

The Crushing Burden of Rape

Sexual Violence in Darfur



Photo Marcus Bleasdale

“It happened last August when we were in our farms outside the village. We saw five Arab men who came to us and asked where our husbands were. Then they told us that we should have sex with them. We said no. So they beat and raped us. After they abused us, they told us that now we would have Arab babies; and if they would find any Fur woman, they would rape them again to change the colour of their children.”

Three women, 25, 30 & 40, October 2004, West Darfur

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The crushing burden of rape

Since early 2003, the people of Darfur have endured a vicious campaign of violence, which has forced almost 2 million people to flee from their destroyed villages in search of safety. Rape against women children and men has sadly been a constant factor in this violence throughout this campaign of terror. More tragically, it continues to this day even long after people have fled from their villages. The stories of rape survivors give a horrific illustration of the daily reality of people in Darfur and especially of women and young girls, the primary victims of this form of violence. It has to stop.

MSF teams have been assisting people fleeing their villages since 2003 in Darfur and in neighbouring Chad. These first waves of people in flight repeatedly recounted to our teams how armed militias attacked their villages, killing and raping the inhabitants. The hundreds of thousands who fled the destroyed villages have now sought refuge in makeshift camps with little but rags and sticks as shelter. But they have found no safety there.

In spite of high-profile visits of the world's leaders, people still face persecution and intimidation inside the camps. Rape, a feature of the attacks on their villages, has now followed them insidiously into their places of refuge. Families, in order to sustain themselves, have to continue collecting wood, fetching water or working their fields. In doing so, women have to make a terrible choice, putting themselves or their children at the risk of rape, beatings or death as soon as they are outside the camps, towns or villages. Rape has serious consequences for womens' health and well-being, especially without adequate access to health care and general proper attention.

Between October 2004 and the first half of February 2005, doctors from Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) treated almost 500 rape victims in Darfur. Given the great sense of shame, humiliation and fear felt by victims of sexual violence, a sense which discourages them from going to a health facility to receive treatment, MSF strongly believes that the numbers recorded are only a partial representation of the real number of victims.

"I was collecting water in the river bed, just outside town when I met a group of men in military uniform who asked me to bring them some water. I brought them some but the men threw the water in my face. I went home carrying my buckets of water and those men followed me. When we were close to the village, they told me to come to their camp. I refuse but they pulled me. My mother was around and asked them to stop. The men started to beat both of us. My mother fell down on the ground. One of the men took me aside and raped me."

Woman, 28, 6 months pregnant at the time of the rape, January 2005, West Darfur

Alarming reports

MSF is providing health care to more than 1.250.000 people in 25 locations in Darfur. It is from among the patients MSF treats that we receive alarming numbers of reports of rape. All the victims seen by MSF in clinics and hospitals report similar mechanisms of violence and persecution at the time of the assault.

In West Darfur alone, between October 2004 and 15 February 2005, MSF health clinics treated 297 rape victims. 99% of the victims have been women. The ages of the victims vary between 12 and 45 years old with an average age of 27. 22% of the victims came within three days following the rape. More than half of the rapes were reported within 30 days.

Almost 90% said that the rape occurred outside a populated village. The majority (82%) were raped while they were pursuing their ordinary daily activities. Only 4% of women reported that the rape occurred during the active conflict, while they were fleeing their home village.

Almost a third (28%) of the victims reported that they were raped more than one time, either by single or multiple assailants. In more than half of the cases, physical violence was inflicted beyond sexual violence; women are beaten with sticks, whips or axes. Further, some of the raped women were visibly pregnant at the time of the assault, sometimes up to eight months. In one case, the rape provoked a miscarriage.

Brutal assaults

In most instances, the assailants are men carrying guns; sometimes wearing military uniforms, sometimes in plain clothes. 81% of victims report that their rapists are militia or military who use their weapons to force the assault. The use of firearms leaves no means of escape for these victims. In addition, sticks, whips and axes (common tools in Sudan for cattle herders or farmers) are reportedly used to inflict physical injury in conjunction with the rape.. The assaults are particularly brutal, and several victims account that family members (husbands, children, mothers, etc.) or friends got severely beaten while witnessing or trying to intervene during the assault.

“I was working in my farm alone on that day. Eight men with guns came to me and ordered me to give my coat. I refused so they started beating me with a stick on my back. Five men took me and raped me. One of the men pointed a gun at me after that and wanted to shoot me. Another man stopped him. My wife, who was on her way to meet me in the farm, saw me with the men. The same men took her and 2 of them raped her as well.”

