

Aid Agencies Say Ceasefire Urgently Needed in Darfur

Written by Robert ID3173

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New Violence in Darfur Threatens Humanitarian Response

In Darfur, Sudan nearly half a million people have less access to humanitarian assistance as a result of increasing military activity, banditry and direct violence against aid workers in early December. The insecurity led to 250 humanitarian staff members, from key locations across Darfur serving some 480,000 people, being temporarily evacuated. A group of leading international aid agencies working in the conflict-stricken region have said 'Aid workers are facing unprecedented difficulties at a time when humanitarian needs are rising fast.'

The agencies: Concern Worldwide, Goal, International Rescue Committee (IRC), Norwegian Refugee Council, Oxfam International and World Vision, said they demand that: All parties must urgently agree -- and maintain -- a ceasefire with immediate effect. They must ensure that aid workers are able to reach people in need.

"If the deterioration is allowed to continue, the impact on civilians could be devastating. With new displacements and attacks, the presence of aid agencies is more important than ever. Yet every day brings one huge blow after another to aid efforts," said Paul Smith-Lomas, regional director for Oxfam.

With access to people in need already at its lowest point since mid-2004, five major areas suffered significant withdrawals of staff in the first week of December alone: El Fasher and Kutum in North Darfur; El Daein and Shearia in South Darfur; and Kulbus in West Darfur. Although hopefully temporary, such evacuations are becoming more and more frequent, restricting the massive humanitarian response in a region where nearly 4 million people are now dependent on aid agencies for essential services such as food, water and healthcare. Humanitarian agencies in eastern Chad are also finding it increasingly difficult to operate.

"The whole region is increasingly complex and uncertain. While we all remain fully committed to helping the people of Darfur, frequent evacuations of programs are making it incredibly difficult to deliver aid effectively. Blame cannot be laid solely on one particular group. Everyone involved in the conflict must respect humanitarian operations," said Patty Swahn, the International Rescue Committee's regional director.

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Since Dec. 1 violence has spread across the region:

In South Darfur:

-- In Shearia, one agency evacuated operations supporting 130,000 people, after staff were assaulted by armed men and three vehicles stolen

-- El Daein has recently seen 20,000 new arrivals fleeing fighting, in addition to 30,000 displaced people already there. Yet the agencies that would help them were forced to evacuate as rebels and government troops scaled up offensives

In North Darfur:

-- Violence in and around El Fasher prevented aid workers from accessing camps that shelter over 100,000 people

-- Agencies have had to evacuate non-essential staff from Kutum, where 140,000 people are being assisted. The surrounding area has seen some of the heaviest fighting and attacks on civilians in recent months

In West Darfur:

-- Around Kulbus, escalating violence along the Chad border forced evacuations of aid workers from an area where tens of thousands of people are being assisted

-- Aid vehicles have been hijacked and staff violently beaten. A commercial truck contracted to deliver humanitarian supplies was attacked and at least 31 civilian passengers shot and burnt to death

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Recent months have seen a steady deterioration in agencies' ability to reach people in need. In November, one agency was unable to properly access 19 of its 22 program locations, affecting 175,000 people. In Kalma camp in South Darfur, sheltering 90,000 people, agencies are losing one day's work a week due to rising violence inside the camp.

Since the signing of the Darfur Peace Agreement last May, violence against civilians and aid workers has increased and an estimated 200,000 or more newly displaced people have arrived in Darfur's camps. These camps have been the last source of refuge for many civilians, yet now are increasingly rife with weapons and armed groups. Civilians are suffering doubly -- either caught up directly by the violence, or because aid agencies are prevented from providing essential services.

"We have no blankets, no plastic sheeting for shelters, and no security," said one man recently arrived in Otash camp in South Darfur

Additional notes:

Incidents impacting upon humanitarian delivery in early December:

Dec. 2: Humanitarian vehicle held up by armed men in Jebel Si, West Darfur

Dec. 3: More than 30 aid workers evacuated from Kulbus area in West Darfur, due to violence along the Chad-Darfur border

Dec. 4: Humanitarian convoy stopped and looted by armed men in Niteaga, South Darfur

Dec. 6: 135 UN and NGO staff withdrawn from El Fasher following increased military activity in and around the town

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Dec. 6: UN declared Kalma camp in South Darfur a temporary no-go zone for aid workers following shooting inside the camp

Dec. 7: Eight aid workers violently beaten and three vehicles stolen in Khor Abeche, South Darfur

Dec. 8: Shots fired into the ICRC compound in Kutum in North Darfur, forcing ICRC to evacuate 10 international staff. More than 20 other aid workers also evacuate.

Dec. 9: All aid agencies in El Daein in Southeast Darfur are forced to evacuate more than 30 staff due to increased military activity

Dec. 9: GOAL announces evacuation of all remaining international staff in Darfur

Dec. 9: NGO-contracted commercial truck hijacked at Sirba in West Darfur, with at least 31 civilians killed

Dec. 11: Agencies evacuate staff from Shangil Tobai in North Darfur, following nearby fighting

Dec. 11: Two humanitarian vehicles hijacked and stolen en route to Muhajeriya in South Darfur

Dec. 11: Hijacking of a humanitarian vehicle in Krinjing camp, West Darfur. The driver was taken along with the vehicle

Dec. 13: International NGO vehicle hijacked outside Geneina airport main road. An increase in carjackings and shooting along the road has left movement to and from the airport extremely

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dangerous. If the airport becomes out of bounds then all access to Geneina may be prevented, as the surrounding roads are already unsafe.

The UN's most recent figures of humanitarian access levels in Darfur show more than a third of Darfur is effectively out of bounds to aid agencies. Evacuations and new violence in December mean access levels are now even lower.

In Chad:

Agencies in eastern Chad are also finding it increasingly difficult to operate, with a similar rise in attacks against humanitarian workers and looting of essential equipment.