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In Southern Darfur, Signs of Another Massacre

By [JEFFREY GETTLEMAN](#)

NAIROBI, Kenya, Oct. 16 — [African Union](#) and [United Nations](#) officials are looking into reports of a new massacre in [Darfur](#), in which witnesses said Sudanese government troops and their allied militias had killed more than 30 civilians, slitting the throats of several men praying at a mosque and shooting a 5-year-old boy in the back as he tried to run away.

According to several residents of Muhagiriya, a small town in southern Darfur, two columns of uniformed government troops, along with dozens of militiamen not in uniform, surrounded the town around noon on Oct. 8 and stormed the market.

Muhagiriya was a stronghold of one of Darfur's many rebel factions, but witnesses said that there were few rebels there at the time and that government forces turned their guns — and knives — on civilians.

Ayoub Jalal, a mechanic, said his father was praying at a mosque when soldiers burst in. "They dragged my father and the others out of the mosque and slashed their throats," said Mr. Jalal, who was interviewed by telephone.

Both the United Nations and the African Union said that dozens of civilians had been killed and that witnesses had consistently identified the attackers as government soldiers and allied gunmen. However, neither entity said it could independently verify who was responsible.

The Sudanese government denied any involvement, but witnesses said uniformed troops methodically mowed down anyone who tried to escape, including a group of fleeing children.

"The youngest child, a 5-year-old boy, I knew well," said Sultan Marko Niaw, a tribal elder, who also spoke by phone. He said the boy's name was Guran Avium, adding, "A soldier had shot him in the back."

The viciousness of the attack, as described by the witnesses and corroborated by aid organizations working in the area, seemed reminiscent of the early days of the conflict in Darfur, when government troops and allied militias slaughtered thousands of civilians, according to human rights groups. But Muhagiriya may be symptomatic of a larger problem happening now as many of Darfur's armed groups — rebels, Arab militias and even the Sudanese military — rush to seize territory before a major peace conference later this month.

"They are all trying to reposition themselves ahead of the cease-fire talks and ahead of the discussions of who controls what," said Sam Ibok, a senior adviser of the African Union who is closely involved with preparations for the peace talks.

Mr. Ibok said he had heard the reports of civilians being killed by government soldiers in Muhagiriya and was waiting for the African Union to conclude its inquiry. But he said the accusations were already causing grave concerns and complicating peace efforts because "people are now becoming very skeptical" and believe "that the

government is not interested in peace.”

He said the descriptions of the attack fit the overall picture of Darfur these days, with rebel forces growing increasingly assertive in the weeks leading to the peace talks and the Sudanese government responding by “trying to reclaim these areas before the cease-fire.”

African Union officials are investigating accusations of another attack on civilians, in Haskanita, most of which was burned to the ground. Rebels say the government ransacked the town, killing 100 people, after a rebel attack on a nearby African Union base.

It is not clear why killing unarmed civilians would be part of this equation, but ever since the Darfur conflict exploded in western Sudan in 2003, massacres of civilians have been a recurrent theme. United Nations officials estimate that more than 200,000 people have died and more than two million have been driven from their homes.

The Sudanese government has consistently denied accusations that its forces have raided villages and killed residents, and Muhagiriya was no exception.

“That’s completely false information,” said Mohamed M. Salih, an official in the governor’s office of South Darfur, when asked about the reports. “This was internal fighting between the movements,” he added, without specifying which movements.

An African Union team that visited Muhagiriya in the days after the attack found no evidence that government helicopters had bombed and strafed the town, as some residents had claimed.

“That we can be certain about,” said Gen. Martin Luther Agwai, the top commander of the peacekeeping force in Darfur.

But as to the identities of the armed men who stormed the town, he was not so sure. “It’s true the town was razed,” he said. “It’s true people got hurt and some killed. All these are facts.”

Muhagiriya, population 23,000, is split by the same kind of ethnic tensions that have torn apart much of Darfur, namely thorny land issues between Arab nomads and non-Arab farmers. The town was controlled by the only major rebel faction to sign a peace agreement with the government in 2006. But antagonism between those two sides has been rising recently, and after the attack, aides to the faction’s leader, Minni Minnawi, said he was pulling out of the peace agreement.

Thousands of people have fled Muhagiriya and are camped around a small African Union peacekeeping base for protection.

James Smith, chief executive of the Aegis Trust, a British anti-genocide group working in the region, said villagers in Muhagiriya “confirmed to us that government and janjaweed forces deliberately attacked unarmed civilians,” referring to the Arab militias that are aligned with the government.

Solidarités, a French aid organization that distributes food in the area, said three Sudanese aid workers were killed in the attack. In a report, it also said that “many people are wounded and need medical assistance.

“Many houses and shops have been looted,” it said. “Many families lost everything.”

In separate interviews, several residents said they watched soldiers cart away their property in government trucks.

The United Nations sent an assessment team to Muhagiriya last week to take photographs of the destruction and interview villagers about the attack.

“All the I.D.P.’s,” internally displaced persons, “believe it was a joint government-militia operation,” said Radhia Achouri, a United Nations spokeswoman. “But we can’t independently confirm that.” She said that the United Nations team was looking into human rights and civilian protection issues, but that its job was not to investigate “who did what.”

The Darfur peace talks, scheduled to begin in Libya in less than two weeks, are already facing long odds.

Several rebel leaders have said they were boycotting the talks. Others cannot agree on who will represent them. Meanwhile, Darfur continues to come apart: Arab tribes have turned on one another; government troops have seized several towns; banditry is on the rise; and 10 African Union soldiers were killed last month after a rebel splinter faction overran their base.

The United Nations and African Union are expanding the peacekeeping force to 26,000 soldiers from 7,000, and more peacekeepers will begin arriving soon. But there must be a peace to keep — which is why the Libya talks are so crucial.

“There’s a lot of skepticism as to whether these talks will happen at all,” Mr. Ibok, the African Union adviser, said, adding that the United Nations and African Union were committed to holding the talks on time.

A further snag is that the peace treaty that ended the civil war in southern Sudan, which is seen as a blueprint for ending the war in Darfur, seems to be on the verge of collapse. Last week, the former southern rebels who made peace with Sudan’s governing party in 2005 pulled out of the national unity government in protest. The war in the south killed an estimated 2.2 million people. Sudan’s ruling party, led by President Omar Hassan al-Bashir, indicated Tuesday that it was ready to discuss the southerners’ demands.

At the same time, the former rebels in the south are holding a meeting for Darfur’s rebel leaders to prepare them for the coming talks in Libya. Several Darfur rebel leaders have said they are not ready to negotiate with the government and first need to solve internal differences.

A reporter in Darfur contributed to this article.

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