

Human Rights Watch - UN Peacekeepers Should Protect Civilians, Aid

(Nairobi, June 11, 2011) – The Sudanese government should immediately stop bombing civilian areas and halt human rights abuses by its soldiers and allied militia forces in Southern Kordofan, Human Rights Watch said today. The United Nations, the African Union, and other concerned governments should strongly condemn the violations of international humanitarian law and call on Sudan to immediately rein in its forces and allow humanitarian access to all affected populations.

On June 5, 2011, fighting broke out between Sudan Armed Forces (SAF) and elements of the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) near Kadugli, the capital of the oil-rich state of Southern Kordofan. The fighting followed weeks of growing tension between the ruling National Congress Party (NCP) and the southern Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM) over security arrangements in Southern Kordofan and the re-election of Ahmed Haroun as governor of the state. Haroun is wanted by the International Criminal Court for war crimes and crimes against humanity committed in Darfur.

“Sudan needs to stop these attacks immediately and allow UN and aid organizations access to affected people,” said Daniel Bekele, Africa director at Human Rights Watch. “UN peacekeepers should act robustly to protect civilians, and UN and AU and member states should condemn these attacks.”

The fighting quickly spread to Kadugli, Tolodi, Dilling, and other towns and villages, and extensive artillery shelling and aerial bombardment of civilian areas by SAF forces have resulted in several civilian deaths and destruction of property. Government soldiers and militia forces have also been engaged in widespread abuses including extrajudicial killings, arrests, and looting and destruction of civilian property such as private homes and churches.

Credible reports received by Human Rights Watch indicate SAF soldiers and Popular Defense Forces, a militia force, deployed in large numbers in Kadugli and other towns, targeted a number of civilians they suspected to be SPLM members. The forces carried out house-to-house searches and set up checkpoints, where they stopped civilians trying to flee the violence and killed some of them, according to witnesses. Reports from the ground indicate that military personnel arrested people who had sought refuge inside the UN Mission in Sudan (UNMIS) compound, in violation of international humanitarian law. One of those arrested was later found dead.

“The peacekeeping mission should urgently investigate this horrific incident and make sure it never happens again,” Bekele said. “It’s very disturbing that the UN mission may have allowed these crimes to occur.”

One resident of Kadugli, reached by telephone, described the dire situation: “Kadugli is an empty city now. Shops were closed, electricity was cut off, no one knows who is fighting whom, heavy shelling is all over the place, but I managed to get my family outside the town. As I speak now I am leaving my house. This place is finished; the city will never be the same again.”

Human Rights Watch has been unable to confirm the number of civilian casualties, as little detailed information is available. Government forces have also prevented journalists from accessing the area. At a checkpoint 40 kilometers north of Kadugli, soldiers stopped a vehicle carrying Al Jazeera journalists, forced them out of the car, beat them, and then ordered them to leave the state.

The violence has resulted in the displacement of tens of thousands of people toward El Obeid and the Nuba Mountains, where they have scattered amid ongoing aerial bombing. An estimated 10,000 civilians who gathered near the UNMIS compound in Kadugli since the fighting broke out do not have adequate protection or humanitarian assistance

and remain vulnerable to further abuses by government forces patrolling in the area. The humanitarian situation has deteriorated sharply, with humanitarian agencies effectively unable to operate.

“The UN, AU, and concerned governments should speak out against these abuses and insist Sudan allows aid in immediately,” Bekele said.

The NCP and SPLM, parties to the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) that ended Sudan’s long-running civil war, should urgently agree to security arrangements that protect civilians and enable humanitarian access, Human Rights Watch said.

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