



SUDAN

# “They Shot at Us as We Fled”

Government Attacks on Civilians in West Darfur

HUMAN  
RIGHTS  
WATCH



## Summary and Recommendations





About two-thirds of Abu Suruj, a town in northern West Darfur, was burned to the ground when government forces and militia attacked it on the morning of February 8, 2008. Aid groups provided tents for shelter.

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# “THEY SHOT AT US AS WE FLED”

Government Attacks on Civilians in West Darfur in February 2008





**The Sudanese government's large-scale attack on towns in rebel-held areas of West Darfur in February 2008 was a vicious reprise of "scorched earth" counterinsurgency tactics from 2003 to 2005. The Sudanese armed forces and government-backed Janjaweed militia killed and wounded hundreds of civilians and caused widespread property damage and looting in violation of international humanitarian law.**

The February attacks highlight the severe inadequacy of international protection efforts, namely the United Nations-African Union Mission in Darfur (UNAMID). The failure of the United Nations (UN) Security Council to strongly condemn these attacks and impose sanctions on those responsible points to a larger failure by concerned governments to effectively confront the Sudanese government to ensure the protection of civilians at risk.

On February 8, 2008, Sudanese government forces attacked the towns of Abu Suruj, Sirba and Silea, all located close to the Chadian border in the plains north of the West Darfur capital Al-Geneina in an area known as the "northern corridor." Ten days later, government forces attacked Jebel Mun, a mountainous rebel stronghold some 80 kilometers north of Al-Geneina. Each attack involved Sudanese air and ground forces and hundreds of Janjaweed militia. The attackers killed more than 120 civilians, injured hundreds more and destroyed and pillaged civilian property, including homes, schools, medical facilities, and food and water supplies.



In Abu Suruj, soldiers and Janjaweed burned down three-quarters of the town and killed at least 30 civilians, most while attempting to flee. In a simultaneous attack on nearby Sirba, more than 40 civilians were killed, many by attack helicopters or by soldiers using heavy machineguns mounted on four-by-four vehicles. Later the same day, soldiers and Janjaweed attacked Silea to the north, killing at least 20 civilians and looting homes, shops and the premises of four nongovernmental organizations. Following the attacks,



government military and police forces were stationed in each town, and in the days and weeks that followed, soldiers in Silea were reportedly responsible for further killings and incidents of rape.

On February 18, 19, and 22, 2008, government forces assaulted Jebel Mun, targeting rebel positions located within or near civilian settlements. Starting on February 18, aircraft bombed a displaced persons' settlement near Jebel Mun and several villages around the mountain, using Russian-built

In February 2008, thousands of Sudanese refugees arrived in Birak, eastern Chad, to escape government attacks in northern West Darfur..

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Antonov transport planes and other fixed-wing aircraft and attack helicopters. On February 19 and 22, aerial bombing was accompanied by ground attacks in which soldiers and Janjaweed entered villages around Jebel Mun and shot at





fleeing civilians. Those who could not flee, including disabled and elderly people, burned to death in their homes as militia deliberately set their huts on fire.

Following the February 8 attacks, many civilians fled to Jebel Mun for safety, and fled a second time after government forces assaulted Jebel Mun. At least 13,000 sought refuge in Chad, where many settled close to the border in the hope of returning to their villages ahead of the rainy season in June.

More than 5,000 people have moved to refugee camps run by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) further inside Chad. Others fled south to Al-Geneina. During their flight, families were separated and some reported missing children to humanitarian agencies.

While many civilians returned to the towns of Abu Suruj and Sirba in the weeks following the attacks, few have returned to Silea and Jebel Mun. Continuing insecurity caused by clashes





Left: In the aftermath of the attacks, Nigerian soldiers with the United Nations/African Union Mission in Darfur (UNAMID) on patrol in Silea, one of three villages attacked by the Sudanese government and Janjaweed militias in West Darfur on February 8, 2008.

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Above: A woman stands in the ashes of her home as she and other civilians start to rebuild their destroyed houses in the village of Abu Suruj on February 28, 2008.

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between Sudanese forces and rebels of the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM) near Jebel Mun has made Silea and Jebel Mun largely inaccessible to humanitarian agencies.

