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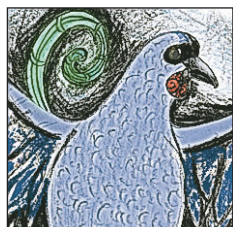
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Nurse tells of Darfur horror



"They're the ones who have hurt thousands of children in front of their parent's very eyes."

- Margaret Taylor, Amnesty International

By Dianna Vezich

A New Zealand nurse has spoken out against "atrocities" in the western Sudan region of Darfur amid reports of mounting attacks on aid workers.

Lisa Blaker, who recently returned to Auckland after working in the region for aid agency Medecins Sans Frontières (MSF), says that if no one acts, the Darfur conflict will continue until the entire region is "cleared" of ethnic minorities.

The softly spoken 35-year-old wants the world to know about the horrors of Darfur — and she plans to go back to help.

Nigerian President Olusegun Obasonjo warned this week over possible genocide in the region while \$2.5 million in humanitarian aid has been hampered.

MSF says four of its Darfur workers have been attacked, and one woman staff member had been sexually harrassed.

Hollywood actor George Clooney received some negative comments with his recent campaign visit to Darfur. Some critics said his visit was a mere publicity stunt.

"At least George Clooney's visit cast some much-needed attention upon Darfur," Blaker says.

"He smuggled cameras into the area and was able to show the images of suffering. His message was for the world to stop and actually do something about what's going on in Darfur. If people respond to George Clooney then that's fantastic."

Working five days a week at Middlemore Hospital suddenly lost its appeal when Lisa Blaker heard the "horror stories" of Darfur — stories she says are being ignored by the international community.

And after spending nine months amid the fighting, Blaker certainly knows the issues are too large to neglect.

One of only three New Zealanders working in the region, Blaker says whole villages are being destroyed by the Government-backed militia, leaving the people of Darfur with no security.

A number of sources, including the United Nations, cite a figure of about 400,000 deaths in the conflict since 2003.

Blaker says she has no idea just how many have become victims of the "social

injustices" occurring in this part of Africa.

"No one knows the exact figure. I asked people who would come to our clinics, and they didn't know either. Most of their friends and family had become internally displaced, escaping into the bush, and in refugee camps. They had no idea where they were," she says.

Blaker's role in Darfur was working in the hospital in Muhajariya, the village where she spent most of her time. She conducted clinics under the trees.

Many of her patients would walk incredibly long distances for medical treatment, the majority being mothers with children.

"Imagine the frustration when I know someone has walked six hours to come to a clinic, and there's been an attack and we can't get there; nor can we let the people know we're not coming," she says.

Originally from Howick, Blaker still has an urge to be back providing humanitarian help in the midst of the conflict.

"I received an email from a colleague of mine the other day. It was two lines. All it said was: 'We've been attacked; we're going to the bunker.' It made me think I should be there."

Amnesty International activism support manager Margaret Taylor says the Sudanese Government-sponsored militia — the Janjaweed — are responsible for most of the attacks.

"They're the ones gang-raping women after they have broken their legs so they can't run away. They're threatening to throw babies in pots and cook them. They're the ones who have hurt thousands of children in front of their parent's very eyes."

Blaker also says much of the fighting is initiated by the Janjaweed, a mainly Muslim militia. The target is mainly the Fur, Zaghawa and Masalit ethnic groups.

"The attacks from the Janjaweed are not so much to kill everyone, but to destroy the village so the people cannot return," says Blaker.

Taylor says the Government is turning a blind eye to the problems in Darfur.

"They don't give a damn about the atrocities carried out on its own people. They sponsor the Janjaweed to carry out attacks and kill and torture the people of Darfur," she says.

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Baby Mohammed (top) was one of the war's 400,000 victims. Blaker (right) dispenses medicine to a mother and child. Refugee camps (left) stretch for miles across North Darfur and Chad.