Man, 28, November 2004, West Darfur

Assaults during daily activities

Women are usually assaulted while pursuing their daily activities essential to the livelihood of their household. As mentioned above, 82% of the rapes occur when women are outside populated villages/towns while searching for firewood or thatch, while working in their fields (sometimes in unoccupied destroyed villages), while fetching water in river beds or while travelling between villages to go the market or to retrieve their family's belongings in a destroyed village. The ongoing insecurity outside populated areas forces people to stay within the boundaries of their villages. Even walking in groups does not help - 65% of women who reported their cases were actually in a group when they were attacked.

[Five women, 2 young girls (13 and 14 years old) and 3 older women, went to collect grass for their donkeys. The group got ambushed by three armed men (one was on a camel, one on a horse and the third one on foot)]

"I was taken to the near-by river bed away from the other women. One man took me in one direction. The other man took the other girl. And the third man stayed to guard the camel and the horse. The man who took me told me to sit on the ground. But I refused. He hit me twice on my back with a stick. Then he took out a knife and threatened me by pointing the knife at me. I sat down. And then he told me to take off my underwear. I refused, but he threatened me again with his knife. He pulled his trousers down and raped me. He left without saying anything or even looking at me."

Young girl, 13, February 2005, South Darfur

"One of the three man took me away from the other women. He threatened me with his knife by pinching my chest with it. He pushed me on the ground and took off my underwear. He raped me and was repeating "I will kill you" all the times to intimidate me."

Young girl, 14, February 2005, South Darfur

Multiple rapes and abductions

Rapes by multiple assailants are very common. Women report in 28% of cases that two or more men have raped them. In five (5) cases, women described that the rapists abducted them and held them captive for several days and during that period they were raped regularly by several men. One woman reported that her abduction lasted six (6) days and she was raped by 10 men. In addition, almost half of the survivors report that there was more than one victim in the attack. This provides further evidence that the numbers of rapes are significantly underreported.

[30 people were travelling with public transport (car) between two main towns in South Darfur. In one village along the road, armed men surrounded the car and started shooting at it.]

“Most of the men wore in military uniforms and some were in plain clothes. They were on camels and horses. Everybody in the car was asked to get out of the car. The armed men took all the belongings and the money from the passengers. They drove the car into the bush and separated the men from the women. There were four women in total. One managed to run away. The other three were taken to different directions. Two men took me and raped me. The first man raped me while the other one was intimidating me. When this was finished, they changed roles: the first man intimidated me while the second one was raping me. It was still not finished. A third man appeared and he raped me as well. The three men finally left while I was lying on the ground.”

Woman, 23, February 2005, South Darfur

“I was returning from the market, that day. I was walking with a group of nine women and two men. We met some armed men along the road. They took the nine women and held us under a tree in their camp. They released us after three days. During all this time, I was raped every night and every day by five men.”

Woman, 30, October 2004, South Darfur

[Among the nine women, only three came to the clinic, among which two girls were 12 and 13 years old.]

Medical and social effects of rape

Victims of rape suffer serious physical consequences. 4% report that they have sustained several physical injuries, such as broken bones or burns after the assault. Through infection with sexually transmitted diseases and HIV/AIDS, it puts their lives in danger and endangers the lives of their children. The mental consequences of rape often last for years after the actual incidents. These are compounded by the social stigma that many victims endure which often lead them to be excluded from their communities and cut off from their livelihoods.

At the time they sought treatment, 7% of the women already knew they were pregnant as the result of the rape. Given that almost 40% came for treatment within the first month, it is too early for the women to know if a pregnancy resulted from the rape. Beyond the trauma of the rape, the female victims suffer unwanted pregnancies and are victims of mistrust and accusations by the police or their community. These women are often ostracised by their own families and communities. Some women reported that they had to build their own straw hut outside the family compound.

“When my village was attacked, 30 men with guns entered in the village. Some of them found me in my house. Three of them raped me and I fell unconscious. The men locked me inside my house (straw hut) and set it on fire. I managed to get out of the house through the burning grass. ”

Woman, 17, October 2004, West Darfur

[The medical examination of this patient revealed that she had old burns to her left and right hands and arms; one arm was burnt from hand to shoulder. She had burns also on both the left and right side of her upper back and very extensive burns on both legs from the heels to the calves.]

Victims treated as criminals

Victims say they are even more afraid to report their cases to the police or to the local authorities than to their families. Women fear that, rather than receiving help and support, they will be punished for illegal pregnancy. On several occasions, pregnant women report that the police arrest and punish them for illegal pregnancy. Women, who are already eight (8) months pregnant, account that they have been guarded in prison at night whilst forced to do exhausting daily labour (e.g. fetching water several times a day) until they can pay their fine.

