



INTERNATIONAL



# Report: Sudan rights violations could amount to 'crimes against humanity'

Human Rights Watch says Sudanese government forces continue to rape and kill civilians in the Darfur region

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by [Natasja Sheriff](#)

Sudanese government forces have killed and raped civilians in the Darfur region of Sudan in attacks on villages that could amount to crimes against humanity, Human Rights Watch said in a report released Wednesday.

"We've documented widespread, systematic and serious abuses against the civilian population, by the Rapid Support Forces and by other government forces fighting alongside them," Jonathan Loeb, a fellow at Human Rights Watch (HRW) and author of the report told Al Jazeera.

"These abuses include extrajudicial killings, torture, widespread looting, burning of villages and extraordinarily high levels of sexual violence, including mass rapes."

HRW is one of several rights groups [drawing attention](#) to rights violations in Darfur in recent years through [reports](#). Its [newest report](#) says the abuses represent systematic attacks on civilians and could amount to crimes against humanity.

**"They took our livestock. They beat the men. And then they raped us... After we were raped some of us ran to the hospital. Even in the hospital some soldiers came and they raped women."**

— **Woman, 38, from small village near Golo**  
Witness and rape survivor

The attacks took place during two government counterinsurgency campaigns.

The first, called "Operation Decisive Summer" began in February 2014 and continued until May 2014. The second, "Operation Decisive Summer II," took place between January and June of 2015, in the Jebel Marra area of Darfur.

HRW documented eyewitness and survivor accounts of attacks that took place during the campaigns in dozens of villages across the region.

Witnesses say the soldiers stole food, water and livestock, beat and killed their neighbors and friends, and raped women and men.

Aerial bombardments from government aircraft laid waste to villages, bombing and burning homes, destroying wells.

### Witnesses to violence

From May 2014 to July 2015, researchers at HRW interviewed 212 people who were victims of the violence or who had witnessed the attacks taking place, including 178 men, 30 women and 4 children.

Most of those interviewed had fled to neighboring Chad or South Sudan; 16 were interviewed inside Darfur. Five soldiers who had defected from the Sudanese government forces, and who had participated in the attacks, also spoke to HRW.

One woman in her 20's, a mother of four from the village of Breidik, said, "When [the soldiers] entered I was the only one outside [of our hut]. They asked where my husband was. I told them I did not know. They started beating me. Then my husband came outside. And then they shot him. I was looking at him when he was shot."

Shortly afterwards, her village was bombed and her home destroyed. Ten members of her family were killed in the attack. She decided to leave the village.

"I put my two youngest children on a donkey and my two oldest children walked. It took us seven days to walk from Breidik to Um Baru. We had very little water," she said.

Sixty-year-old Tahir from the village of Gasa Sel describes how soldiers shot a man in the town of Sani Deleba, "The attackers arrived right after we arrived in the town on Saturday morning... They killed [a man] because he had a nice horse and did not want to give it to them... They shot him in front of the police station. We saw him killed with our own eyes."

According to the report, a special unit of the Sudanese government forces, known as the Rapid Support Force (RSF), is responsible for the attacks.

Created in 2013, RSF was formed to fight rebel groups operating throughout Sudan and is under the command of the National Intelligence and Security Services rather than the Sudanese army.

The RSF has absorbed members of the proxy militias the government used to commit atrocities against civilians earlier in the conflict. Many of the militias were integrated into the military and are now at the frontline of efforts to fight the rebels. Notorious former members of the government-backed [Janjaweed militias](#) are among the RSF's leaders. The RSF began operations in Darfur in 2014.

One attack, on the town of Golo in the Jebel Marra region of Darfur, is representative of the atrocities carried out by the RSF, say the report authors. The attack took place during two days in January, 2015 when the RSF took over the town, raping and killing civilians before looting and burning buildings. "Nearly everyone interviewed said they witnessed killings, rape and widespread beating and looting," researchers wrote in the report.

