

Sudanese Refugees in Chad: Addressing Violence against Women

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Abstract

The displacement of thousands of Sudanese refugees from Darfur into the neighboring country of Chad and the ongoing violence being perpetrated against women in Chadian refugee camps deserves more attention from the international community. This paper aims to address the plight of Sudanese women and girls in refugee camps in Eastern Chad and to detail the abuses committed against them, including rape and other violence. I address the contributing factors to the prevalence of violence against refugee women, including local resentment and increased competition over resources. I also outline key ways to establish and maintain security for refugee women in Chad, including support for UN programs like UN Mission in Central African Republic and Chad (MINURCAT) and Integrated Security Detachment (DIS), which establish security and justice, and for innovative, private humanitarian programs like Solar Cookers International (SCI), which address resource depletion.

Sudanese Refugees in Chad An Overview

The genocidal situation in Darfur, which was described by the UN Commission of Inquiry on Darfur (UNCOI) as “governmental forces conducting indiscriminate attacks throughout Darfur, which included the killing of civilians, torture, the destruction of villages and rape and other forms of sexual violence,” has led to a massive refugee crisis (Ntsebza, 2009, p.334). As a result of the conflict, thousands of Sudanese have fled their homes to seek refuge in the neighboring country of Chad. There are over 240,000 Sudanese refugees living in Chad (Polgreen, 2008). The majority of Sudanese refugees live in 11 established camps in eastern Chad, which are run by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), where some shelter, food, education and health care are provided (Rehrl, 2010, ¶1).

The government of Chad has agreed to the Refugee Convention and is honoring its commitment not to return Sudanese refugees to their homes, where their own government does not protect them, and where they face violent, uncertain futures (“Convention and Protocol,” 1967). However, the established refugee camps in Eastern Chad provide no long term solutions or opportunities for Sudanese refugee women and are oftentimes violent and unsafe.

According to Doctors without Borders (2003), refugees in eastern Chad lack “food, clean water, shelter and medical care” (¶1). Malnutrition and disease is a major concern in the camps, where refugees are living almost exclusively on cooked millet, which offers almost no diversity in minerals and vitamins (“Providing Health Care,” 2003).

Overview: Sudanese Refugee Women

Over 142,000 women and girls have fled insecurity, violence, and human rights violations in Darfur, traveling to Chad to seek safety and protection. However, security in Chad has not been guaranteed to female Sudanese refugees. Amnesty International asserts that “women and girls living in refugee camps in eastern Chad face high levels of rape and other violence on a daily basis, both inside and outside the camps” (“No Place,” 2009, p. 3). Rape and other gender based violence is an issue which has had lasting and profound effects on the quality of life for Sudanese refugee women. One report found that “on a 1 to 5 scale, with 1 being very good and 5 being poor, the women interviewed reported an average mental health rating of 4.9 while in Chad” (Voelker, 2009, stories section, ¶7). These interviews are highly indicative of the painful and violent lives Sudanese refugee women experience in Chad.

The ICC, through the Office of the Prosecutor, has taken a very serious view of gender-based violence, stating that “rape constitutes a crime against humanity” (Ntsebeza, 2009, p. 342). Rape and gender based violence being perpetrated against Sudanese refugee women, which should continue to be defined as crimes against humanity, deserve the attention of the international community and the United Nations.

Contributing Factors to Prevalence of Violence against Refugee Women

Traveling Outside Camps

One of the largest contributing factors towards violence against Sudanese refugee women is the fact that women and girls regularly leave the relative safety of the camps. A report from Amnesty International states that “most cases of rape and violence against refugee women in eastern Chad take place outside the refugee camps” (“No Place,” 2009, p. 12). The burden of supporting family is largely a woman’s responsibility, and many resources are only available outside of the camps. Women leave the camps to collect

firewood for cooking and straw for animals, to find water, go to village markets, and sometimes to tend small vegetable patches in areas near water supplies (“No Place,” 2009, p. 4). In most cases, women leave the camps to provide vital necessities for themselves and their families.

Local Resentment and Competition over Resources

Because the camps in eastern Chad have been in existence for more than six years, the surrounding land has been increasingly depleted of natural resources. The lack of availability of resources means that women often travel as many as 10 kilometers outside of the camps to find adequate resources, far from the relative safety of the refugee camps and humanitarian groups. This has led to increased tensions between Sudanese refugee women and local Chadians. The Red Cross and Red Crescent maintain that the influx of refugees into Chad has led to an oftentimes brutal competition over natural resources in eastern Chad (North, 2005). Chadians are among the world’s poorest people and have seen a drastic increase in competition over the already limited natural resources in the area.

