

'You can see it in the eyes of the people'

by Lucy Arthur

Fatima Ali Zayed, 22, is a mother of three.

She escaped with her children when her village of Kailek, in southern Sudan, was torched by militia four months ago.

She has had no word on her husband. Now, she lives in a hut made with branches.

It is less than two metres square and about one metre high. There is a straw mat, a jerry can, and two pieces of clothing on the tent floor. That is all they have.

All she asks for is a plastic sheet to protect her and the children from the rain. She shares the Al Jahubiya camp in Kass, in South Darfur, Sudan with 4,000 others.

Fatima's camp is relatively small compared with one further south. Five weeks ago there were 30,000 people living there at the Kalma Camp. Now there are some 65,000 and there are new arrivals daily.

Darfur is a western region in Sudan, a country which has known little more than 10 years of peace since its independence from the British in 1956. The United Nations has reported rape, torture and ethnic cleansing and other "gross and systematic" violations of basic human rights.

The UN estimates more than two million people have fled their homes in terror so far.

Darfur is a vast area — no one is sure how many people's lives have been ruined.

"Certainly, well over a million, maybe a million and a half are affected," says New Zealand aid worker Steve Matthews, of World Vision, speaking on satellite phone from South Darfur.

"There are apparently six million people in Darfur and a lot of them are affected by this. But I would suspect anybody who said they had firm numbers on anything.

"Let's just say it's a lot of people, it's hundreds of thousands, if not millions who are affected by this."

As more people arrive in the camps, conditions continue to deteriorate.

"There's a lot of diarrhoea. Out here it can kill a kid in a matter of days. They're worried about an outbreak of worse diseases like shigella (dysentery) or cholera, especially with the bad water and



INTERNAL REFUGEES: Fatima Ali Zayed, 22, and her son Baker Abdulla.

lack of sanitation. People are urinating just about everywhere," says Matthews.

Sanitation is not the only issue.

There is a serious lack of basic supplies. To say food is limited would be an understatement.

"The planting season is normally in June so the planting season has gone by. These people are not able to farm their land this year. That means no harvest this year. They only get one harvest per season. So that means that the normal harvest that would carry them through to next year isn't going to be around," says Matthews.

"You can see it in the people's eyes, you know these people are suffering greatly. They've been displaced, they've lost everything. In some cases they've lost family or relatives or husbands or children," says Matthews.

"There's still a gentleness about them."

Despite organisation such as Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and the UN exposing violations, members of New Zealand aid agencies are careful when talking about the situation in Sudan. If they openly accuse the Sudanese government of violations they wouldn't be granted

visas to work there.

Kiwi aid workers tell stories of other aid agencies who have talked publicly or published reports on the situation in Sudan and in turn have been blocked from entering the country and continuing their vital work.

"It's an obsessive regime," says a Kiwi aid worker who did not want to be named.

"I've worked throughout Africa and I've worked in Tibet, and I've worked in Yemen — another country that has a bad reputation — entirely free compared with Sudan."

"On the ground, the security operatives make it difficult every minute of every day. And even if you finally get permission to go to a camp you'll only be allowed to visit a 50 by 50 square metre area of that camp," he says.

The permit even specifies a particular vehicle and its registration number.

"On the day, if that car is not available from your organisation

and you want to take another car they won't let you go.

"You were given permission to go in that car with these four wheels, and that colour spare wheel — now you can't go."

A ceasefire agreement made by the Sudanese government has not been observed, say aid workers.

International pressure from world leaders has only begun in the last few months.

New Zealanders have taken notice only since the end of July when foreign ministers from Australia and New Zealand plotted the possibility of sending troops to Sudan.

Although many countries throughout the third world are constantly in need, Sudan is seen as a genocide waiting to happen. The UN describes this as the world's worst humanitarian crisis.

And the situation is desperate, says Matthews.

"We're on the brink of a catastrophe here."



KALMA: Water queues stretch out in a camp south of Nyala.

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