

Towards a culture of human rights in Darfur

by Joseph Aguettant

The International Rescue Committee and UNDP have embarked on an ambitious training programme to raise awareness of human rights amongst law-enforcement, judiciary and security officials and restore trust between citizens and statutory and customary authorities in Darfur.

The IRC/UNDP Human Rights and Rule of Law training programme was launched in September 2004 with the support of tribal leaders in Darfur and the endorsement of state and federal authorities. Human rights training courses and workshops have been attended by some 7,000 people. Participants have included military officers, local police officers, lawyers, judges, law students, leaders of women's organisations and youth groups, IDP camp leaders, municipal officials, prison administrators and the native administration.

Trainees indicated a high level of satisfaction with the training courses and a strong desire to work towards translating theory into practice. Participants stressed that prompt action on incidents reported by IDPs will help to restore trust in law enforcement officials. The programme has succeeded in providing a neutral space dedicated to the discussion of human rights standards and current realities. The value of this neutrality cannot be overemphasised as most participants have never had an opportunity for such exchanges. The provocative style of the trainers has encouraged debate, but at the same time promoted tolerance and respect. In several training sessions high-ranking participants freely debated the use of torture with a level of openness that is rare in Darfur. The sense of relief and excitement at such free expression was palpable.

Human rights education must be designed so that everyone involved has a motive for learning. Trainers attempted to understand and explore the constraints of target groups and the ways in which they themselves may experience a lack of respect for human rights. Instead of taking

an accusatory or lecturing style, condemning police officers for human rights violations, trainers have first discussed situations in which the rights of police officers may be violated. This then allowed them to explore ways to improve the human rights of others. Similarly, trainers have used domestic law, primarily the Interim National Constitution as a starting point for discussions on human rights. Only after local notions of human rights have been discussed, do facilitators introduce such international human rights law instruments as the UN Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement and the Declaration on the Protection of Women and Children in Armed Conflict.

Human rights training is not an end in itself. While awareness raising sessions are often the most inspiring feature of this programme, they must be complemented and reinforced by parallel efforts to ensure protection and build the capacity of local rights groups. Darfur has rightly been dubbed a protection crisis and displaced Darfurians remain in dire need of protection. Both inside and outside IDP camps, people continue to be victims of armed attacks, sexual assaults and theft of livestock and other property. Many victims have well-founded fears of the authorities and are unable to report crimes. The task of restoring trust in the authorities has only just begun.

After participants have left training courses it is important to provide ongoing mentoring and monitoring of all stakeholders, in particular potential perpetrators of human rights abuses. The IRC in partnership with UNDP and local partners has followed up awareness raising sessions by identifying key allies within mem-

bers of the community, establishing Justice and Confidence Centres and building the capacity of paralegals and human rights defenders.

Experience has taught the IRC that targeting specific categories of individuals does not produce sustainable effects and can increase tensions or cause harm. The programme has had to tread a careful line in terms of selection of participants. We felt that it was equally important for displaced persons, host communities and conflict affected populations to be aware of their rights as it is for local authorities, traditional leaders and other duty-bearers to be conscious of their responsibilities.

This successful first phase has demonstrated that it is never too early to address longer-term issues, notably the imperative for a return of the rule of law and respect for human rights. It is possible to do so while meeting survival needs such as food, health, water and sanitation. We hope that this project will positively contribute to the debate on timely integration of protection and human rights within humanitarian assistance.

In light of obstacles in the field and the fact that some authorities are occasionally challenging the need for human rights and protection activities, it would be useful for the UN and the Government of Sudan to reiterate their joint commitment to human rights training. To all it should be clear that humanitarian assistance and human rights come as a package.

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