Megan Williams notes that “wood for fuel and construction has long been a scarce commodity” that has been drastically exacerbated by the influx of refugees (Williams, 2005, p. 6). For example, the camps Bredging and Treguine give shelter to over 43,000 people, in an area that has been traditionally utilized by about 10,000 local villagers. These villagers have been forced to compete with the large influx of refugees over the same natural resources, including firewood. Fatimé Ibrahim Adam stated, “before the refugees arrived it was easy to get wood to prepare for meals. Since their arrival all of the wood has gone. We have to walk three to four hours to the mountains to find wood” (North, 2005,

¶16). This increased competition over resources due to population increase has led to incidents of violence against Sudanese refugee women.

In some cases, the assistance provided to Sudanese refugees, and not to local Chadians who are also suffering, has caused resentment and tension. Bredjing is a Red Cross run refugee camp that houses and assists over 28,000 Sudanese refugees, not far from a local village of about 1,000 Chadians. Here, locals see assistance being given to refugees in the form of “schools, adult literacy programs, vocational training, health education, and fortnightly distributions of food” (North, 2005, ¶10). Chadian Haoua Mahamat states, “the refugees get food regularly. That’s nice for them. But we don’t have anyone who will give us food. We have nothing. Everyone is suffering” (North, 2005, ¶11). This type of local resentment can be addressed by establishing and maintaining services which are available to both Sudanese refugees and Chadians. An example of this is a nutrition health clinic run by the Red Cross in Treguine camp, which makes resources and services available to both locals and refugees.

The threat against refugee women who leave the camps comes from many sources, including Janjawiid fighters and bandits. Chadian men, who oftentimes accuse Sudanese women refugees of depleting the area’s natural resources and stealing their property, are also among those who attack refugee women. In many cases documented by Amnesty International, women recounted attacks by local Chadians who accused them of stealing. In one case, a twenty-year-old woman named Fatima left Bredjing Camp in order to collect firewood. Men appeared “accusing her, and all Sudanese women, of taking their wood” and attacked her (“No Place,” 2009, p. 14). Fatima’s case is not unique. Many women report that their male attackers and rapists blame them personally for the presence of all

Sudanese refugees in Chad. This resentment towards Sudanese refugee women permeates Chadian society, and oftentimes culminates in brutal violence against them.

Suggestions for Resource Depletion: Solar Cooking

The problem of natural resource depletion and increased competition over resources like firewood is an issue that must be addressed. Tensions between Chadian locals and Sudanese refugee women will only increase as resources continue to be depleted. Programs that specifically reduce resource dependence and depletion would be an adequate response to this issue.

One program, Solar Cookers International (SCI), has been successful in reducing resource dependence in the camps. Since 2005, SCI has implemented a solar powered cooking program in the Iridimi refugee camp, which houses 17,000 refugees. SCI has developed “CooKits” that are made of cardboard and other local materials, which are crafted to reflect light rays towards a metal pot to effectively and safely cook food (Zuckerman, 2008, p. 58). In Irimidi camp, SCI’s program has cut firewood use by 50 to 80 percent (Resch, 2007). The solar cookers lessen the need for women to leave the relative safety of the camps, and through this, reduce the chances of rape and attack.

The solar cookers can also be used to pasteurize drinking water, which reduces the incidence of water-borne diseases. Megan Williams notes that foraging for firewood has led both “Chadians and refugees to increasingly opt to chop down trees for fuel, thereby turning fertile land into desert” (Williams, 2005, p. 6). Solar cooking programs address this environmental issue, as they slow the deforestation process. The solar cookers also produce no pollution and help cut down smoke in camps, which “improves health and quality of life for refugees” (Resch, 2007, ¶8).

SCI believes that “with the support of the United Nations, the project could bring solar cookers to the rest of the 200,000 refugees in Chad” (Resch, 2007, ¶8). Innovative programs such as SCI’s solar cooking initiative can greatly increase the quality of life for all Sudanese in refugee camps, while specifically targeting the contributing factors of violence against women. The United Nations and the international community should support SCI and programs like it.

