

The continuing plight of Sudan's children

by Julia Freedson, Simar Singh and Sarah W. Spencer

The protection and well-being of children in Sudan are at a critical juncture. While children in the South are enjoying increased protection and access to services, those in Darfur and other areas of Sudan continue to face shocking levels of violence and abuse. The international community must ensure that the protection of children is placed at the forefront of efforts to bring peace and stability to Sudan.

In its report, *Sudan's Children at a Crossroads: An Urgent Need for Protection*, the Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict documents dozens of persistent and pervasive violations against children by all armed forces and groups operating in Sudan and urges that immediate action be taken to protect Sudanese children. The report details violations against children in Sudan under the six major categories identified by UN Security Council Resolution 1612 on Children and Armed Conflict – killing and maiming; rape and other forms of sexual violence; abduction; denial of humanitarian assistance; attacks on schools and hospitals; and recruitment and use of children by armed forces and groups.

In addition to these violations, Sudanese children face a spectrum of other abuses, and obstacles to obtaining services and support which are documented in *Sudan's Children at a Crossroads*. Some of these abuses include forced displacement and trafficking for labour and sexual purposes.

Restrictive government policies and administrative procedures coupled with chronic violence and insecurity have hindered access to information from Darfur, the East and other volatile regions in Sudan. Organizations and experts on the ground find it increasingly difficult to share information as they fear that reporting abuses will lead to retributive attacks against those they are working to assist and humanitarian staff. Watchlist is concerned that these threats and attacks are part of deliberate efforts by the Government of National Unity to prevent the collection and dissemination of verifiable information on violations against children.

Killing and Maiming

While many areas in the South are experiencing improved security, extreme violence and fighting have escalated and continued to plague Darfur. Armed forces and groups operating in Darfur have killed and maim children and youth and humanitarian actors and other experts in the region have documented cases of armed forces and groups shooting, mutilating and torturing children.

Rape and Other Forms of Sexual Violence

The prevalence of rape and other forms of sexual violence in Sudan is difficult to determine for a number of reasons including the extensive fear and stigma that surrounds reporting, retributive action taken against women and girls who do report, customary and statutory laws which penalize survivors and the limited access to services for survivors. Most experts believe, however, that rates of sexual violence throughout Sudan are high.

In Darfur, incidents of sexual violence are reportedly perpetrated by all armed forces and groups in the region and are often extremely brutal. Sexual violence is used by Arab militias operating in Darfur and amongst refugee populations in Chad as a tool to subjugate and humiliate non-Arab girls and women and acts of sexual violence are often accompanied by racial epithets and other degrading comments.

Denial of Access to Humanitarian Aid

Agencies operating in Darfur continue to face challenges in providing much-needed assistance and support to civilians. Widespread violence and insecurity in the region pose significant operational challenges for humanitarian agencies and threaten the security of civilians and humanitarian personnel. Armed forces and groups in Darfur have repeatedly attacked aid agencies, looting their property, carjacking and confiscating vehicles, stealing and/or destroying humanitarian goods, harassing international and national staff and levying illegal taxes on humanitarian goods. These attacks have forced some agencies to withdraw from parts of Darfur or from the region altogether, leaving hundreds of thousands of Sudanese children without access to life-saving support and assistance.

Government policies have also prevented the adequate and timely provision of humanitarian assistance. Bureaucratic obstacles and complicated administrative procedures that restrict the movement of humanitarian workers have stymied aid operations in Darfur, the East and around Khartoum, limiting the access which agencies have to certain areas of Sudan and delaying the delivery of goods and services.

Attacks on Schools and Hospitals

Although attacks on schools have waned in the South, Southern Sudan continues to have the lowest school enrolment rates in the world, with an estimated 25 percent of primary school-age children enrolled in school. Meanwhile, attacks on schools in other areas of Sudan have increased. Schools, students and teachers in Darfur have been attacked by various armed forces and groups forcing schools to close and decreasing education opportunities for children.

The South also continues to lack an adequate health infrastructure and qualified health personnel despite a relative decline in attacks on hospitals and healthcare facilities, with only one doctor for every 100,000 people and one primary healthcare centre for every 79,000 people. Attacks on hospitals, medical facilities, medical staff and humanitarian agencies are frequent in Darfur. These attacks have severely hampered access to healthcare, and aid agencies estimate that only 40 to 50 percent of people in Darfur have access to health services.

