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The Darfur Crisis



ONLINE REPORTS

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Victims of Sexual Violence in Darfur Face Stigma, Unresponsive Justice System

Reports of women raped during militia raids or while seeking supplies are widespread in the Darfur conflict, yet Sudan's government has denied it occurs and prosecuting the crime has remained virtually impossible in the Muslim country.

"It is not in the Sudanese culture or people of Darfur to rape. It doesn't exist. We don't have it," Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir said in an interview with NBC in March.

However, the U.N. Human Rights Council on June 11 released recommendations on how the government should respond to the problem, including publishing a national action plan, reforming the legal system, and warning armed forces and militias under government control that any form of sexual violence is prohibited.

While the Sudanese government agreed to all but a few of the recommendations, the real indicator of change will be if they are implemented over the coming months.

Rape in conflict

Rape has been employed as a weapon of war by all sides in Darfur, but the Janjaweed militia, an Islamic army allegedly supported by the Sudanese government, has reportedly conducted the most widespread and systematic attacks.

Aid workers in the region say they have witnessed both attacks and the fallout from how sexual violence is permeating communities.

Former head of the Doctors Without Borders mission in southern Darfur Vanessa Van Schoor said one victim, who was impregnated through rape, starved herself to death rather than face the shame of people knowing what happened to her. Some women in the conflict do take care of their children born of rape, but these children will be a test of how communities will deal with the legacy of the crimes, she said.

Rape is committed with a sense of impunity in this conflict and victims find little recourse, regional observers say.

Sudan requires four male witnesses be willing to testify in order to prosecute any sexual assault. Married women who come forward also put themselves at risk of being found guilty of adultery, said Madeleine Rees, head of the Women's Rights and Gender Unit for the U.N. High Commission for Human Rights.

Victims need to live in a secure environment and feel protected if anything is to change, according to Rees.

"A woman who is a survivor of rape who has been stuck in an [internally displaced persons] camp for years and is constantly subjected to attack ... the chances of her coming forward to testify under these circumstances are slim," said Rees.

Due to the social repercussions and fear of reprisals, even the process of documenting the extent of rape has proved extraordinarily difficult. U.N. workers say they reported 2,500 rapes in Darfur in 2006, but aid groups treating rape victims fear they are seeing only a small fraction of the violations.



Rees warned that although the message that rape is not being ignored is an important step, expectations for what it means for Darfur victims should be realistic.

"The justice is going to seem a little more remote and there has to be an understanding that that is how the system is going to work," Rees said. "It's not going to be able to prosecute thousands of men for rape."

But "the fact that we are now addressing [rape] as a war crime is actually huge progress," she said.

-- By Talea Miller, Online NewsHour

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