

Stuck in Darfur: Refugees are 'like hens in cages'

by [Chris Herlinger](#) in the [February 8, 2005](#) issue

On my last night in Nyala, in southern Darfur, convoys of combat-ready security forces circled the streets of the city, which has become part fortress, part camp for the displaced, and part home for dozens of international humanitarian groups. In the Darfur region, at least 1.5 million persons are, as one aid official says, “stuck between a past they don’t want to remember and a future they cannot see or even glimpse.” They have fled what they describe as a government-led campaign by Janjaweed militias to drive them from their homes—an allegation the Sudanese government has heatedly and steadfastly denied.

Now they are stuck in camps where most fear for their lives. The women also face the threat of rape. “We are just like hens in cages,” said one resident of the Hassa Hissa Camp on the edge of the city of Zalingei.

A long-awaited peace agreement between the government in Khartoum and Sudan’s predominately animist and Christian south was finally reached in early January, officially ending a conflict that has resulted in about 2 million deaths over two decades.

But it does little for Darfur, where peace talks between the Sudanese government and rebels have come unglued. The result, says UN Secretary General Kofi Annan, is “a build-up of arms and intensification of violence, including air attacks.”

The international community seems resolved to do as little as possible. A few African Union “peace-keeping” forces in Darfur, one observer told me, are a “cover for the West not to do anything.”

The debate over genocide in Darfur has faded, with the U.S. (which labeled the events in Darfur genocide) and its allies (which did not) still at odds over what to call the situation. Humanitarians working in Darfur wonder if the debate matters. They note that the label for the disaster doesn’t change the statistics: 70,000 dead from

illness, disease, hunger and war.

Perhaps the most practical question to ask as a new year begins, says one humanitarian official, is “What will it take to return life in Darfur to the way it was?”

The answer will not come easily. Disarming militias is a tricky business anywhere, and with the Sudanese government and some of the Janjaweed militia reportedly at cross purposes, the situation in Darfur is close to anarchy.

How can the displaced at least be protected? And when can they return to their homes?

Residents of the camps say again and again that they don't feel secure. Many, including the local village leaders, or “sheiks,” are determined to wait for concrete signs of safety. Unfortunately, understaffed international humanitarian groups are overstretched and overextended, and there are limits to what their workers, who can be asked to leave Sudan on a moment's notice, can do. The villagers' refusal to leave—in spite of longing for freedom of movement and the chance to work their land—is explained by the level of brutality they experienced from the Janjaweed militias.

The good news is that relief groups were finally granted access to the region in 2004 and, by most accounts, responded well, making a substantial difference in the lives of Darfur residents. A European colleague who visited Darfur in May and returned late in the year said that response had helped stave off a large-scale famine and health crisis.

But a Somali nutritionist told me that the food security and nutrition situation remains “delicate and very fragile.” In late December the UN's World Food Program said it still remained difficult to deliver food to over 300,000 persons within Darfur.

That's because much of Darfur remains a guerrilla war zone characterized by sporadic military attacks and continuous displacement, and by quick military movements followed by sudden quiet. Less than an hour's drive from Nyala, thousands of the displaced have wandered in and out of areas controlled by one rebel group or another. Given the region's tension, humanitarian response has been spotty.

Away from the blaze of Sudan's mid-day heat, in cool star-filled nights or in the soft light of mornings, it is possible to catch a glimpse of what life might be like without war: dogs barking and cattle quietly stirring; mothers feeding their infants and preparing their older children for school.

But just days after I left in December, the area we had visited was attacked, causing dozens of women and children to flee in terror.

A colleague wrote me the news: "That's a place in the world which is no longer there."

Once again, a small hole in the world—and in our hearts.