The February 2008 clashes and ongoing insecurity in the northern corridor underscore the urgent need for wider, quicker and more effective UNAMID deployment. UNAMID is mandated under Chapter VII of the UN Charter to protect civilians “under imminent threat of physical violence and prevent attacks against civilians, within its capability and

areas of deployment.” However, in February, UNAMID was without the necessary troops and logistical support to effectively protect civilians in the areas under attack.

The failure of UN member states to contribute sufficient appropriate personnel and equipment to the UNAMID forces, combined with continuing political weakness in confronting Sudan’s obstruction of UNAMID’s deployment, undermines the effectiveness of UNAMID and threatens the credibility of the UN’s operational peacekeeping and protection role.









Sudanese refugees from West Darfur carry their belongings to trucks that will take them to refugee camps near Guereda, Chad.  
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A Chadian police officer screens Sudanese refugees arriving at a refugee camp in eastern Chad in March 2008.

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Human Rights Watch's field research found that during the February 2008 attacks the Sudanese government committed numerous violations of international humanitarian law. There is no evidence that rebel forces were even present in Abu Suruj, Sirba and Silea when they were attacked by government forces and militia, indicating that the attacks on civilians and civilian property were deliberate. In the attack on rebels in Jebel Mun, armed forces and militia deliberately targeted civilians and conducted attacks that were indiscriminate or caused civilian loss disproportionate to any expected military gain. Individuals who committed, ordered or held command responsibility for these attacks are responsible for war crimes. The government should prosecute those implicated, regardless of rank, according to international fair trial standards.

The rebels bear some responsibility for failing to take all feasible precautions in the Jebel Mun area to safeguard civilians and property in areas under their control from the effects of attacks, and may have deployed forces within or near densely populated areas.

The international response to the February attacks was appallingly muted. UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, UNAMID officials, and UN member states issued statements condemning the attacks, but, critically, the UN Security Council took no steps to hold Sudan responsible. In March 2008, the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights issued a detailed report on the attacks committed by government forces in January and February, urging Khartoum to prosecute those responsible. To date, Sudan has taken no steps to ensure accountability for war crimes committed in February 2008.

Instead, the Sudanese government continues to disregard its international humanitarian law obligations and flout UN Security Council resolutions, including the ban on offensive military over-flights, the disarming of the Janjaweed militia, and cooperation with the International Criminal Court (ICC) at The Hague. An entrenched pattern of impunity persists in Darfur, exacerbated by Sudan's failure to use national justice mechanisms to punish perpetrators of crimes in violation of international law and its failure to hand over indicted war crime suspects Ahmed Haroun and Ali Kosheib to the ICC.







Sudanese refugees from Darfur seek help at a medical center in Birak, eastern Chad.

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Human Rights Watch calls upon the UN Sanctions Committee to impose targeted sanctions on Sudan, including travel bans and asset freezes on senior civilian and military officials involved in these attacks. The UN Security Council should also establish and monitor a clear set of benchmarks, drawn from UN Security Council resolutions, for all parties to the conflict that includes compliance with their international law obligations, and imposes sanctions for non-compliance. The benchmarks should include ending attacks on civilians and offensive military over-flights, ending support to Janjaweed militia, facilitating UNAMID deployment and freedom of movement and promoting accountability in meaningful ways. Crucially, UN member states should ensure that UNAMID has adequate personnel, equipment, technical expertise and other resources to respond rapidly and effectively to threats to civilian protection.



Left: Sudanese refugees from West Darfur in transit from the Chad-Sudan border to a refugee camp near Guereda, eastern Chad.

