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**Ninth periodic report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human
Rights on the situation of human rights in the Sudan**

**Attacks on civilians in Saraf Jidad, Sirba, Silea and Abu Suruj
in January and February 2008**



Issued by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights in
cooperation with the United Nations African Union Mission in Darfur.

Executive Summary

This report is issued by the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) in cooperation with the United Nations – African Union Mission in Darfur (UNAMID). The report contains the findings of the investigation conducted by UNAMID Human Rights into the January and February attacks on the villages of Saraf Jidad, Sirba, Silea and Abu Suruj in West Darfur. The attacks were carried out in the context of a major military campaign which the Sudanese government launched in January 2008 in an attempt to regain control of the northern corridor of West Darfur and drive out the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM), a non-signatory insurgent group, from the area. The investigation revealed that violations of international humanitarian and human rights law against the civilian populations of Saraf Jidad, Sirba, Silea and Abu Suruj, were perpetrated by armed militias and Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) during those attacks. The activities of JEM prior to the Government's military offensive, including its attack on Government positions in Silea (29 December) and its public statements justifying the use of force to address the Darfur conflict, were determined by the Darfur Ceasefire Commission to be in violation of the 2004 N'Djamena Ceasefire Agreement.¹

Military attacks in Sirba, Silea and Abu Suruj (8 February), involved aerial bombardments by helicopter gunships and fixed-wing aircraft, accompanied by ground offensives by militia and SAF. Consistent information gathered by UNAMID Human Rights Officers (HROs) indicated that these actions violated the principle of distinction stated in international humanitarian law, failing to distinguish between civilian objects and military objectives. Moreover, the scale of destruction of civilian property, including objects indispensable for the survival of the civilian population, suggests that the damage was a deliberate and integral part of a military strategy. Information on extensive pillaging during and after the attacks was also gathered. In addition, consistent and credible accounts of rape committed by armed uniformed men during and after the attack in Sirba were collected.

As a result of the attacks, at least 115 persons were killed, including elderly people, women and children, and more than 30,000 individuals forcibly displaced to other locations, including neighboring Chad. Civilian homes, NGO clinics and offices, community centers, water structures, schools, food storages, milling machines and shops were systematically pillaged, vandalized and/or set ablaze. Livestock was also looted.

Background and Context

The northern corridor of West Darfur covers a large territory stretching from Bir Dagig and Kondobe villages; about 20 kilometers north of the state capital El Geneina, to Kulbus, located 200 kilometers north of El Geneina. The area is populated mostly by people from the Erenga and Messeriya Jebel tribes, often accused by the Government of supporting and collaborating with the rebels, as well as semi-nomadic and nomadic tribes and the Gimir tribe. At the start of the JEM offensive in December 2007, Jebel Moon, a strategic mountainous region located in the northern corridor,

¹ See press statement of the Chairman of the Ceasefire Commission on the arrest of the JEM Representative to the Ceasefire Commission and fighting in Silea – 30 December 2007

was under the control of the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM) and the Abdul Wahid faction of the Sudan Liberation Movement (SLA/AW).

Freedom of movement within the northern corridor has been problematic ever since the conflict started. Insecurity due to banditry and organized attacks against civilians has made travel from Geneina to most parts of the area extremely dangerous. Civilians from the Messeriya Jebel and Erenga tribes have been routinely targeted by militia groups. In September 2005, armed militiamen attacked the Aro Sharow IDP camp, south-west of Jebel Moon, killing more than 20 civilians. In October 2006, several villages in the Jebel Moon area were attacked by a large group of armed militia in green camouflaged uniforms, resulting in the killing of approximately 50 civilians. In December 2006, a group of armed men in green uniforms attacked a commercial truck traveling north from Geneina to Sirba killing 28 passengers. Most of the victims were reportedly burned alive in the truck. Similar attacks, but with fewer casualties have taken place in other parts of the region including around Silea, Sirba and Abu Suruj.