Inaction by Chadian Authorities

Another contributing factor to the prevalence of violence against refugee women is the fact that the Chadian authorities, which have the power to prosecute perpetrators of violence and rape against women and establish security, many times refuse to act. Amnesty International has documented numerous cases in which Chadian authorities, including the police force, have not acted on complaints of rape and violence against women. Amnesty notes that “local authorities are generally perceived to have little concern about reports of rape and other violence against refugee women and girls” (“No Place,” 2009, p. 15). In fact, some Chadian officials are outspoken in condemning refugee women and girls for stealing resources that they believe rightfully belong to the Chadian population. In some cases, Chadian authorities actually profit off the sale of firewood and straw to the refugee population and resent the fact that women collect it for themselves (Red Cross, 2008). This conflict of interest coupled with the excuse of justified violence has tainted the Chadian authority’s ability to protect equally and fairly.

Social Stigma

It should also be noted that there is a high level of social stigma attached to rape and sexual violence, and that this stigma has a significant effect on whether justice can be achieved. Dr. Petra Clarke of the Medical Foundation for the Cure of Victims of Torture states that “fear of exclusion is frequently the greatest concern” among victims who keep

rape secret (Moszynski, 2004, p. 251). This fear of exclusion leads to the silencing of a woman's ability to speak out against rape and other gender based violence. The British Medical Journal notes that "given the cultural taboo associated with rape, women are reluctant to report it to the few medical workers present in refugee camps" in Chad (Moszynski, 2004, p. 251). This has detrimental effects on women's health and perpetuates a society in which rapists have impunity.

Camps Unsafe for Women

Although the majority of cases of violence and rape take place outside of the refugee camps, it is important to note that the level of violence inside the camps is high. Women and girls are subjected to rape and violence in many aspects of daily life in the camps. Amnesty International has received reports of humanitarian workers committing acts of rape and other violence against women and girls in the camps ("No Place," 2009). Schooling is another area in which girls face violence. Refugee girls in camps complain of frequent sexual harassment from their Sudanese teachers. According to reports, girls "have been threatened that they would receive poor marks if they refused to have sexual intercourse with their teacher," which has led some girls to drop out of school ("No Place," 2009, p. 16).

Protecting Women: Chadian Law

In order to address rape and violence against women, we must examine Chadian law and whether provisions protecting women are implemented. According to Article 275 of the Chadian penal code, perpetrations of rape are liable to imprisonment with hard labor. However, the code does not include a definition of rape. The Chadian Constitution also protects women and girls from any kind of discrimination (The Fund for Peace, 2008).

Under articles 7 and 9 (1) of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, refugees have the right to physical security (ICCPR, 1976). Chad is also a party to the Conventions on the Rights of the Child, which protects refugee girls under the age of 18. Article 19 protects refugee girls from physical and mental violence, and article 37 protects against cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment (Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989). Chad has also ratified the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in 1995, which ensures that women and girls are fully protected from discrimination and violence (1979).

Provisions not implemented

While Chad has clear and extensive provisions protecting the rights and liberty of women and girls, including refugees, there is a clear gap between formal provisions and practice of law. The Coalition for the International Criminal Court notes that “national experts affirm that none of the international treaties and human rights instruments ratified by Chad have ever been incorporated into national law” (ICC, 2009, ¶1).

Traditional Methods Create Impunity for Perpetrators

The lack of a strong criminal justice system in Chad has led to the use of traditional dispute resolution techniques by Sudanese refugees. This has ultimately led to the creation of a parallel justice system based on tribal customs and traditional practices.

The most common form of negotiated resolutions for rape is the use of traditional *Diyya* law, which is derived from Sharia law, and includes compensation from the perpetrator to the family of a rape victim. In *Diyya* settlements, the perpetrator of violence and rape chooses the compensation he will provide to the family and victim. Traditionally, compensation can be provided through either marriage of the victim of the rape in addition to financial payment to the family, or through financial compensation alone. Marriage is more frequently included in *Diyya* negotiations when the woman becomes pregnant

following rape (“No Place,” 2009, p. 20). However, since there is no legal framework enforcing compensation, perpetrators and abusers often ignore or flee compensation negotiations. In many cases, the perpetrators of violence and rape are unknown to the victim, and traditional *Diyya* law cannot be utilized.

In order to move past ineffectual and abusive traditional negotiation methods like *Diyya* law, a strong Chadian legal system must be created and maintained. This can be accomplished through international intervention, including the continued UN support of humanitarian and police forces in Chad, which would work to ensure that provisions protecting women are implemented.