“I am 16 years old. On day, in March 2004, I was collecting firewood for my family when three armed men on camels came and surrounded me. They hold me down, tied my hands and raped me one after the other. When I arrive home, I told my family what happened. They threw me out of home and I had to build my own hut away from them. I was engaged to a man and I was so much looking forward to getting married. After I got raped, he did not want to marry me and broke off the engagement because he said that I was now disgraced and spoilt. It is the worse thing for me... [continues next page]

...When I was eight months pregnant from the rape, the police came to my hut and forced me with their guns to go to the police station. They asked me questions, so I told them that I had been raped. They told me that as I was not married, I will deliver this baby illegally. They beat me with a whip on the chest and back and put me in jail. There were other women in jail, who had the same story. During the day, we had to walk to the well four times a day to get the policemen water, clean and cook for them. At night, I was in a small cell with 23 other women. I had no other food than what I could find during my work during the day. And the only water was what I drank at the well. I stayed 10 days in jail and now I still have to pay the fine, 20,000 Sudanese Dinars (65 USD) they asked me. My child is now 2 months old.”

Woman, 16, February 2005, West Darfur

Conclusion

Rape is one of the most insidious forms of violence to which people in Darfur and other conflicts have been subjected. Lacking the flash and thunder of other weapons it has failed to call upon our consciences and action. Unlike the victims of gunshots and beatings, the crime, and its victims are often driven into the shadows – too scared or too ashamed to seek help. However tragic and devastating the consequences, rape has not received the attention that the massiveness of the crime nor the gravity of its impact would call for. This has to change.

Rape as a form of violent oppression against civilians continues to plague people in Darfur and in conflicts throughout the world. MSF clinics and hospitals still see an unending stream of rape victims in search of assistance. In most societies and conflicts where we work there are very few places for them to turn.

Rape destroys individual lives, traumatises the population and fractures society. Rather than care, the women and children who are subjected to sexual violence receive rejection. The horrific practice we have seen in Darfur of actually imprisoning the victims of rape rather than providing them medical care, adds to an already appalling pattern of neglect and abuse. All too frequently the victims of rape find inadequate care even when they do make their way to a clinic. In many places the fear of mistreatment and stigma stops people from searching for necessary assistance.

In Darfur, and in conflicts throughout the world, it is necessary to stop the ongoing crime of rape.

- This form of warfare against civilians must be stopped. Local authorities need to end their tolerance of this crime and must end the impunity of the rapists and their accomplices.
- Local government and other health care providers must ensure full and appropriate treatment for victims of sexual violence.
- There should be an end to the stigma and rejection faced by victims of rape which leads to additional victimisation and the undermining of their future livelihoods

MSF's response to sexual violence

Dealing with sexual violence is difficult and there are many obstacles, including cultural, to treating and supporting the victims appropriately. Working in emergency or semi-emergency settings where there may not be even basic health care, let alone a private space for treatment and counselling, only adds to these. But we have a responsibility to provide care. MSF assists victims of sexual violence in Darfur, Uganda, Democratic Republic of Congo, Burundi and other conflicts.

MSF is striving to provide comprehensive and quality care to victims of sexual violence in confidential settings. We treat the victims' wounds, offer emergency contraception and provide treatment for the prevention of sexually transmittable diseases. This includes HIV, for which we administer antiretroviral drugs to prevent post-rape infections. These drugs are effective only when taken within 72 hours after of the rape, one reason why immediate medical assistance is so vital.

Given the fact that sexual violence is often a taboo, it is as important to have education activities in place to raise awareness about the issue and the fact that medical treatment is available. In some projects, MSF also organizes the psychosocial counselling. Here, women are enabled to talk about - often for the first time - what they endured. They share their beliefs and receive acknowledgement for their suffering. The objective of the psychosocial interventions is to reinforce or restore coping mechanisms and self-control.

MSF started working in Darfur in December 2003. More than 180 international aid workers and over 3,000 national staff work throughout the three provinces (West, North and South Darfur). MSF is providing health care to more than 1.250.000 people in 25 locations in Darfur. In our report entitled "Persecution, Intimidation and Failure of Assistance in Darfur"¹, released in October 2004, MSF expressed great concern about the mass violence across Darfur and described the mechanisms of persecution and intimidation inflicted to the population since the beginning of the conflict in early 2003. Civilians, and especially women, have been the main victims of atrocities committed in Darfur since the beginning of the conflict.

"One day, I went to the farm with 4 other women. At the end of the day, on our way back to the village, we met two men. One was on a camel carrying a gun and the other one was on foot carrying a stick. They told us that we should take another road because further down, they were people stopping all travellers at a checkpoint. We then turned around, but at this moment, the man on the camel made a strange noise and many men in military uniform who were hiding in the bushes ambushed us. They caught me and another woman and took us to their nomadic camp. They raped us several times until the following morning. After we came back to the village, our community leader was afraid to report our case to the police because he was afraid that the police would put us in jail."

Woman, 30, January 2005, West Darfur

¹ The report 'Persecution, Intimidation and Failure of assistance in Darfur' is available at www.msf.org