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The Rape of Sudan

Terrorism against women and girls.

By Donna M. Hughes

Although the West has only recently taken notice of its scope and intent, the aggressive global Islamic fundamentalist movement has been underway for several decades. Among its first victims have been women and girls. The Islamists begin their reign of terror at home, forcing their own mothers, sisters, and daughters into a system of gender apartheid.

Where Islamic fundamentalists attack enemy populations, women and girls suffer even more. In Sudan in 1989, a coup installed the present military dictator Omar al Bashir, who declared Sudan to be an Islamic republic and imposed *sharia* (Islamic law). The Arab Islamist government intensified the long-standing conflict with the south by backing raids against the Christian and animist civilian populations. The raiders killed men and animals, burned villagers, and abducted women and children. Since 1983 — when the Sudan People's Liberation Army started the warfare that preceded Bashir's coup — an estimated 2 million people have been killed and 4.5 million people have become refugees and internally displaced persons. Two hundred thousand women and children have been captured for labor and sexual slavery. Some of the victims were trafficked into slavery and sexual servitude beyond northern Sudan to Middle Eastern countries.

Once in the north, the slaves are subjected to forced Islamization and Arabization. In Sudan, the ritualistic cutting of girls' genitals, often called female genital mutilation, is widely practiced among all religions and ethnicities, although Christians have discouraged the practice. A survey conducted by [Christian Solidarity International's](#) Slavery Research Unit on slaves liberated from the north found that 40 percent of the women and girls had been subjected to female genital mutilation while in captivity.

As international pressure for a peace agreement between the north and south intensified, and peace appeared imminent, conflict broke out in western Sudan. The inhabitants of Darfur are Muslims but from black African tribes. They are not Arab, and most significantly, not Islamist. The government seized this opportunity to ethnically cleanse the west as it has done in the south.

Government airplanes and helicopters have bombed and strafed villages, and government-backed militia, called Janjaweed — meaning armed men on horseback — have attacked civilian populations in a scorched-earth campaign of killing, raping, burning villages, and driving people from their homes. An

estimated 1.2 million people have been internally displaced and 170,000 have fled across the border into Chad. An estimated 30,000 have been killed.

The widespread and systematic rape and sexual enslavement of women and girls in Darfur has been documented by Amnesty International in a report called "Rape as a Weapon of War: Sexual Violence and Its Consequences." As part of the campaign of ethnic cleansing, rapes are carried out in public, in front of family and community members. Those who resist or intervene are beaten and killed. Victims' arms and legs are broken to prevent escape. The intent is to impose terror on a village, and destroy the victims' and communities' integrity and identity. One rape victim was told by her attacker: "You, the black women, we will exterminate you, you have no God."

Additionally horrifying is the participation of Arab women in the atrocities. According to Amnesty International, Hakama — female traditional singers who praise male fighters — accompany the raiders and rapists. By singing and ululating, they provide encouragement and a song track to rape and pillage.

A report by U.S. Senator Sam Brownback and Congressman Frank Wolf, who recently visited camps in Darfur and interviewed victims, said that the Janjaweed were branding rape victims on their back and arms to permanently label them.

In western Sudan, many of the women and girls previously have been subjected to female genital cutting, including clitoridectomy and infibulation. These crude, mutilating practices of cutting away of genitalia leaves scars and inelastic tissues. Rape for these women is excruciatingly painful and can cause severe physical injuries.

There is also cultural meaning to these acts of violence: females' genitalia are considered "unclean," and by cutting them away, the girls are supposed to be made "clean" and their virginity and chastity preserved. The victims' own belief in these cultural norms causes them additional psychological trauma when they are raped.

Rape is a violation that destroys the whole of the person in the eyes of society. Sadly, the families of the victims often complete the devastation of these victims' lives by rejecting them. Fearing this, women who have been raped may avoid seeking help in refugee camps because they fear family or community members will discover their rapes.

The rape and enslavement of women and girls in Sudan is part of what the United Nations calls the world's worse current humanitarian crisis and the U.S. Congress calls genocide

An immediate and effective solution is needed to the ongoing genocide in Sudan. The world cannot remain indecisive while tens of thousands more are driven from their homes, raped, and killed. We also need to take a sobering look at the atrocities in Sudan, past and present, and understand that this is Islamic fundamentalism in practice. It is a threat to all women, everywhere.

— Donna M. Hughes is professor and holds the Carlson-endowed chair in women's studies at the University of Rhode Island.

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