Darfur's agony: does even more misery lie ahead for this war torn region of Sudan?

INCE THE HORRORS BEGAN IN 2003, at least 200,000 civilians have been killed in Darfur--a vast, arid region of western Sudan with a population of about 6 million. More than 2.5 million people have been displaced and are living in refugee camps, mostly in neighboring Chad.

The conflict pits Arab Africans against black Africans. (Both groups are Muslim.) It started when rebels demanded greater political and economic rights for black Darfurians from the Arab-dominated Sudanese government in Khartoum. The government responded by turning loose Arab militias known as janjaweed. On horses and camels, they stormed black villages, torching huts, stealing cattle, destroying crops, and raping and killing villagers. Janjaweed attacks were often accompanied by Sudanese bombers and ground troops.

The United Nations has called the conflict in Darfur "the world's worst humanitarian crisis." Many in the international community, including President Bush, have denounced the slaughter as genocide, which is defined as the systematic destruction of a racial or cultural group.

Over the past three years, the violence became more sporadic. Although Darfur remained a deadly place, large-scale attacks were rare. But now, the brutal attacks have resumed. In recent weeks, the Sudanese government has carried out a series of coordinated attacks, using air power, ground forces, and--according to witnesses--the janjaweed.

In February, the janjaweed stormed the town of Suleia. They burned houses, looted shops, and shot anyone who stood in their way. Aid workers and diplomats say the return to large-scale attacks is a sign that the Sudanese government is planning a scorched-earth campaign against the rebel groups.

MORE REFUGEES

Government officials say strikes have been carefully aimed at rebels, not civilians, and that the janjaweed were not involved. They say rebels have hijacked aid vehicles and prevented peacekeepers from patrolling the area, events that some aid workers and peacekeepers have confirmed.

But residents of the towns say the rebels were long gone when the government attacks began. Survivors describe a series of assaults that left dozens dead and scattered tens of thousands of fearful residents. The U.N. estimates that the recent fighting has forced an additional 45,000 people to flee their homes in Darfur. Some fled to Chad, others to Jebel Moon, a rebel stronghold.

Sudan has long resisted U.N. involvement. A combined U.N. and African Union peacekeeping force is in danger of failing just as it begins its mission because of bureaucratic delays and the reluctance of troop-contributing countries to send forces into an active conflict. U.N. officials say the peacekeeping force now has just over 9,000 of an expected 26,000 soldiers and police officers; it will not fully deploy until the end of the year.

In Khartoum, money from the country's oil boom is very much on display, with office towers rising and wealthy Sudanese filling the cafes, even as people are starving and dying 600 miles away in Darfur.

Pressure is mounting on the Sudanese government. But U.N. Security Council diplomats say that action against Sudan, including sanctions, has been resisted by China--Sudan's biggest oil customer--and Russia, which helped Sudan develop its oil industry and sold it weapons.

In recent weeks, China has been more critical of Sudan's government, possibly due to pressure from human-rights advocates who have linked the Olympic Games in Beijing this summer with the violence in Darfur. Sudan has been trying to improve its relationship with the United States, which has pressured the government to let in U.N. troops and has provided most of the food aid going to Darfur.

In March, President Bush's special envoy to Sudan, Richard S. Williamson, visited Darfur and Khartoum, meeting with President Omar al-Bashir. "Since the first of the year, another 75,000 people in Darfur have been displaced," says Williamson. "That is more than a thousand a day. There are not going to be any changes until that reverses."

LESSON PLAN 2

CRITICAL THINKING

Review the role of the Sudanese government in the crisis in Darfur. Discuss its relationship with the janjaweed and its response to humanitarian aid efforts.

\* What qualifies violence as genocide? In your opinion, is the situation in Darfur genocide? Why or why not?

\* Why do you think the United Nations has not officially Labeled this situation as genocide?

\* Who is responsible for the violence in Darfur? What measures might be taken against them?

The U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees, Antonio Guterres, has called the Darfur conflict "the Largest and most complex humanitarian problem on the globe." Do you agree or disagree with his statement, and why?

WRITING PROMPT

Defend your views on the following in a persuasive essay: "Is it the international community's responsibility to intervene in Darfur?"

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

What is a scorched-earth campaign? What indicates that Sudan's government is planning one? How has this caused a refugee crisis in Sudan and neighboring countries?

Given China's relationship with Sudan, do you think that Beijing is an appropriate place for the upcoming Summer Olympics? Why or why not?

FAST FACTS

The U.N. has authorized its peacekeeping force in Darfur to grow to more than 31,500, including troops, military observers, police, civilians, and U.N. volunteers.

\* The U.N. currently has 17 peacekeeping operations around the world. [See the graph on page 4 of the TE.]

WEB WATCH

www.safedarfur.org

The Web site of Save Darfur, a coalition of organizations formed in response to the humanitarian crisis in Darfur

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