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# RECOMMENDATIONS

## TO THE SUDANESE GOVERNMENT

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- Issue clear public orders to all commanders of government forces and government-supported Janjaweed militia to immediately cease all attacks on civilians and civilian property in Darfur.
- Investigate alleged violations of international humanitarian law in West Darfur in February 2008, and any allegations of subsequent violations by the Sudanese armed forces, police or Janjaweed militia; bring perpetrators to justice, and provide reparations for the victims of such abuses, including by recovering and returning looted property.
- Suspend from official duties Sudanese officials who are alleged to have participated in the February 2008 attacks, either directly or through command responsibility, and in any subsequent violations of international law.
- Actively facilitate the full deployment of an effective UNAMID force throughout Darfur, including by immediately and formally agreeing to the deployment of non-African troops, and by ending all obstruction and delay of equipment and personnel.
- Ensure that UNAMID is able to fulfill its mandate to protect civilians in Darfur by implementing in full the Status of Forces Agreement signed in February 2008, particularly the provisions for UNAMID to have the right to freedom of movement throughout Darfur, including to conflict-affected areas.
- Cease all military, financial and political support to and recruitment of abusive Janjaweed militia, and immediately implement disarmament programs in accordance with relevant international standards.
- Cease all offensive military over-flights and other breaches of the UN arms embargo pursuant to UN Security Council Resolution 1591.
- Investigate all incidents of alleged crimes against humanity, war crimes, and other violations of international law committed in Darfur since 2003, including those committed by members of the Sudanese armed forces and Janjaweed militia; try alleged perpetrators in accordance with international fair trial standards; and provide reparations, including the return of confiscated property, to victims of abuses.
- Facilitate full and unimpeded access of humanitarian personnel and the urgent delivery of humanitarian assistance to civilians.
- Fully cooperate with the International Criminal Court, pursuant to UN Security Council Resolution 1593, including handing over Ahmed Haroun and Ali Kosheib in accordance with arrest warrants issued on April 27, 2007..



## TO REBEL GROUPS AND FORMER REBEL GROUPS

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- Issue clear orders to all commanders to abide by international humanitarian law, especially with respect to civilian protection.
- Appropriately discipline any member alleged to have participated in violations of international law.
- Facilitate full and unimpeded access of humanitarian personnel and the urgent delivery of humanitarian assistance to civilians.
- Fully cooperate with UNAMID and ensure it can carry out its mandate unhindered, allowing for full freedom of movement throughout Darfur including to conflict areas.

## TO THE UNITED NATIONS SECURITY COUNCIL AND UN MEMBER STATES

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- The Security Council should task the Panel of Experts to investigate the attacks in West Darfur in February 2008 and continuing attacks on civilians, to report, promptly and publicly, to the Sanctions Committee on any violations of international humanitarian and human rights law, of the arms embargo and of the ban on offensive military over-flights, and to provide a list of those who are responsible. Impose targeted sanctions including travel bans and asset freezes on those individuals.
- Establish and monitor benchmarks for all parties to the conflict including on compliance with their obligations under international humanitarian and human rights law, and impose sanctions for non-compliance. These benchmarks should include:
  - ending attacks on civilians and civilian property;
  - ending unlawful use of UN markings on aircraft;
  - ending support to abusive Janjaweed militia and initiating disarmament programs;
  - facilitating UNAMID deployment and freedom of movement;
  - ending impunity and promoting accountability through cooperation with the International Criminal Court and by undertaking legal reforms to strengthen Sudan's national justice mechanisms.
- Ensure UNAMID has adequate personnel, equipment, technical expertise, and other resources to protect civilians through rapid response and frequent patrolling in conflict areas.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### TO THE UNITED NATIONS-AFRICAN UNION MISSION IN DARFUR

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- Ensure that UNAMID has strong rapid response capabilities, including sufficient personnel, attack helicopters and armored personnel carriers and information gathering and analysis technology to carry out daytime and nighttime activities that could include reconnaissance missions, placing peacekeepers in positions to protect civilians prior to expected attacks, providing armed protection to civilians who come under attack, conducting search and rescue missions if humanitarian or other convoys are hijacked, or investigating ceasefire violations immediately after they occur.
- Deploy fully equipped, quick reaction forces to respond immediately to imminent threats to civilians and humanitarian operations, including in the “northern corridor” of West Darfur and along the Chad-Sudan border and in cooperation with the European Force (EUFOR) peacekeepers to be deployed in eastern Chad. Ensure UNAMID establishes a permanent presence and actively patrols in northern West Darfur where civilians are at risk from continued armed conflict.
- Ensure that all units are instructed, prepared and able to take all necessary measures to fulfill their mandate to protect civilians to the greatest extent possible with available resources. This requires ensuring that all forces understand and are instructed to take all necessary means to protect civilians under imminent threat of attack and exercising full freedom of movement throughout Darfur including in conflict-affected areas.

### TO THE INTERNATIONAL CRIMINAL COURT

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- Investigate and prosecute senior civilian and military officials and leaders of non-state armed groups responsible for offences committed in West Darfur in February 2008 within the court’s jurisdiction.





Above: Sudanese refugees from West Darfur at a gathering point in eastern Chad await transportation to refugee camps near Guereda, further inside Chad.

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