From mid-2006 and due to growing insecurity and persistent attacks from bandits and militia groups, a number of villages in the area increasingly resorted to protection from vigilante groups known as “local defense forces”. These groups, consisting mainly of local Erenga and Messeriya Jebel tribesmen, were alleged to have forged close ties with rebel groups, particularly with JEM.

In December 2007 and early January 2008, JEM occupied a number of towns and villages including Silea, Sirba and Abu Suruj. When JEM entered Abu Suruj on 31 December 2007, the police allegedly surrendered without resistance. According to reports, JEM remained in town for two days and then left Abu Suruj. The police reportedly withdrew from Abu Suruj after JEM left the town. With the exception of Silea, where attacks by JEM on the Government police station and a military barracks reportedly resulted in death and injuries to members of Government security forces and civilians, there was little or no resistance from the Government to JEM’s occupation of these locations. On 7 January 2008, the police station of Saraf Jidad was attacked by JEM forces and the police withdrew from the town. However, according to the community, JEM never maintained a presence inside the village.

Following these developments, the Government began assembling troops and substantial military hardware in Geneina in January, in apparent preparation for a large military operation. The Minister for Defense of the Sudanese central government visited El Geneina on 28 January 2008 and held meetings with the local security authorities and representatives of the Arab community where he allegedly gave clear instructions that he wanted the northern corridor to be cleared of armed groups. In a meeting with UN agencies on 31 January 2008, the Deputy Wali (Governor) of West Darfur stated that the GNU was “determined to recapture areas under JEM control and this will occur soon”.

Due to the increasing tension between the Government and JEM, the northern corridor remained a no-go area for the UN and INGOs from mid-December 2007 and no humanitarian supplies were dispatched to the north until very recently. During the 31 January meeting, the Deputy Wali of West Darfur made it clear that UN agencies and INGOs would not be authorized to access areas in the northern corridor under JEM control “until the Government of National Unity (GNU) had regained full control of

these areas”. According to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), the total number of people affected by this blockade was estimated to be 160,000 individuals from displaced and host communities, reliant on food and other humanitarian assistance since the eruption of the Darfur conflict. Also the traffic of private commercial vehicles to the North was blocked by the Sudanese National Intelligence and Security Services (NISS) during January 2008. In sum, the area north of Kondobe was completely cut off from the rest of the State due to Government imposed restrictions on the movement of people, goods and services between the north and south of the region. The international community started to have access to the affected areas only on 3 February (Saraf Jidad). Sirba, Abu Suruj and Silea were respectively accessed on 11, 12 and 14 February 2008.

The information in this report is based on the work of UNAMID Human Rights Officers who monitor the implementation by the Government of Sudan of its obligations under international human rights law and international humanitarian law, in line with UNAMID’s mandate. They also monitor respect by other parties to the Darfur conflict to their obligations under international law. In Darfur, Human Rights Officers conduct field investigations and on site visits; interview witnesses and victims; meet with officials of the Government of Sudan, political and tribal leaders, representatives of UNAMID, UN Agencies, and other stakeholders. To ensure reliability, information is cross-checked with other sources. Human Rights Officers regularly engage in dialogue with local, regional, and national authorities to obtain information, raise human rights concerns, and recommend corrective and preventative actions. Human Rights Officers in Darfur also provide capacity building on human rights to Government institutions, civil society, and UN agencies.

Details of the attacks on Saraf Jidad, Sirba, Abu Suruj and Silea

Saraf Jidad (7, 12 and 24 January 2008)

The village of Saraf Jidad, located 50 kilometers north-west of Geneina, was attacked by militia groups on 7, 12 and 24 January 2008 respectively. A total of 26 civilians, including elderly persons, women and children, were killed as a result of these attacks. The major attack took place on 24 January, involving looting and wanton destruction of civilian property. The attacks caused the displacement of almost the entire population of Saraf Jidad.

