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Chad: Waiting for Help - and for More Ethnic Attacks - on Darfur's Border

Ethnic violence has forced roughly 100,000 Chadians to abandon their homes and livelihoods in the eastern part of the country, mostly in the Dar Sila area along the southern border with Darfur. Humanitarian assistance is slowly increasing as it becomes clear that the crisis will last through 2007 – but there are still communities at risk of attack and displacement.

The tens of thousands of people seeking safety around the town of Goz Beida, in southeast Chad, while not entirely abandoned by the humanitarian community following attacks on their villages, have been left to wait – and wait, and wait. It is only now, sometimes a year after fleeing for their lives, that they are getting help with food and water. Their biggest priority, though, is improved security so they can live safely where they have settled and return home as soon as possible. However, security is elusive as the Chadian military is occupied elsewhere with its fight against rebel groups, leaving no one who can deter attacks and punish aggressors.

In Kerfi, a large village south of Goz Beida, women among more than 1,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs) follow age-old survival strategies developed for drought, including boiling water with tree leaves and giving that to their children in the hope of keeping them alive. Humanitarian agencies have used this resilience to justify the delay in assistance, saying that people can take of themselves.

Self-justifying rationales aside, the government and agencies withheld assistance when the crisis first began in early 2006, thinking it would discourage further displacement and push the displaced to return home. People have fled their homes in Dar Sila not for a handout, however, but because they are afraid of being killed. Now that this is clear, assistance is starting to flow. For those in Kerfi, the World Food Programme (WFP) says it will organize a food distribution soon, and Oxfam has scouted out well sites, but the displaced do not know how long they will have to wait. Staff at the health clinic whisper of girls as young as ten sexually assaulted during attacks on their villages; they, too, must

wait until agencies can figure out how to approach and find them. And the internally displaced do not have the seeds and tools they need to plant crops when the rainy season starts in June, meaning they will have to continue coping, somehow, for many months to come.

In Goz Beida itself, thousands of people from the border town of Adé fled the threat of attack several months ago, settling behind the Red Cross compound. The local government has issued an express request that agencies not help these people, hoping they will leave. Beyond a lack of assistance, women and girls have also suffered from sexual assault and rape committed by government troops stationed in town. Authorities recently moved the displaced further out, where they hope to get some food rations and an alternative to the nearby water source normally used for livestock. The site has swollen a bit recently with arrivals from town who hope to profit from food distributions. The government and humanitarian community, overwhelmed by the surge in displacement since November 2006, is suspicious and unsure of how to respond, relegating the truly needy to the back of the line.

Overall, the number of internally displaced in eastern Chad has now passed 100,000, due entirely to inter-tribal violence: people have fled attacks or the threat of attack on villages by marauders crossing from Darfur or coming from nearby local settlements. The displaced consistently characterize themselves as non-Arab and their attackers as Arab; these may refer more to status as settled farmers and nomadic herdsman rather than specific ethnicities. Motivations for the attacks include profit from the theft, sale, and use of land, pasture, water, livestock, and crops; fear (perhaps

stoked by outsiders) of being forced to change their way of life and have their grazing rights taken away; vengeance for past abuses; lack of a traditional homeland or grazing rights for some nomadic Arab tribes; and an ideology of Arab superiority and solidarity emanating from the governments of Libya and, more recently, Sudan.

The similarity between these attacks and those in Darfur that have been unleashed by the government of Sudan against its own citizens, and the possibility of a backlash against Arab villages, bode ill for resolution and reconciliation in Chad. The authority and capacity for such undertakings normally rests with traditional chiefs, but the sharp turn by some Arabs against their neighbors has severely undermined this resource. The territory of one chief in Kerfi covers both Arab villages linked with the marauders and the non-Arab villages they have attacked. Since the attacks began last November, however, he has had no contact with the Arabs. “We all swore on five Korans that we would not attack one another,” he told Refugees International, “and they came and did it anyway. What can we do?”

The official with the greatest capacity to respond to that question was the Sultan of Dar Sila, who had a lifetime of experience in mediating conflict between those under his domain. He was abruptly deposed a few months ago, purportedly by the central government, in favor of his son, who does not command the same respect. The region desperately needs his father’s skills, however, to reach out to Arab leaders, stop the attacks, and broach the subject of restitution. However, traditional mediation may be overpowered if outsiders are supporting the attackers in a concerted campaign to drive non-Arabs off their land, and deterrence by force may be the only short-term option.

The point is relevant because there are still non-Arab villages in the southeast that have not yet been attacked (those of the Mauro tribe, for example) and non-Arabs may increase reprisal attacks on Arab villages. In addition, ethnic tensions are exploding into violence elsewhere. Far to the north, around the town of Guéréda, the Zaghawa now find themselves under the control of the Tama, their traditional enemies, following a recent agreement between the government and Tama rebels. Clashes between the two sides are increasing, provoking some displacement. More worrying, though, is the fact that a camp of Zaghawa refugees from Darfur lies in the area of Tama control, an easy target for aggression – and the refugees have refused further food distributions by WFP until they have some guarantee of protection.

The United Nations Security Council is debating how to protect civilians in eastern Chad through the deployment of a “multi-dimensional presence” along the border with Darfur. This will take months and may provoke even more violence.

In the near term, the UN could reduce the risk to civilians in eastern Chad by strengthening its leadership in the most affected areas. In Goz Beida, not only is there a gap in leadership in the response to internal displacement, but in protecting civilians and preventing attacks as well. The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) is best positioned for this work, and there are plans for a senior staff member to start work soon in Goz Beida. It cannot be too soon, however; as the displaced wait for assistance and those still at home prepare for further attacks, the UN has a chance to work with traditional leaders to reach out and take the first steps towards an end to the violence.

REFUGEES INTERNATIONAL RECOMMENDS:

- ❑ OCHA deploy immediately an experienced staffer to Goz Beida capable of providing leadership in responding to the needs of the displaced and working with local leaders to prevent attacks on Mauro villages and reprisals against Arabs.
- ❑ The Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) work with the government of Chad to assess the threat to Zaghawa refugees from the Tama controlling the area, and make changes accordingly.
- ❑ WFP move quickly to respond to needs identified in its recent nutrition survey of IDP sites, particular in regard to stockpiling food at sites before the start of the rainy season in June.
- ❑ UNHCR and the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) ensure that as many displaced as possible have access to land, seeds, and tools for farming before the start of the rainy season in June.
- ❑ Relief agencies managing refugee camps, such as CARE, InterSOS, and SECADEV, step forward with proposals to organize and manage IDP sites; donors must then fund these projects quickly.
- ❑ The US Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration work with UNHCR to increase its request for more protection staff in the east and deploy them immediately.
- ❑ The government of Chad and local authorities recognize internal displacement promptly and continue to take steps to protect and assist internally displaced people. This includes stopping any efforts to force them back to their village of origin.

Advocate Rick Neal, currently in the Central African Republic, visited Chad from February 25 to March 4, 2007.