

Darfur: UNAMID must not desert civilians in Muhajeriya

Amnesty International today called on the joint United Nations/African Union peacekeeping force, UNAMID, not to desert civilians sheltering in the town of Muhajeriya in south Darfur.

Following weeks of clashes between the government and the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM), who control Muhajeriya, thousands of civilians have sought protection outside the UNAMID base in the town.

“The UNAMID peacekeeping force must stand by the people of Muhajeriya. Ordinary civilians continue to be killed, raped and displaced by both sides to the conflict and it is essential that UNAMID does not withdraw and leave civilians in danger.” said Tawanda Hondora, Amnesty International’s Deputy Programme Director of Africa.

“We are seeking assurances from the peacekeeping force that it will remain in Muhajeriya and protect the civilian population.”

The government of Sudan urged UNAMID to move out of Muhajeriya before they started aerial attacks against JEM near the town on Monday. The Sudanese Armed forces and their allied militia have a history of indiscriminately bombing and attacking civilians in Darfur, in violation of UN resolution 1591. “If UNAMID peacekeepers withdraw from Muhajeriya, we are likely to see a repeat of the indiscriminate attacks against civilians, which took place in Sirba, Selea and Abu Suruj,” added Tawanda Hondora. “This operation resulted in more than 115 civilian deaths and the displacement of more than 30,000 people. Then UN and humanitarian agencies were denied access to the area for months. UNAMID cannot let this happen again.”

The government of Sudan has an obligation to protect civilians and not undertake military exercises that will unduly place people in danger. The direct or indiscriminate targeting of civilians by all sides to this conflict may constitute a violation of international humanitarian law.

Following the clashes, many humanitarian agencies evacuated their staff from Muhajeriya.

Background

The town of Muhajeriya has been the scene of fighting between the Justice & Equality Movement (JEM) and the Sudanese government for more than two weeks. The clashes have exposed the civilian population in Muhajeriya to the worst level of violence witnessed in Darfur more than a year.

In mid January 2009, the town of Muhajiriya was captured by JEM forces from the Sudan Liberation Army/ Minni Minawi faction, a former armed opposition group that signed the Darfur peace agreement with the government.

According to the UN, up to 300,000 people in Darfur have died and more than 2.2 million have been displaced since the conflict began in February 2003.