

Protecting Sudan's children

by Julia Freedson, Simar Singh and Sarah W Spencer

The protection and well-being of children in Sudan are at a crucial juncture. While children in the South are enjoying improved security and access to services, those in Darfur continue to face appalling levels of violence and denial of basic services. Protection of children must be at the forefront of efforts to bring peace and stability to Sudan.

In its latest report, *Sudan's Children at a Crossroads: An Urgent Need for Protection*, the Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict¹ documents pervasive and continuing violations against children by all armed forces and groups operating in Sudan and urges that immediate action be taken to protect Sudanese children. The report details violations against children in Sudan in the six major categories identified by UN Security Council Resolution 1612 on Children and Armed Conflict² – killing and maiming; rape and other forms of sexual violence; abduction; denial of humanitarian assistance; attacks on schools and

hospitals; and recruitment and use of children by armed forces.

Since the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA)³ relative peace has returned to much of southern Sudan. The CPA provided for the restructuring of the Government of Sudan, including the adoption of an interim national constitution, the establishment of a Government of National Unity (GoNU) and a semi-autonomous authority in the South known as the Government of Southern Sudan (GoSS). Implementation of the CPA however, has been extremely slow and difficult. While the agreement ended one of Africa's longest-running

wars, it only encompassed two parties to the conflict, resulting in a lack of broad support throughout the country. As the international community has shifted attention to the Darfur conflict it has failed to remain deeply engaged in the implementation of the CPA. Despite an international framework to support the return and reintegration of IDPs and refugees, and the signing of UNHCR-supported repatriation agreements between Sudan and several refugee host countries, returns have generally taken place without support. Long distances, high transportation costs, mines and flooded roads have created enormous logistical challenges. Often, the trip home has been treacherous and fraught with danger. Returnees to the South have reported encountering militia activity, armed civilians, landmines, forced conscription of children and limited supplies of food and water. In some cases, returnees have been robbed, attacked, kidnapped, raped and illegally taxed.

IDP families arrive in Kuajok, Warrap State, southern Sudan, May 2007, on their way home to their villages.



Chronic violence and insecurity in parts of Sudan, particularly in Darfur and the East, have dramatically reduced access to information on abuses against Sudanese children. Many experts on the ground noted that sharing such information would increase the risk of retributive attacks or threats against civilians and the people assisting them. Restrictive government policies and administrative procedures have also hindered access to information and Watchlist is concerned about apparent deliberate efforts by the GoNU to prevent the collection and dissemination of information on attacks against children.

Armed forces and groups operating in Darfur continue to kill and maim children and youth, and humanitarian actors and other experts in the region have documented cases of armed groups shooting, mutilating and torturing children. The prevalence of rape and other forms of sexual violence in Sudan is difficult to determine given the pervasive fear and stigma that surrounds reporting, retributive action taken against women and girls who do report, customary and statutory laws which penalise survivors and the limited access to services for survivors. Most experts believe, however, that rates of sexual violence throughout Sudan are high. In Darfur, sexual violence is reportedly perpetrated by all armed groups and is often extremely brutal. Sexual violence is used by Arab militias in Darfur as a tool to subjugate and humiliate non-Arab girls and women, and acts of sexual violence are often accompanied by racial epithets and other degrading comments. Many girls in Darfur are abducted during attacks on their villages and once abducted, girls may be gang-raped, often multiple times by each perpetrator.

Although attacks on schools have waned in the South, southern Sudan continues to have the lowest school enrolment rates in the world, with an estimated 25% of primary school-age children enrolled in school. Schools, students and teachers in Darfur have been increasingly attacked by armed groups, reducing education opportunities for children. Despite the relative abatement of attacks on hospitals and health care facilities,

the South lacks an adequate health infrastructure and qualified health personnel, with only one doctor for every 100,000 people and one primary health care centre for every 79,000 people. Attacks on hospitals, medical facilities, medical staff and humanitarian agencies are frequent in Darfur. These attacks have severely hampered access to health care, and aid agencies estimate that only 40 to 50% of people in Darfur have access to health services.

Reports indicate that most armed groups in Sudan recruit and use children. While the Sudan Armed Forces (SAF) continue to deny the presence of children within their units, SAF representatives have acknowledged that there are children in other armed groups that have recently been incorporated into their forces. Recruitment of children has declined in southern Sudan, although armed groups not party to the CPA initiated recruitment drives prior to their incorporation into the SPLA or the SAF to bolster their negotiating power. Sudanese militias have also recruited children and other civilians amongst refugee populations in Chad.

Recent events have provided faint glimmers of hope for the improvement of security in Sudan. But the GoNU and GoSS must do more to ensure that children and youth are protected. One important step would be to increase socially-oriented spending in Darfur and the South, utilising oil revenue to support education and other social services for children and youth. The GoNU must also provide humanitarian agencies with unrestricted and secure access to all areas of Sudan and member states of the United Nations must continue to work with the two governments of Sudan to ensure that both uphold their commitments and obligations outlined in the CPA, Security Council resolutions and international law.

Other key recommendations to assist and support children in Sudan include:

- The authorities of the GoNU must immediately halt all forced relocations of IDPs, particularly those living in and around Khartoum.

- The GoNU and GoSS must ensure that all children, including refugees and IDPs, have free and safe access to primary and secondary education – provided by regularly paid teachers – in line with Interagency Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE) Minimum Standards for Education in Emergencies⁴.
- Members of the humanitarian community, including donors, should strengthen and expand programmes that protect and assist children in Sudan, particularly unaccompanied and separated children, out-of-school youth, girls and others who may face higher risks of violence, exploitation, abuse and neglect.
- Donor countries and agencies should increase and sustain human and financial resources to adequately protect children in all parts of Sudan.
- Key trading partners and allies of Sudan, notably the People's Republic of China and members of the League of Arab States, should use all available means to ensure that the GoNU upholds its commitments and obligations outlined in relevant Security Council Resolutions and international law.

Julia Freedson (juliaf@womenscommission.org) is Director, Sarah Spencer (sarahsp@womenscommission.org) an Officer and Simar Singh (simars@womenscommission.org) a Programme Specialist for the Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict. Sudan's Children at a Crossroads: An Urgent Need for Protection is online at: www.watchlist.org/reports/sudan.php

1. The Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict strives to end violations against children in armed conflicts and to guarantee their rights. www.watchlist.org
 2. Unanimously approved in July 2005, UNSCR 1612 established a comprehensive monitoring and reporting mechanism to ensure the protection of children exposed to armed conflict. See: www.crin.org/resources/infoDetail.asp?ID=5957
 3. The North-South agreement ending the conflict between the Khartoum-based government and southern opposition forces signed in January 2005. See FMR24 www.fmreview.org/sudan.htm
 4. www.ineesite.org/page.asp?pid=1240 and www.fmreview.org/FMRpdfs/EducationSupplement/19.pdf