Addressing the Issues: Creating Security in Camps Need for Strengthened International Presence

The Security Council has acknowledged the need for an increased national and international police force to establish security for refugees in Eastern Chad. In August 2006, the UN Security Council stated that there was a need for a “multidimensional presence consisting of political, humanitarian, military and civilian police liaison officers in key locations in eastern Chad, including the refugee camps” (Security Council, 2007, Background section, ¶1). There are currently UN sponsored police and humanitarian groups in Chad, working to establish security for refugees. However, these groups, including the UN Mission in Central African Republic and Chad (MINURCAT) and Integrated Security Detachment (DIS), are understaffed and underfunded.

Formation of MINURCAT

In September 2007, the Security Council authorized the establishment of the UN Mission in Central African Republic and Chad, known by its acronym MINURCAT. MINURCAT is a multidimensional force which “works to protect both refugees and humanitarian workers from attack” (“Relying on Outsiders,” 2008, ¶6). MINURCAT also

aims to strengthen human rights and the rule of law by working with European Union military forces, as well as assisting humanitarian and UN aid groups (MINURCAT, 2007).

Issues with MINURCAT

There have been documented issues in the implementation of MINURCAT's objectives due to a lack of deployed troops and equipment. The Security Council has stated that MINURCAT's military should include a maximum of 5,225 people. However, as of June 2009, only 2,424 MINURCAT troops have been deployed.

In addition, the military equipment needed to establish and maintain security in Chad has not been made available to MINURCAT. Officer-in-Charge of the UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations Dmitri Titov stated in May 2009 that MINURCAT lacked 14 of 18 military and reconnaissance helicopters included in the creation of the project. Because of this, MINURCAT has lacked the ability to "track incidents as they develop, as well as to react to changing circumstances" ("No Place," 2009, p. 22).

MINURCAT cannot provide the level of security necessary to protect refugees in eastern Chad if they lack personnel and equipment. Every effort should be made by the international community and the UN to equip MINURCAT with the troops and equipment needed to establish and maintain security.

Formation of DIS

In addition to MINURCAT, the Security Council established the Integrated Security Detachment (DIS) with the passing of Resolution 1778 in September 2007. DIS is a Chadian police force which was created with the goal of working alongside MINURCAT to establish greater security for refugees and humanitarian groups.

Issues with DIS

There have been documented issues in the implementation of DIS's objectives due to delayed deployment and inaction by DIS officers. The Chadian government only

officially established DIS in September of 2008, a full year after Resolution 1778 was passed by the Security Council. A full deployment of DIS troops was only reached in August 2009. The gap between creation and implementation of DIS by the Chadian government is unacceptable. Any inaction by the Chadian government, including the delay of the implementation of UN sanctioned groups, seriously affects the welfare and security of refugee women. Every effort should be made by the UN to guarantee the timely implementation of groups like DIS.

In addition to implementation issues, Amnesty International has noted that “there is a widely-held concern throughout eastern Chad that DIS officers are not yet able to provide the protection that refugees require” (“No Place,” 2009, p. 24). Refugee women interviewed by Amnesty International stated that they had “very little confidence that DIS officers are willing, let alone able, to provide them with security” and that many of their requests for protection and security were dismissed (“No Place,” 2009, p. 24). Because of this, women at the Gaga camp indicated that they no longer ask DIS officers for assistance because they feel that their requests will be denied.

The UN has the obligation to train forces who respect their responsibility to establish security for all refugees, as well as to investigate any report of DIS inaction in cases of violence against women. Groups like DIS have the potential to make immense positive strides in the area of security for refugee women. The UN must work to guarantee that DIS officers are both financially equipped and morally trained to establish security in the camps.

Conclusions

The violence perpetuated against Sudanese refugee women in eastern Chad deserves attention from the international community, as well as continued support from the UN.

The pervasiveness and regularity of violence and rape can be addressed through increased UN humanitarian aid and international police forces, coupled with work by independent humanitarian groups such as Solar Cookers International (SCI). The major contributing factors to the prevalence of violence against Sudanese refugee women, including increased tensions with Chadians over resource competition and inaction by Chadian authorities, can be addressed through continued funding of both UN and private humanitarian work. It is the obligation of the international community to acknowledge and address violence against Sudanese refugee women by continuing to support ongoing humanitarian work in refugee camps in Eastern Chad.

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