

Sudanese women acting to end sexual violence

by Fahima A Hashim

The UN and the African Union must do more to insist that the Government of Sudan create an enabling environment to report, investigate and prosecute cases of violence against women.

Militarisation and long-standing armed conflicts in many regions have deeply affected the daily lives of Sudanese women, most recently and tragically in Darfur. Fundamentalist interpretations of *sharia* law are used to control women and are given as reason for not ratifying the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW).¹

When it was established in May 2004 the African Union Mission in Sudan (AMIS) – the only external military force in Darfur – was charged with monitoring the ceasefire agreement signed between parties at conflict to deter uncontrolled armed groups from committing hostile acts against civilians. AMIS public reporting has focused on breaches of the ceasefire, including attacks on civilians, but has failed to integrate gender issues. AMIS has conspicuously failed to prevent widespread rape and sexual violence.

In 2005 the Government of Sudan reacted to international pressure to expand the role of AMIS in challenging gender-based violence (GBV) by establishing a Violence Against Women Unit within the Ministry of Justice.² The Unit has partnered with UNFPA and AMIS to organise training sessions with lawyers, health workers, UN police and UN staff – but without involving local civil society organisations. The Unit has hired 20 female police and deployed them to IDP camps in the states of North and South Darfur. Security considerations have been cited as reasons for not deploying them in West Darfur.

It is unfortunate that the Unit has not been fully supported by the

Government of Sudan and its work disrupted by the need to seek donor funding.

Sudan has a large number of women's organisations with capacity to engage in constructive work on peace and security issues. The Government of Sudan has suppressed debate and restricted our ability to gather and disseminate information relating to rape, abduction and other violations of the rights of women. In February 2006, Sudan enacted into law the Organisation of Humanitarian and Voluntary Work Act which imposes severe restrictions on NGOs and gives the government excessive discretionary and regulatory powers over their work. Amnesty International and other human rights organisations have condemned the legislation and noted that it violates the right to freedom of association contained in international human rights treaties to which Sudan is a party.³

The very existence of women's civil society organisations is in jeopardy. UN Security Council Resolution 1325 passed in 2000⁴ specifically calls on the UN to consult with local and international women's groups. Our organisation joined with other Sudanese women's organisations to present a petition to the Security Council mission which visited Sudan in June 2006, urging the UN to pressure the Government of Sudan to review and amend the Voluntary Work Act. Action is needed to facilitate access of women's organisations so they can provide humanitarian services to GBV-affected women in Darfur, the Nuba Mountains, Eastern Sudan, areas of South Sudan where the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) and other

militias are present, and the IDP camps around Khartoum. Our role as peacemakers – working to conciliate communities torn apart by external meddling – must be recognised.

It is also essential that:

- AMIS's mandate be strengthened and that it be explicitly authorised – and provided with necessary resources – to take action against GBV
- all AMIS personnel receive training on gender issues and how to identify and prevent cases of gender-based violence
- AMIS be encouraged to monitor progress towards gender mainstreaming in all its activities
- AMIS closely liaise with and support the work of Darfurian and national women's organisations
- the UN insist on the participation of Sudanese women's organisations in all gender training and GBV awareness activities
- the Violence Against Women Unit be properly resourced so that it may take its place as a national organisation working for all Sudanese women, rather than – as at present – serving the interests of the ruling National Congress Party.

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1. www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw

2. See presentation made to the International Symposium on Sexual Violence in Conflict and Beyond by the Unit's director, Dr Attiat Moustafa. www.unfpa.org/emergencies/symposium06/docs/daytwosessionfiveattiat.ppt

3. <http://web.amnesty.org/library/Index/ENGAFR540092006?open&of=ENG-SDN>

4. See article on pp13-14