

Darfur Update – April 2009

Following the ICC's issuing of an arrest warrant for the Sudanese President, Omar Hassan Al-Bashir, the government has responded by forcing 16 humanitarian aid groups to leave the region. The arrest warrant was issued for seven counts of war crimes and crimes against humanity in Darfur, but the charges of genocide against the President have been dropped. Amongst the banned aid agencies are Oxfam, Save the Children, and the International Rescue Committee. They have been accused of collaboration with the ICC investigation. The organisations have denied any links and maintain that they are independent with the sole aim of assisting the people in Darfur who are in urgent need of aid.

This devastating situation is affecting the civilians of Darfur who have been targeted by the government in their attempt to clear the land. The conflict has been raging since 2003 when rebel groups attacked the government in Khartoum in response to attacks on their villages. The government has responded by arming the Janjaweed militia and encouraging them to attack villages. Khartoum has denied any link to the Janjaweed, yet these attacks were often supported by the Sudanese Air Force. The villages were burnt to the ground and villagers were raped and murdered. Stories have also been told about women and children being taken to the desert and abandoned, miles from home or water, and left to die slowly as they starve and dehydrate. Those who did manage to escape have been forced to leave and many hundreds of thousands of people are currently living in camps, either within the country or across the border in neighbouring Chad. These camps are not safe, and women and young girls are frequently raped when they are out collecting firewood.

It has been estimated that as many as 400,000 people have died during this conflict, and 2.5 million more have been displaced. A UN report states, "These organizations provide a lifeline to 4.7 million people in Darfur alone, and millions more in other areas of Northern Sudan. While some 85 international NGOs operate in Darfur, without these organisations much of the aid operation literally comes to a halt".

Officials from the aid agencies are continuing their appeal to the Sudanese government to reverse the expulsion order, but senior foreign affairs official, Mutrif Siddig, announced in early March that this was "an irreversible decision". The UN Security Council has drafted a statement asking Sudan to reverse its decision to expel the groups, but this has been vetoed by China, who reportedly want to wait for 1 year to see if peace can be achieved. The Sudanese government has previously made peace agreements with several rebel groups, but as it does so with only select groups at one time, it leads to fighting between the rebel groups, and also turns these groups against their own people.

The continuing tragedy in Darfur is genocide. The native Africans are being forcibly removed from their land as the government turns their Arab neighbours, with whom they have lived peacefully for many years, against them. The failure of the UN to act during the Rwanda genocide in 1994 should have been enough to teach us that the international community must take action and stand up for those who cannot defend themselves. There are many grass roots organisations around the world calling for decisive action, and when enough people are shouting, the governments of the countries who can make a difference will have to listen.

There is a photographic exhibition currently showing in the Eastern states, depicting the journeys of survivors who have managed to escape and travel to Australia. The stories tell

of the tragedy that they have endured and the pathway to a new life of safety. The exhibition, 'Far to here', is not scheduled to visit Perth, but SWB is hoping to fundraise enough to make this possible.