A 38-year-old woman from a small village near Golo told HRW that she and other women had been raped as they walked to the market on Jan. 24.

"They confiscated our belongings. They took our livestock. They beat the men. And then they raped us... After we were raped some of us ran to the hospital. Even in the hospital some soldiers came and they raped women," she said.

### Calls for EU sanctions

Although the roots of the conflict are complex, the current fighting has its origins in a rebellion that began in 2003, when rebel groups took up arms against the government, citing neglect and political marginalization of the region. The Sudanese government responded with brutal force. "Janjaweed" militias swept across the region in a genocidal campaign.

According to the [United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs](#), more than 3 million people are currently displaced in Sudan, and around 2.5 million of them are in Darfur. The [U.N. Refugee Agency](#) says that around 7 million people are currently in need of humanitarian assistance in Sudan, approximately one-fifth of the population.

"You have people who have been displaced for over a decade, people who got displaced several years ago and you have people who got displaced very recently, they have different needs. But all that adds up to the large humanitarian challenge that we still have in Darfur," Ivo Freijnsen, head of the U.N.'s humanitarian office in Sudan told Al Jazeera by telephone from Khartoum.

"We should remain very vigilant that there continue to be humanitarian needs," said Freijnsen. "We found these important many years ago, as an international community, when a lot of celebrities and others were focused on Darfur, and they continue to be important today."

A decade ago, the conflict in Darfur provoked an international outcry and massive advocacy efforts, which in 2008 helped mobilize one of the largest peacekeeping missions in the world.

That effort was seen by many as a solution to the conflict, but it only represented a partial fix, says Loeb. "To this point, the troops have failed in their core mandate to protect civilians."

"Darfur is still a very serious situation," said Loeb. "The Sudanese government has made a great deal of effort to prevent the [U.N. Peacekeeping] mission from accessing certain areas of the country and it's also prevented almost all journalists and independent human rights investigators from entering Darfur, so there's really been an informational black hole."

**"The [U.N. August] report paints a very grim picture of the systemic failure, or outright refusal, by the authorities to take human rights violations seriously"**

— **Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein**  
U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights

The Sudanese government has [denied](#) past allegations that their forces have committed human rights abuses, including mass rapes [documented](#) by HRW earlier this year.

"The government does not deny that the rapid support force exists," said Loeb. "On the contrary, they are quite open as they see as their accomplishments in fighting against and defeating the rebels, which has happened in certain incidents. What they have denied is that these forces have carried out any serious abuses against the civilian population. Our report shows that they very much have."

The Office of the Permanent Mission of Sudan to the United Nations and the Embassy of Sudan in Washington D.C. did not respond to requests for comment on the report's allegations.

HRW is calling on the Sudanese government to immediately disarm and disband the RSF, to give UN peacekeepers as well as humanitarian and human rights groups access to all areas of Darfur, to provide medical services for the victims of sexual violence, to investigate abuses and prosecute the perpetrators and to cooperate with the International Criminal Court (ICC).

The rights group says international organizations like the European Union should make it clear that failure to cooperate with the ICC will result in sanctions.

In August, a [report](#) by the U.N. Human Rights Office said that the failure of the Sudanese government to hold anyone accountable for human rights abuses in Darfur in 2014 has created a "climate of impunity."

"The [U.N.] report paints a very grim picture of the systemic failure, or outright refusal, by the authorities to take human rights violations seriously," the U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein [said](#) in a statement.

Sudan's president, Omar Hassan al-Bashir, was expected to participate in this year's General Assembly at U.N. headquarters in New York, but [reports](#) suggest that Sudan's foreign minister Ibrahim Ghandour, will lead the delegation instead.

Bashir is [wanted by the ICC](#) on charges of war crimes, crimes against humanity and genocide. The first warrant for his arrest was issued in 2009, but he has so far evaded the court.

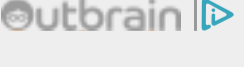
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