Abductions

Armed forces and groups operating in Sudan and in border areas have abducted children to serve as combatants. The LRA is estimated to have abducted over 16,000 children including Sudanese refugees, while Sudanese refugee children in Chad have been abducted by Chadian and Sudanese armed forces and groups. Many girls in Darfur are abducted during attacks on their villages. Once taken, girls may be raped, often gang-

raped multiple times by each perpetrator. Many girls are held in these conditions for a period of a few days and then released, while others may be held for months or even forced into long-term “marriages.”

Children Associated with Armed Forces and Groups

Reports indicate that most armed forces and groups in Sudan, particularly the Janjaweed, Justice and Equality (JEM), South Sudan Unity Movement (SSUM), Sudan Liberation Army (SLA) and Sudan People’s Liberation Army (SPLA), recruit children to their ranks. While the Sudan

Armed Forces (SAF) continue to deny the presence of children within their units, SAF representatives have acknowledged that there are children in other armed forces and groups that have recently been incorporated into their forces. Recruitment of children has declined in southern Sudan, although armed groups not party to the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement initiated recruitment drives prior to their incorporation into the SPLA or the SAF to bolster their negotiating power. Sudanese militias have also recruited children and other civilians amongst refugee populations in Chad.

Other Abuses

Sudanese girls have been trafficked within and out of Sudan to serve as commercial sexual workers and others have been trafficked to work as domestic servants. Boys as young as four or five years old have been trafficked to Arab Gulf states to work as camel jockeys and beggars. Children and young people are further threatened by violence and insecurity in Sudan due to the presence of landmines and explosive remnants of war (ERW) and the widespread availability of small arms and light weapons throughout the country.

Recommendations

Sudan’s Children at a Crossroads confirms that children in Sudan continue to endure some of the most inhumane treatment found anywhere in the world. Despite the end of the conflict in the South and the recent signs of hope for a strengthened peacekeeping force in Darfur, many Sudanese children are not faring any better than they were four years ago when Watchlist published its first report on Sudan. The Governments of National Unity and Southern Sudan need to take urgent measures to ensure that children and youth are protected. One important step would be to increase socially-oriented spending in Darfur and the South, utilizing oil revenue to support education and other social services for children and youth. Both governments must also ensure that policies to protect the security and rights of children in Sudan are an integral part of all government institutions.

Other key recommendations to assist and support children in Sudan include:

- **Authorities of the Government of National Unity** immediately cease all attacks on civilians and halt all violations perpetrated by government armed forces, government-supported militias, police or other officials against the security and rights of Sudanese children and adolescents.

- **Authorities of the Government of National Unity** must provide humanitarian actors with unrestricted and secure access to all areas of Sudan, and guarantee all civilians safe, unimpeded and sustained access to humanitarian assistance, including emergency relief supplies. This includes ensuring that human rights defenders are protected and their efforts to bring to public attention information about violations of human rights supported.
- **Authorities of the Government of Southern Sudan** must ensure that communities receiving returnees are given adequate support to expand their capacity to provide social services and improve their overall absorptive capacity.
- **Authorities of the Government of Southern Sudan** must ensure that all children, including refugees and IDPs, have free and safe access to primary and secondary education in line with INEE Minimum Standards for Education in Emergencies.
- **All member states of the United Nations** should use all available means to ensure that the Government of National Unity upholds its commitments and obligations outlined in relevant Security Council Resolutions and international law.
- **UNMIS** must, as a matter of urgency, implement child rights and sexual exploitation and abuse prevention training for all military and civilian personnel associated with UNMIS, and ensure that all such training is periodically reviewed during deployment.
- **Members of the humanitarian community, including donors**, should strengthen and expand programs that protect and assist children in Sudan, particularly unaccompanied and separated children, out-of-school youth, girls and others who may face higher risks of violence, exploitation, abuse and neglect. This includes formal and nonformal education and vocational training initiatives for young people which help prepare them for productive futures.
- **AMIS** must identify and implement ways to reduce risks of sexual violence facing women and girls in camps in Darfur and Chad.

A majority of this article is extracted from *Sudan's Children at a Crossroads: An Urgent Need for Protection*. The report is available online at www.watchlist.org

Julia Freedson serves as Director, Sarah W. Spencer serves as Special Projects Officer, and Simar Singh serves as Programme Specialist for the Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict, a network of NGOs that strives to end violations against children in armed conflicts and to guarantee their rights. As a global network, the Watchlist builds partnerships among local, national and international non-governmental organizations, enhancing mutual capacities and strengths. Working together, Watchlist strategically collects and disseminates information on violations against children in conflicts in order to influence key decision-makers to create and implement programs and policies that effectively protect children.