilians in Darfur has continued to explode upwards to levels not seen in years. On July 31 Khartoum's security forces, using automatic weapons with live rounds, gunned down scores of student demonstrators in Nyala, killing twelve and leaving many critically injured. On August 4, I received an urgent email from North Darfur, informing me of the near total destruction of humanitarian capacity in the town of Kutum, which was overwhelmed by Arab militia on August 3, as was nearby Kassab IDP camp. On August 13 – 14 ethnic violence killed or injured dozens in Mellit. On August 17, following evening prayers, the town of Tabit was attacked by Khartoum's paramilitary Central Reserve Police. The assault had hallmarks of a deliberate massacre.

There are almost daily reports from Radio Dabanga of girls and women being raped. It is difficult to know the full scale of sexual violence, since UNAMID and the UN don't dare offend Khartoum by reporting or speaking about it. Astonishingly, there is *no* mention of rape in the last two reports on UNAMID by UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon. And his reports note only two instances of civilian bombings since the beginning of the year, despite the fact there have been dozens. Many attacks are in Jebel Marra, to which UNAMID, humanitarian organizations, and UN agencies are all denied access.

This sharp increase in violence and insecurity comes as UNAMID is preparing to reduce its force by over 4,000 troops and police. The justification? Security has improved sufficiently to justify this drawdown, and UNAMID force size should reflect "reality on the ground," according to Hervé Ladsous, head of UN peacekeeping.

But the *lack of security* represented by the attacks on Kutum, Mellit, Tabit, and many other locations is the major "reality on the ground"; and growing insecurity means that humanitarians cannot reach many of those in camps who most need food, clean water, and primary health care. Dr. Mohamed Ahmed Eisa, former director of the Amal Center in Nyala, has indicated to me

that based on his communications with medical professionals and others on the ground in Darfur, the health situation this rainy season is considerably worse than last year.

Water-borne diseases pose an especially grave threat, as the rains have been extremely heavy at times, and many locations have experienced serious flooding. Malaria, diarrheal diseases, and a host of other acute health risks are becoming more urgent by the day, especially in the wake of the withdrawal, expulsion, or suspension of operations by key medical relief organizations: MSF was forced to suspend operations in Jebel Si, North Darfur; Médecins du Monde, active in Jebel Marra, was expelled by Khartoum in 2011; Aide Médicale Internationale and Medair both withdrew from West Darfur earlier this year.

Displacement continues apace, though barely acknowledged by the UN or UNAMID. Indeed, since UNAMID took up its mandate in January 2008, more than 1 million civilians have been newly displaced. And we know from nine years of grim experience in Darfur that displacement is overwhelmingly a function of violence rather than the "pull factor" of food or shelter in camps. Following the violence near Kutum, Radio Dabanga estimated that 70,000 people were newly displaced.

UNAMID spokesman Chris Cychmanick, in a May interview with Radio Dabanga, described "the security situation in Darfur as 'relatively calm,'" echoing similar comments by UNAMID head Ibrahim Gambari. Darfuris—whose current crisis is being overshadowed by the vast catastrophe unfolding in the North/South border regions—may be forgiven for wondering why their own suffering and dying are so expediently misrepresented to the international community.