

Darfuri survivors welcome ICC arrest warrant for Omar al-Bashir

4 Mar 09 – Today the judges at the ICC issued an arrest warrant for Omar Bashir, the President of Sudan, on charges of crimes against humanity, war crimes and genocide in Darfur. It is the first time that such a step has been taken against a sitting head of state.

As the ICC judges announced their decision in the Hague, Darfuri survivors were gathered in capital cities across Europe to remember their murdered loved ones and destroyed communities. In London, they gathered for a commemoration outside the Sudanese Embassy from midday to 2.00pm, reading out the names of over a thousand victims and holding a minute's silence at 1.00pm, the moment the ICC's decision was announced in the Hague. When the news came through that the ICC had issued the arrest warrant, the crowd erupted with joy.

"Today, for the first time, I feel that just maybe, the people responsible for the murder of my father, Issa, and my brother, Ishag, will eventually be held to account for their actions," said Darfuri survivor Ibrahim Issa Korkor, responding to the news. "There can never be peace in Darfur without justice. Today is a massive step towards both."

"Khartoum would like its friends and business partners to think that today's arrest warrant is a western conspiracy against the Sudanese President and Sudanese state," says Khatir Mohammed, General Secretary of the Darfur Union. "I assure you it's not. It's the result of testimony from countless survivors such as myself, who have seen their families mercilessly killed by Government aircraft, troops and militias. It's the result of testimony from soldiers and Janjaweed fighters now explaining how they were recruited, paid, armed and directed by the Government to kill their fellow citizens. We ask all governments doing business with Khartoum to stop turning a blind eye to these crimes. Do you want to be tainted by association? Use your influence with Khartoum to bring an end to the violence and injustice in Darfur, and the Sudanese people will thank you."

"Today's decision to issue an arrest warrant for Omar al-Bashir is a landmark step towards ending the impunity of war crimes suspects everywhere. It shows that no-one – even a sitting head of state – is above international law," says Dr James Smith, Chief Executive of the Aegis Trust. "This warrant should be used to urge Sudanese leaders to change policy - to stop committing atrocities. If the UN Security Council gives in to threats from Khartoum and suspends the ICC proceedings without a change of policy in Sudan it sends a message that to avoid justice, war criminals need only threaten more atrocities."

Darfur women urge the AU and Arab League to support international justice for Darfur

In a letter addressed to African and Arab officials [full text of the letter below], Darfuri women welcome the move by the ICC, stating that the arrest warrant against Bashir : "has shown that no one is above justice, and that no one can be responsible for killing and dehumanizing so many without consequence."

The 28 women, who fled war-torn Darfur during the conflict and now live abroad, strongly link the ICC's work and the prospect of international accountability to the search for stability and security in Darfur. The women assert that justice "will help us build the foundations for reconciliation and lasting peace."

The signatories argue that it will be impossible to "return to peace without accounting for what has been done. The women and children of Darfur deserve justice, they deserve the chance to hold those responsible to account and they deserve to be treated, at last, with dignity";

Women have especially suffered from the conflict in Darfur, with the United Nations and many other international organisations routinely reporting that rape has been used systematically as a weapon of war. The letter notes that "rape is used deliberately as a weapon. It is intended to demoralise a community, stigmatise its women and sabotage the tribal line."

The women conclude by affirming that the ICC investigations have already helped to bring some redress for the suffering of women in this conflict: "As women of Darfur, we are grateful that our sisters are not forgotten. We are grateful that their

stories are heard, their suffering accounted for, their rights acknowledged."

Full text of letter and signatories:

4 March 2009

To the African Union:

To the League of Arab States:

Today the International Criminal Court has issued a warrant for the arrest of General Omar al-Bashir. We, as survivors of the conflict in Darfur, ask you to support the process of international justice, to ensure that our people will see an end to impunity, and finally, peace.

In our homeland of Darfur, war has raged for over five years, ruining the lives of our people. Hundreds of thousands are dead, and millions more are barely living, confined to camps, stripped of their homes, livelihoods, and human dignity.

Each of them is the victim of our homeland's tragedy. But many are also the victims of direct, personal crimes. The most vulnerable among us, women and children, have often paid the greatest price. Each of us has her own story, and each story should be acknowledged, each crime we have suffered from accounted for.

The 25-year-old woman who was raped in front of her two children by a man carrying a gun. Badly beaten, she lay on the side of the road for nine days. She was too scared to tell her husband. The 17-year-old who was chased down, bitten on her arm and neck to mark her as compromised, and then raped by a man in uniform. The woman who, seven months pregnant, was robbed, beaten, and gang-raped along with her six companions. They were hoping to gather firewood to earn money to feed their families. They returned to their camp naked and brutalised.

In this conflict, rape is used deliberately as a weapon. It is intended to demoralise a community, stigmatise its women and sabotage the tribal line. Homes can be rebuilt, but the social, psychological and emotional wounds inflicted by this violence will never heal.

We hope that peace will come someday soon to Darfur, that the conflict which has destroyed so many lives, caused so much suffering and allowed so many crimes, will be brought to an end. But we know that we cannot return to peace without accounting for what has been done. The women and children of Darfur deserve justice, they deserve the chance to hold those responsible to account, they deserve to be treated, at last, with dignity.

The international community recognized the need to account for these crimes when the UN Security Council referred the case of Darfur to the International Criminal Court. The Court has worked slowly but continuously to find those responsible for the crimes in Darfur, even when it found that responsibility lay at the highest level - our president, Omar al-Bashir.

The arrest warrant that the court has issued against President al-Bashir is not the first in this case, and will not be the last, but it is the one that has shown that no one is above justice, and that no one can be responsible for killing and dehumanizing so many without consequence. Now, at last, the victims of crimes against humanity in Darfur recognize that justice will come. Justice, and with it dignity, which will help us build the foundations for reconciliation and lasting peace.

As women of Darfur, we are grateful that our sisters are not forgotten. We are grateful that their stories are heard, their suffering accounted for, their rights acknowledged. We urge the international community to continue to support the pursuit of justice for the victims of Darfur. With justice we will build the road back to peace.

Yours sincerely,

Nejwa Gabir Ahmed, Tharayd Salbo, Muzdaisa Adam, Maryam Aldai, Fatima Yousif, Aloyha Mohammed, Ebtisam Ghazi Ismail, Huda Ishak, Kousa Ismail Ali, Suad Ismail Ali, Zakia Abdella , Hajer Ibrahim Khalif, Khadija Mahadi Khalif, Aziza Hamid Abdalla, Ihtisam Abdelrahman Mahmoud, Zubaida Ahmed Ibrahim, Khadija Adam Hassan, Suad Sherif, Suad Abdelrahman, Ihtisam Ali, Mohassim Adam, Awasif Abdallah, Hasna Ali, Batoul Mohammed, Mariam Abdullah, Abir Mohammed Ahmed, Inam Babikir, Amira Ahmed.