On 24 January 2008, attackers described by the witnesses as “Janjaweed” and “Arabs”, in military uniforms, riding on camels, horses and in a number of green camouflaged military vehicles approached Saraf Jidad at 7:00 a.m. According to eyewitness accounts, the attackers exchanged fire with JEM east of Saraf Jidad, in the nearby hills, but soon overcame them as the former were superior in number and military equipment. The attackers entered the town and started torching houses and shops and shooting deliberately at people. The attack lasted from three to four hours. Twenty-four civilians were killed in this attack, among them six burned alive in their houses, including three women. The umda² of the village was also killed. About 45

² A local administrator who deals with tribal issues.

percent of the village was burned down. The attackers deliberately set houses, shops and milling machines on fire. Food reserves were also burned. The local clinic was pillaged and vandalized. The population of Saraf Jidad was displaced to Tendelti, Geneina and Armankol and the village was abandoned.

Prior to the 24 January attack, aerial bombing was conducted twice in the area east of Saraf Jidad, namely in the Tire Mountain, believed to be the base of the rebels. No confirmed civilian casualties were reported.

According to the account of one of the victims from Saraf Jidad, aged about 80:

“I was in my house and Janjaweds were in the village, looting and shooting at people. I could not run away because I am old. The attackers entered my house. They were four, in military uniforms. One of them hit my head with the butt of his gun. I fell down. He told me, ‘If you do not all move from here we will burn you alive.’ At that, they set my house on fire. I was inside, but managed to escape though I had my arms injured by the fire” My two brothers died in the attack. One of them was shot in his head with a bullet. He was an old man. There were no Tora Boras³ in our village.”

Abu Suruj (8 February 2008)

The attack on Abu Suruj started around 8.00 a.m. on 8 February. Eyewitnesses stated that two camouflaged helicopters and one white Antonov flew over the area before the attack. Half an hour later, a large number of armed Arab militia wearing different kinds of uniforms, mostly green camouflage and green military uniforms, on horses and camels, entered the town from the south-west. Witnesses consistently reported that the attackers started running after the animals to collect them, while shooting and killing people. Then the attackers began looting and torching houses. Over 75 percent of the town was burnt down during the attack.

Eyewitnesses reported that the Sudan Armed Force (SAF) arrived around one hour and half after the beginning of the attack. SAF took position in the area of the mountains and gardens around Abu Suruj. Some witnesses reported that SAF participated in the pillaging of the village, loading items on to their cars. During the attack at least 30 persons were reportedly killed, including one woman, one mentally disabled man, ten elderly people, among them a 75-year-old blind woman who was burned alive inside her house, and three children, three, eight and sixteen years old. The eight-year-old was a disabled girl who could not walk and therefore succumbed to the flames inside her house. Witnesses stated that many corpses were recovered on the north side of town, to where many of the victims were chased by the armed men at the early stages of the attack. The vicinities of Melmelle and Dabuk Shabab Ardo, villages located in the west side of Abu Suruj, were bombed during the attack but no casualties were reported. The INGO medical center was robbed and vandalized and the two vehicles of the organization were stolen. Local Abu Suruj residents fled to Birak area in Chad and Jebel Moon. There remained an estimated 5,000 people in Abu Suruj for many days out of a total population of 18,600 residents before the attack.

³ Local term for rebels.

Sirba (8 February 2008)

Sirba lies approximately 50 kilometers north of Geneina. On 8 February, at around 9:00 a.m., a large number of armed militia members on horses and camels and in military vehicles raided the village. Eyewitnesses gave consistent accounts of a pattern of attack similar to that carried out in Abu Suruj. The attackers upon entering the village immediately began firing indiscriminately at civilians. They then proceeded to systematically loot and set houses ablaze. Prior to this, two military helicopters and one white Antonov plane were seen hovering over the area. About 30 minutes into the attack, SAF troops in military vehicles arrived in Sirba. Most victims and witnesses reported that the looting and torching of houses continued without reaction from the Sudanese army. It is estimated that close to 50 percent of the town was burned down. Reportedly, 45 people including the umda, ten women and at least three elderly people were killed. Thirty-six bodies have been recovered and buried in Sirba town.

