

Fleeing civilians hunted 'like animals' by helicopter gunships

Friday June 10 2011. Escalating violence against civilians in Sudan's South Kordofan state is a major humanitarian catastrophe in the making, with an estimated 300,000 people besieged, cut off from relief aid, and unable to escape fighting.

The United Nations estimates that up to 40,000 people have fled fighting between Sudanese government troops, Sudan Armed Forces (SAF), and members of the former southern rebel group, the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA), in Kadugli, the capital of Sudan's oil-producing border state of South Kordofan. Shelling was heard in the town of Kauda this morning and Antonov planes have been seen carrying out aerial bombardment in areas with a significant civilian population, in the Heiban and Um Dorain areas among others. Furthermore, low-flying MIG fighter planes have been used to terrify the displaced people seeking shelter around the United Nations Mission in Sudan (UNMIS) compound just north of Kadugli.

For the last five days, people have locked themselves in their homes without food or water, for fear of being killed.

Others have fled to the Nuba mountains, where they are being hunted down like animals by helicopter gunships, says the Sudan Council of Churches, an umbrella organisation representing all Sudanese churches.

Humanitarian efforts in and around Kadugli have been severely hampered by the fighting and the presence of large number of Sudan Armed Forces troops. Several eye-witness accounts indicate that SAF troops are carrying out "house-to-house" searches in the towns, pulling out suspected opposition sympathisers and in some cases killing them on the spot. Meanwhile, the SPLA has been accused of committing atrocities and failing to protect civilians.

A peace network of Christian churches that has worked in Sudan for

nearly two decades, the Sudan Ecumenical Forum, says the international community should pressurise both warring parties to fulfil their obligation to protect civilians. SEF co-chair Eberhard Hitzler says that unless an immediate no-fly zone over the state is created, emergency workers are allowed to deliver relief, and the United Nations Mission in Sudan protects civilians, killing will continue on an unprecedented scale. Both the SPLA and the government forces have a responsibility to protect civilians.

Since 1994, the Sudan Ecumenical Forum has played a major role in raising awareness in the international arena about conflicts in Sudan and contributed to peace-building, with the voice of the Sudanese churches at the centre.

SEF co-chair Eberhard Hitzler says urgent action is needed. “A humanitarian crisis on an enormous scale is unfolding in South Kordofan state. We appeal to the world leaders and governments to pay attention to this situation and urgently protect people.”

The SEF has already received many reports by independent witnesses claiming violence and atrocities against civilians. Two eyewitnesses saw people, perceived to be SPLA sympathisers, dragged out of the UNMIS compound in Kadugli and executed in front of UNMIS personnel, who did not intervene.

Meanwhile, UNMIS in Kauda – which was besieged by shelling earlier today - has apparently lost credibility with locals. This is affecting the quality of UN information, as many people are unwilling to speak to UN staff.

The eyewitness claims have been backed up by evidence from individual churches in the region, which have contacted SEF pleading for urgent assistance in bringing the world’s attention to the killings.

In addition to killings, looting, the burning of property and threats

that have caused tens of thousands of people to flee their homes, the violence is a serious threat to stability between northern and southern Sudan and could affect the whole region, says Hitzler.

“The international community, led by the UN Security Council, with the explicit and unwavering support from particularly China, USA, the African Union, the Arab League and the European Union, must urgently take all measures to stop hostilities, protect civilians and allow humanitarian access to all parts of South Kordofan, as a first step to re-engaging the opposing political and military parties in the search for a negotiated solution”.

Only such urgent international efforts can halt what is threatening to become a repeat of the mass atrocities, war crimes and protracted humanitarian crisis the world witnessed in neighbouring Darfur over the past decade, in Abyei in recent weeks and during the previous war in the Nuba Mountains in the early 1990s.

The Sudan Council of Churches is calling on the UN mission in the country to rescue survivors and on the international community to prevent a return to war in Sudan.