

Who will protect Darfuris?

by Ronan Farrow

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EL FASHER, Sudan – On a sun-scorched plateau in the Jebel Marra mountains, Yahia Abdullah is shouting: "Death to Mini! Mini is a traitor!" He chants with the hundreds of other men gathered in this rebel stronghold in northern Darfur, jabbing rifles at the sky and feverishly decrying the leader of an opposing faction.

Today, Darfur continues to burn not only with bullets and bombs, but with the fervor of increasingly divided rebel groups and the men, women and children who have rallied to their cause. Without swift intervention this crisis could explode into all-out rebel warfare, with Darfur's six million civilians caught in the crossfire.

Yahia is 17 years old. He has been fighting with the Sudanese Liberation Army since he was 13. Early one morning four years ago, Yahia was awakened by the sound of gunfire. Janjaweed, government-backed Arab militia that have carried out a brutal ethnic-cleansing campaign in Darfur, had surrounded his village. On camels and horseback they swept through, killing men, raping women and setting fire to homes.

Yahia's entire family was slaughtered. He survived by hiding among the corpses of his relatives.

"I waited with the bodies for hours. And then the bombs started falling around me," Yahia said, gesturing to indicate the falling explosives often unleashed by Sudan government planes in support of janjaweed attacks. When it was over, he walked seven hours, alone, across the desert before encountering the rebel troops he now calls his family.

Like many other child soldiers among their ranks, Yahia says he was eager to take up arms. "I am proud to fight with Abdul Wahid," he says, referring to the leader of his faction of the SLA, who has refused to sign a May 5 peace agreement. "I will fight to the death in his name. Who else is there to protect us?"

It is a question echoed throughout every defenseless village and refugee camp in this region. The world seems to be at a loss for an answer.

The United States, NATO and the European Union have played a game of hot potato with Darfur, ultimately throwing responsibility into the lap of the African Union, which dispatched a small force to the region in 2004. But while world leaders commend the notion of "African solutions to African problems," the AU is floundering.

It is underarmed, undermanned and on the verge of bankruptcy. It is crippled by a mandate that authorizes only the monitoring of a constantly violated cease-fire agreement and prohibits active peacekeeping. Increasing insecurity has caused the AU to withdraw from four major refugee camps in recent weeks. It has even ceased patrols to protect women who face rape by janjaweed as they leave camps to collect water and firewood. Aid workers have also been left without protection. They could be withdrawn at any moment, leaving the region to utter collapse.

In the absence of any source of protection, men and boys like Yahia have flocked to the ranks of disparate rebel groups. All seem gripped with equal zeal, ready to fight to the death not just the government of Sudan and its proxy militias, but now opposing rebel factions.

After years of inaction, the United Nations has dispatched a team to Darfur to assess the possibility of a UN peacekeeping mission. It is a single bright spot on Darfur's horizon. In refugee camps and villages and even among opposing rebel fighters, cheers of "UN, UN! We want UN!"

erupt. But the man tasked with deploying a UN force revealed the devastating obstacles such a mission would face.

On the evening of June 13, Jean-Marie Guehenno, the UN under secretary general for peacekeeping operations, placed his tray on a mess hall table at the African Union's barracks in El Fasher. "We will only deploy at the invitation of the government of Sudan," Guehenno said. I asked about Khartoum's increasingly forceful comments rejecting any UN presence. "We just have to hope," Guehenno said wearily. "I do believe they will ultimately accept."

But even if the government of Sudan eventually relents, peacekeepers won't be coming any time soon. "We're looking at six or seven months," Guehenno said. "Logistically, it would be difficult to do anything sooner than that. January 2007 is, realistically, the earliest we might hope for."

I think back to the rebels chanting on that plateau in Jebel Marra, armed and feverish. Will the situation hold until January? How can we accept a seven month wait?

The UN Security Council must ensure that a peacekeeping force with sufficient manpower and a robust civilian protection mandate is deployed promptly. Greater diplomatic pressure must be brought to bear on the Sudanese government to ensure that a force is admitted. Camps and surrounding areas must be actively safeguarded from the janjaweed and other armed groups. The tenuous Darfur peace agreement must be enforced before rebel tensions explode.

Yahia's question still echoes. "Who else will protect us?" We must make sure that the answer comes before it is too late.

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