A victim stated: "When the attackers surrounded my house I fled running to my parents' house. There I found my three sisters and two brothers. They were about to flee. My parents were not there. I do not know where they are, since the attack we have lost their track. I took my brothers and sisters with me and we hid in the main hut. The roof of the hut is made of grass but the walls are made of mud. A man opened the door and found us there. He was wearing a green uniform and was armed. He saw us inside the hut. I was holding tight my four-year-old brother; I was scared that the man was going to shoot him. Instead he left. After a few seconds the roof of the house was burning. He saw we were inside and he set the hut on fire to burn us alive. We escaped from the window and ran in different directions. I spent the night in the bush. The following day I returned to the village. I found only one of my brothers and my sisters. My 15-year-old brother, N, is missing, as well as my parents."

In the aftermath of the attack, UNAMID HR visited the town and observed that it was completely surrounded by SAF. Some residents expressed concern that the large presence of Government soldiers may have deterred many of the injured from seeking treatment at the local hospital. Several residents, including children, remained unaccounted for while a number of elderly people had been separated from their relatives and care givers.

Eyewitnesses and community leaders interviewed by UNAMID HR reported that rape and other acts of sexual violence were perpetrated by the attackers during and after the attack. HROs were able to speak to five eyewitnesses and two victims. Based on interviews conducted, it is believed that at least ten girls and women, between the ages of 9 and 18 years, were raped on 8 and 9 February. There are strong indications that SAF members participated in these incidents of sexual violence and rape. One eyewitness reported that she witnessed four girls being escorted to an abandoned hut and raped at gun point by a group of soldiers belonging to the SAF.

Silea (8 February 2008)

Silea is located about 65 kilometers north of Geneina. The assault on the town took place in the early afternoon of 8 February 2008. The ground attack by militia groups was preceded by aerial bombardments by Government Antonov planes and helicopter gunships at around 3:00 p.m. The planes flew over the town and dropped three bombs

in three areas. The eastern edge of the town was reported to have been heavily hit during the bombing raid. Four IDP women and five children aged between 1 month and 12 years were killed during the bomb blast. A witness recalled:

“On my way back from the market I met some eight young boys coming from Sirba side on foot. They are students in Sirba but live in Silea. They told us that the government forces attacked Sirba on horses, camels and also by air. They further stated that the attackers were coming towards Silea now so we all must run to a safer place to save our lives. I joined the group and went inside Silea town. After 15 minutes or so an Antonov flew into the area and dropped three bombs: one at the east side of the town, another to the west side close to the hill and a third one out of the village vicinity on the east side in a place called Gos Mongo. I only saw one young girl – approximately nine years old - who was seriously injured in her leg and foot but could not get any further information on the number of people who died or were injured as a result. However, I saw many houses set ablaze by the bombing. People started running randomly in fear and confusion. I witnessed SAF and Janjaweed looting houses, shops and NGO offices. They would load the stolen goods in their cars and on their camels and horses and take them away.”

After the aerial attack, armed militiamen wearing green camouflage uniforms, on horses, camels and in cars, entered the village and began shooting at people. They looted homes and shops before setting them on fire. At least another five people, including one ICRC worker, were killed in the ground attack. The attack on Silea resulted in the forced displacement of almost the entire population of Silea of about 10,600 people to Jebel Moon and across the border to Chad. Many of the wounded were either evacuated to Birak in Chad or to El Geneina. A large portion of the village, estimated to be 40 percent, was burned down. Three INGO compounds, as well as the office of the ICRC were looted and completely vandalized.

Jebel Moon area (18, 19, 22 February 2008)

UNAMID HR received reports that SAF carried out a military ground and air offensive on Jebel Moon and nearby areas, such as Goz Minu and Aro Sharow on 18, 19 and 22 February 2008, involving aerial bombardment by helicopter gunships, Antonovs, and other planes. There was deep concern for the safety of civilians, many of whom had fled to Jebel Moon after the attacks of 8 February. There were reports that the bombing resulted in the killing of civilians. However, UNAMID HR was unable to visit the area to confirm these reports as the government denied the UN access to Jebel Moon until 1 March 2008, in breach of its obligation to allow UNAMID officials freedom of movement under the Status of Forces Agreement signed between the UN and the Sudanese Government in February 2008.

