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Toll of Darfur Underreported, Study Declares

By JEFFREY GETTLEMAN

The number of people killed in Sudan's Darfur conflict has reached into the hundreds of thousands -- not tens of thousands as has often been reported, according to an article appearing Friday in the journal Science.

By using scientific sampling techniques and data from camps for displaced persons, two researchers based in the United States estimated that as many as 255,000 people have died, though they believe the actual number may be much higher.

"We could easily be talking about 400,000 deaths," said John Hagan, a sociologist at Northwestern University and an author of the article, along with Alberto Palloni, a demographer at the University of Wisconsin. "And when you're talking about genocide, it's essential to properly identify the scale of death," Dr. Hagan said in a telephone interview.

In the past, American and United Nations officials have used a range of estimates, from 60,000 to 300,000, to quantify the killing in Darfur, which sank into chaos in 2003. The war started as an uprising of African tribes against Sudan's Arab rulers but soon degenerated into a conflict with many warring parties and civilians bearing the brunt of the fighting.

The Sudanese government has not released comprehensive casualty figures, but health organizations working in Darfur have surveyed survivors at random about family members who were killed.

In their article, "Death in Darfur," Dr. Hagan and Dr. Palloni used seven of these surveys to build projections of the death toll, which ranged from 10,000 deaths per month in 2004 to around 5,000 per month more recently. These estimates include natural deaths, though Dr. Hagan said that number was only 10 percent to 15 percent of the total. He said part of his research was based on a rough ratio of one death per every 14 people living in a camp.

"It's an extremely challenging research environment," he said. "But ultimately, you've got to come up with numbers."

Dr. Hagan attributed underreporting to the obvious difficulties of physically counting victims in a conflict as inaccessible as Darfur's, as well as a general tendency by the news media to use conservative estimates about unverifiable casualty claims. Also, some news organizations continued to use an outdated estimate of 70,000 deaths, made once by the World Health Organization.

In its reporting on the Darfur conflict, The New York Times has said that hundreds of thousands of people have been killed and more than 2.5 million have fled, but that no one

really knows the casualty total.

The situation in Darfur has become increasingly tense recently, with the United States and others pressing the Sudanese government to allow in United Nations peacekeepers but the Sudanese government continuing to say no.