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## Sudan: Town in North Darfur Reflects Changing Nature of Conflict

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The Darfur Peace Agreement has failed to bring peace to Darfur and the ongoing violence should serve as a wake-up call to the international community to redouble its efforts to build a consensus for real peace. Nowhere is this more evident than in a camp surrounding an African Union base near the once prosperous town of Tawilla, located 60 kilometers west of Al Fasher in North Darfur. In the camp a few hundred meters away from town, thousands have recently sought safety after fleeing brutal attacks by the Sudan Liberation Army (SLA) faction led by Minni Arkoi Minawi, the only one of three rebel leaders to sign the Darfur Peace Agreement (DPA) with the Government of Sudan.

Minawi's forces have conducted a reign of terror throughout villages in North Darfur in an effort to fight the rival SLA faction led by Abdel Wahid and others who have rejected the DPA. The violence has been focused against civilians, including the beating and raping of women and the targeted killing of young men. 45,000 internally displaced people now occupy three camps around the town.

The United States and international community must make it clear to Minawi that the U.S. will not support those who violate the Agreement and continue to bring death and destruction to Darfur. Minawi, who has little popular support among the vast majority of the people of Darfur, must not be rewarded for his current actions. Instead, he must be urged to stop seeking retribution for those who do not support the Agreement and instead work with all parties towards peace.

The latest bloodshed encapsulates the changing nature of the conflict in Darfur, but international efforts to bring peace have been slow to realize the new complexity of the situation. The three-year conflict in Darfur has largely been characterized by attacks on African tribes by the Janjaweed – Arab militias

supported by the Government of Sudan. However, the Janjaweed has not conducted widespread attacks in this region in nearly three months. Instead, the DPA has increased tensions between African tribes. Minawi and his supporters – largely from the Zaghawa tribe – are now fighting to increase power over a population that does not support them, and to gain territory controlled by Abdel Wahid and his followers from the Fur tribe. Leaders from within Minawi's own tribe have separated from him, leading to intra-Zaghawa fighting as well. In addition, the situation is further muddied with reports that the Government has provided logistical support to some of Minawi's attacks in North Darfur.

While Minawi and his soldiers deny responsibility for the violence in Tawilla and other towns in the region, a group of sheikhs said that they knew that Minawi's troops were involved because they recognized the attackers as their neighbors. Another sheikh reported that when his town was being attacked, his people were told that the soldiers would kill half of those who were against Minni Minawi in order to urge the other half to follow. Other victims from the region have said that the attackers announced they had arrived to enforce the peace.

A spokesperson for the SLA-Minawi faction told Refugees International, "We want peace and to punish the people who don't want peace." One woman in the Tawilla camp described the nature of these punishments. She said that hundreds of Minawi's soldiers entered her village and started shooting. They went inside the houses one by one shooting the men, including her husband, and beating or raping the women and girls. The soldiers took whatever they could find – clothing, shoes, money, livestock. Her story is remarkably consistent with thousands of others in the region that detail targeted executions of men and violent, forced displacement.

The camp residents, an overwhelming number of whom are women, agree that the situation has deteriorated since the signing of the Darfur Peace Agreement. One sheikh said, "There is no peace in Darfur. Our situation is worse now than ever and this is why no one supports the Darfur Peace Agreement." A woman pointed out that at least the Janjaweed would leave after attacking and looting a village, but Minawi's SLA faction has stayed to control the area and terrorize the population. The women are afraid to walk the few hundred meters into the town market during the day for fear that they will be attacked. An elderly grandmother was beaten just a few days ago, allegedly by Minawi's troops, when she tried to return to her farm to begin planting. The soldiers told her that this was an example of what would happen to the residents who tried to farm.

The African Union Mission in Sudan (AMIS) has been impotent and unable to protect the people from the ongoing violence, largely because its mandate limits the force to monitoring and reporting on ceasefire violations. The internally displaced people (IDPs) in Tawilla expressed serious frustration with the African Union force. Still, when asked why they chose to live in a camp next to the African Union base, the IDPs acknowledged that the African Union was better than nothing and that their presence provided some protection. A few displaced women recognized that if the African Union force wasn't there, they would leave and trek the long distance to the crowded camps around Al Fasher.

The African Union forces have contributed to stability in Darfur, and the international community should continue to support the mission, despite the problems it faces, until a UN peacekeeping mission can take over. Internally displaced people continue to embrace the call for a UN force as the Government of Sudan continues its fierce resistance. Even if the Government relents, a UN peacekeeping force will only be able to quell the violence if it is given a strong mandate to protect civilians and receives adequate funding from international donors.

While the fighting and displacement increase, the ability of humanitarian agencies to respond has decreased due to a lack of funds and difficulties maintaining regular access to the population without endangering their staff. This is especially true in Tawilla. While IDPs have received some food, there are few latrines, there is only one health clinic, and few people have received plastic sheeting to protect them in the current rainy season. There is also a shortage of containers to carry water and IDPs have been forced to use oil cans to transport their water from far-off wells to their shelters.

Many humanitarian operations are also losing their flexibility and ability to respond to new crises because their funding is

tied up in existing, stable programs. Funding cuts have exacerbated this situation, as the shortfalls not only make it difficult to maintain existing programs at a proper level, they reduce agencies' abilities to expand programs into areas like Tawilla. This needs to be addressed as new dimensions in the conflict arise. As one aid official stated, "We can only plan for uncertainty, so we need more flexibility with our funding."

It is clear that the conflict in Darfur is far from over. As the international community struggles to implement a peace agreement that has generated more violence than it has ended, pressuring the warring parties to lay down their arms must be the main priority.

## REFUGEES INTERNATIONAL RECOMMENDS:

- ❑ The United States and the international community pressure Minni Minawi and all warring parties to stop the brutal attacks on civilians and allow humanitarian agencies to access the latest areas of attack.
- ❑ The United States and the international community redouble efforts to reach out to Abdel Wahid, other warring factions, and Darfur civil society groups, particularly women leaders and women's groups, to further discussions on how best to secure peace in Darfur.
- ❑ The Government of Sudan accept a large UN force with a strong mandate to protect civilians to replace the AU force at the end of the year. In the meantime, donors must continue supporting the AU force, especially since it has been tasked with much of the responsibility to implement the DPA.
- ❑ Humanitarian agencies continue to press the Sudan Liberation Army and other warring parties to grant them access to insecure areas so that they can increase services to displaced people in Tawilla and other towns that have borne the brunt of the latest wave of violence.
- ❑ Donors provide more flexible funding so that aid agencies can respond more quickly to the changing dynamics of the conflict and expand their programs.

*Refugees International's communications manager, Megan Fowler, president Ken Bacon and The Initiative for Inclusive Security's advocacy and partnerships specialist, Evelyn Thornton just returned from Darfur.*