Other observations

UNAMID HR approached the Governor of West Darfur on 27 February in Geneina to raise its concerns regarding the attacks on Saraf Jidad, Sirba, Abu Suruj and Silea, but the Governor declined to discuss them. On 3 March, UNAMID HR held a meeting with a senior official in the National Security and Intelligence Service in West Darfur State to discuss its concerns. The official stressed the context of the attacks, stating that at the end of December 2007, JEM with support from the Chadian government took control of Sirba, Silea, Abu Suruj and Saraf Jidad and even threatened to take El

Geneina. The West Darfur State Security Committee ordered the deployment of SAF to retake these areas. In response to a question as to whether there was coordination between the activities of SAF and the militias, the official stated that the northern corridor has experienced tribal conflict between Miseriya Jebel and Arabs and between Erenga and Arabs and it is therefore possible that tribal groups may have exploited the SAF attack in order to act in their own interests and pursue their own agenda. However, the official stressed that such activities were not acceptable to the Sudanese government and, in the case of any violations by SAF members, such acts were committed by individuals and were not in pursuit of a Government policy. According to the official, the SAF met resistance during the attacks and found many weapons, including rocket propelled grenades and mortars.

In relation to the attacks on Saraf Jidad, the official stated that there was no relationship between these incidents and the military campaign to retake villages in the northern corridor. The attacks on Saraf Jidad, according to the official, were prompted by the theft of camels by JEM. A group of members of Arab tribes, together with some Erenga, went to retrieve the camels.

The attacks in the northern corridor have caused the displacement of an estimated 30,000 individuals, around 10,000 to the Jebel Moon and Chadian border areas which are not yet accessible to humanitarian agencies. Many unaccompanied and separated minors and elderly people have lost their care givers. The destruction of civilian property has been extensive.

I. Recommendations

To the Government of Sudan:

- a) To cease hostilities in the northern corridor of West Darfur in order to facilitate the delivery of life-saving humanitarian assistance to affected areas;
- b) To refrain from launching deliberate and indiscriminate aerial attacks against civilians;
- c) To carry out an impartial, transparent, and timely investigation into the attacks on villages and towns in the northern corridor and bring to justice those who were involved in serious human rights violations or crimes under international humanitarian law;
- d) To put an end to the use of armed militia groups in the conduct of military operations and to take all appropriate action to implement its commitment under the DPA to disarm militias operating in the region;
- e) To ensure victims and their families are provided with reparations and witnesses protected;
- f) To take action, including through disciplinary action and dismissal, against members of the security forces who were involved, either directly or through command responsibility, in serious human rights violations or crimes under

international humanitarian law, including rape, either in their official or personal capacities, and prosecute them accordingly;

- g) To respect its obligation to grant freedom of movement to UNAMID, including its human rights monitors, as required by the Status of Forces Agreement, signed by the Government of Sudan and the United Nations, in February 2008;
- h) To protect the physical security and freedom of movement of the affected populations by deploying and providing all the necessary resources for a credible, capable and professional police force, and take all the necessary steps to create conditions for a safe, voluntary return of the displaced populations of Saraf Jidad, Abu Suruj, Sirba, Silea, Bir Dagig and Kondobe;

To all the parties involved in the conflict in Darfur, in particular the Justice and Equality Movement

- i) To respect their obligations under international human rights law and international humanitarian law and implement their obligations under all relevant Security Council Resolutions and ceasefire agreements;
- j) To immediately cease the deliberate attacks targeting civilians and civilian objects, and to refrain from involving civilians in the conflict, particularly the use of civilians as human shields, pillaging, forced displacement and starvation;

To the international community:

- k) To strongly condemn the indiscriminate and deliberate attacks on civilians and civilian objects by the warring factions and to urge all parties involved in the conflict to end all hostilities and abide by the existing ceasefire agreements;
- l) To redouble its efforts in assisting the warring parties to resolve the conflict through an all inclusive dialogue and political process;
- m) To provide without further delay all the necessary resources, particularly the troops and logistical needs, to the newly established United Nations African Union Hybrid Mission in Darfur (UNAMID), so that it can fulfill its mandate to protect civilians.