



Darfur Australia Network Briefing

Sexual and Gender-Based Violence in Darfur

December 2006



The crisis in Darfur is currently one of the most devastating in the world. There has been a systematic campaign of displacement, starvation, rape and mass slaughter by the government backed, ethnic militia groups, commonly known as the Janjaweed. More than 400,000 people have been killed and over 2.5 million people forced from their homes. In Addition, over four million people are dependent on humanitarian assistance leading to the largest humanitarian deployment in the world. The conflict has not discriminated between combatants and civilians and women and children have been systematically targeted. Part of this campaign involves the extensive use of sexual and gender-based violence as a weapon of war.

Sexual and Gender-Based Violence in Darfur

Throughout the conflict in Darfur, there have been numerous reports of rape and sexual violence against women and children¹. These reports all indicate that rape and sexual violence in Darfur is widespread and systematic. Sexual and gender-based violence in Darfur is not simply the result of conflict or 'undersexed' troops, but is used as a weapon of war. Wartime rape moves from being an opportunistic act to a crime against humanity when it is used systematically as a tool of ethnic cleansing and is committed with political motivations.² It is used to humiliate, destabilize and destroy certain populations while also providing sexual services for soldiers and reinforcing the hatred of the enemy. Rape is an instrument of genocide, with devastating effects. It is used as a threat to displace villagers, to inflict fear and terror into communities and to punish the 'enemy'. Describing the initial campaign in 2003 and 2004, Flint and de Waal commented that "rape was so ubiquitous that it appeared to be an instrument of policy to destroy the fabric of the targeted communities and perhaps even create a new generation with 'Arab' paternity".³

The majority of rapes occur while women are pursuing their daily activities including searching for firewood, fetching water and working their fields. Most of the attacks are by armed assailants carrying guns and often wearing military uniforms. The attacks are brutal and often involve the use of weapons to force the assault with some women enduring horrific physical torture before and after the rape. The attacks are also characterized by intimidation and significant verbal abuse. There have been

¹ For examples see Amnesty International, 2004, *Sudan, Darfur: Rape as a weapon of War: Sexual Violence and its Consequences*. Amnesty International, London; Medecins Sans Frontieres, 2005, *The Crushing Burden of Rape: Sexual Violence in Darfur*. Medecins Sans Frontieres, Geneva; Human Rights Watch, 2005, *Sexual Violence and its Consequences Among Displaced Persons in Darfur and Chad: A Human Rights Watch Briefing Paper*. Human Rights Watch, New York.

² Robertson, G., 1999, *Crimes Against Humanity: The Struggle for Global Justice*. Penguin Books, Ringwood.

³ Flint, J., and de Waal, A., 2005, *Darfur: A Short History of a Long War*. Zed Books, London; 108

widespread reports of multiple and gang rapes, and there is often more than one victim in the attack.⁴ Children as young as seven or eight have been targeted and the elderly and pregnant women are not spared. Women and young girls have also been abducted and used as sexual slaves for the Janjaweed who often use torture to prevent escape. Additionally, women may be forced into prostitution or become victims of trafficking.⁵

Even when women reach Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) or refugee camps they are not safe. Most IDP's live in camps on the periphery of cities and towns where they are still the target of Janjaweed attacks, rapes and killing. Men cannot leave the camps for fear of being killed so women must venture out to collect food, water and firewood. Women are regularly beaten, raped and sexually assaulted when they leave the relative safety of the camps. Attacks have been increasing. In August 2006, the International Rescue Committee documented that in the five weeks prior to the release of the report, over 200 cases of sexual assault and an additional 200 cases of physical attacks were reported outside Darfur's largest displaced persons camp, Kalma.⁶ This figure is particularly concerning as many cases would go unreported due to shame.

It appears that one of the key motivations of the attacks is the destabilisation and displacement of the population. The International Commission of Enquiry noted that there has been a "deliberate strategy with the aim of terrorising the population, ensuring control of the movement of IDP population and perpetuating its displacement".⁷ Systematic rape relies on cultural norms that value women's sexuality as 'owned' by society. By physically raping one woman, the whole community or ethnic group becomes the victim.

By raping women in front of their families and communities, sexual violence has been used as a form of humiliation. Not only are women affected physically and emotionally, but men are also humiliated as they are unable to protect the women from attack. Being able to provide protection for their families is seen as an important responsibility for many men; however in Darfur, men are unable to fulfil this sense of duty. Not only are they unable to provide food and shelter, they are powerless to protect their wives from rape and sexual violence. Men are unable to return to their lands to farm and are thus left unemployed. While this may lead some men to join the rebel groups, others are left feeling oppressed, humiliated and frustrated, undermining their sense of masculinity. In an attempt to regain their masculinity, men may try to reassert domestic power which may translate to an increase in domestic violence, further embedding the powerlessness and oppression felt by survivors.

International Conventions

In 2000, the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 formally acknowledged the systematic and widespread effect of violence against women in armed conflict.

"Civilians, particularly women and children, account for the vast majority of those adversely affected by armed conflict, including as refugees and internally displaced persons, and increasingly are targeted by combatants and armed elements".⁸

⁴ Amnesty International, 2004, *Sudan, Darfur: Rape as a weapon of War: Sexual Violence and its Consequences*. Amnesty International, London; Medecins Sans Frontieres, 2005, *The Crushing Burden of Rape: Sexual Violence in Darfur*. Medecins Sans Frontieres, Geneva; Human Rights Watch, 2005, *Sexual Violence and its Consequences Among Displaced Persons in Darfur and Chad: A Human Rights Watch Briefing Paper*. Human Rights Watch, New York.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ 'Increased sexual assaults signal Darfur's downward spiral'. *International Rescue Committee*, 23 August 2006.

<<http://www.theirc.org/news/latest/increased-sexual-assaults.html>>

⁷ United Nations, 2005, Report on the International Commission of Inquiry on Darfur to the United Nations Secretary-General, United Nations, Geneva: 94

⁸ United Nations Security Council, Resolution 1325 (2000), Adopted 31 October 2000: preamble.

The resolution appealed for all parties in a conflict to protect women and children from gender-based violence. However, while protection for women is enshrined in international law, there are no consistent programs, and strategies for preventing and responding to SGBV are limited.

Although Article 27 of the Geneva Convention formally banned the rape of civilians, it is only recently that rape as a weapon of war has been widely acknowledged. The highly publicised incidence of mass rape and sexual violence in Bosnia during the 1992-1995 war, and in Rwanda's 1994 genocide brought wartime rape into the international arena.⁹ In 2001, the Hague Tribunal on former Yugoslavia identified systematic rape as a war crime and a crime against humanity, formally eradicating the irrational view of rape as a 'spoil of war'.¹⁰

Psychosocial and Health Consequences of SGBV in Conflicts

Rape and sexual and gender-based violence have significant physical, social and economic consequences for victims and the wider society. Physical injuries such as cuts burns and broken bones are common after attacks and sexual violence. Women also suffer major injuries to the reproductive system, and pregnant women often miscarry as a result of sexual attacks.

Female genital mutilation is highly practiced in Western Sudan. The majority of Darfuri women are circumcised and many have been infibulated.¹¹ This leads to a much greater risk during rape and significantly increases the chance of contracting sexually transmitted infections.¹² Conflict situations, particularly those with high levels of sexual violence, provide a fertile environment for the transmission of HIV.

Compounding the problem, many women are afraid to seek medical assistance as a result of shame and humiliation they feel after a rape. In other cases, sanitation and hygiene is limited and medical facilities are unavailable due to the deterioration of health infrastructure as a result of ongoing conflict.

While the physical consequences of sexual violence are high, the emotional toll is even greater. Victims of sexual violence in Darfur face psychological consequences that range from feelings of helplessness, fear and desperation through to serious anxiety disorders, long term depression, difficulties establishing relationships and even suicide.¹³ Rape is a social taboo in Darfur and consequently, women in Darfur who have been raped are often highly stigmatised. While some families may be supportive, other victims find themselves ostracized and rejected by their family and community. Women may be abandoned by their husbands and are often seen as 'disgraced'. Due to the high stigma associated with rape, single women may not be able to marry in the future, contributing to economic poverty and even greater vulnerability to future attacks.

⁹ Reports claim that in 1992 in Bosnia-Herzegovina, between 20,000 and 60,000 women were raped over a five-month period. In the Rwandan genocide of 1994 it is estimated that between 250,000 and 500,000 women were raped. Other examples include Sierra Leone in which a study of internally displaced families found that 94% of women surveyed had experienced sexual violence including rape, torture and sexual slavery. As yet concrete numbers on Darfur are not available because of ongoing conflict.

¹⁰ Robertson, G., 1999, *Crimes Against Humanity: The Struggle for Global Justice*. Penguin Books, Ringwood.

¹¹ Amnesty International, 2004, *Sudan, Darfur: Rape as a weapon of War: Sexual Violence and its Consequences*. Amnesty International, London. Infibulation is the practice of surgically closing the female labia majora by sewing them together to seal off the female genitalia, leaving only a small hole for the passage of urine and menstrual blood.

¹² Amnesty International, 2004, *Sudan, Darfur: Rape as a weapon of War: Sexual Violence and its Consequences*. Amnesty International, London.

¹³ United Nations Childrens Fund (UNICEF) and United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), 2005, *The Effects of Conflict on the Health and Well-Being of Women and Girls in Darfur: Situational Analysis Report: Conversations with the Community*. UNICEF, New York.

In addition to the stigma and ostracism that may be directed towards the victim of the attack, women often have to deal with unwanted pregnancies. Mothers find it incredibly difficult to raise a child conceived through rape, particularly if there is no social support. The community may consider the child as the offspring of the enemy and refuses to accept it. After the 1994 Rwandan conflict, more than 5000 babies were born as a result of wartime rape. Known as *enfants mauvais souvenir*, or children of bad memories, these children struggle for acceptance in their community and are often abandoned.¹⁴

The lack of socio-economic assistance is also an issue for victims of sexual violence in Darfur. Women who have been abandoned by their husbands or are unable to marry must struggle to survive, often in isolation and without assistance from the community. This is particularly hard for women with children born from the rape.

What can be done?

There needs to be coordinated services to provide support for the victims of sexual and gender-based violence. In addition to counselling facilities, health services including the provision of emergency contraception, post-exposure prophylaxis and voluntary counselling and testing for HIV need to be established to deal with the aftermath of rape. However, simply treating wounds and providing health care and counselling will not stop the violence. The failure of the Government of Sudan and the international community to halt the ongoing and horrific conflict in Darfur makes these services inadequate to address the real causes of the problem. Preventative mechanisms need to be implemented which provide protection for women. Advocacy campaigns can also be used to raise awareness about the situation and lead the international community to demand the implementation of effective peacekeeping forces.

While ultimately the deployment of a UN peacekeeping force would provide greater protection for women from SGBV, currently this mission is being undermined by the lack of political will by the Government of Sudan and the failure of the international community to provide a united negotiating platform for action. In the mean time, humanitarian agencies must put a much greater emphasis on preventing and responding to sexual violence. An increase in African Union firewood patrols is needed to lower the risk of attacks and enable women to leave the camps in search of wood. Additionally, the African Union mandate must be strengthened to a Chapter 7 mandate to enable the protection of civilians.

Finally, a system of documentation and referrals to the international criminal court must be established to prosecute systematic acts of rape as a war crime and a crime against humanity. Violence against women is a violation of basic human rights and must not be accepted as an inevitable part of war. The international community must not stand idly by and watch yet another genocide occur.

Darfur Australia Network
PO Box 1249
Collingwood VIC 3066
contact@darfuraustralia.org

www.darfuraustralia.org

¹⁴ Shanks, L., Schull, M., 2000, 'Rape in war: the humanitarian response', *Canadian Medical Association Journal*. 163(9), 1152-1156.