

The violence in Sudan's battered Darfur region has dropped dramatically this year, partly because militia have run out of targets, according to UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan. The news emerged as US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, on a visit to Sudan, urged Khartoum and its African neighbours to intensify efforts to bring peace to Darfur.

Mr Annan's report to the UN Security Council said active combat had been replaced by intimidation and fear, perpetuated by an ever-present militia, when homeless people leave refugee camps.

"The decrease in attacks on civilians may also be a function of a reduced number of targets," Mr Annan said. "So many villages have been destroyed since the war began that there are now fewer locations for militia to strike."

Mr Annan urged Khartoum to disarm the Arab militia, known as Janjaweed, and other armed groups.

The UN report, prepared by Jan Pronk, Mr Annan's special envoy in Sudan, said the number of confirmed deaths due to violence had not exceeded 100 a month since January, when the figure was 300-350 people

"The US believes that, by our accounts, it was and is genocide," [Dr Rice] said

Dr Rice said she was willing to proclaim a "new day" with the national unity Government installed this month under a peace accord signed in January to end 21 years of civil war between Khartoum and rebels in southern Sudan.

Dr Rice, who was to visit a Darfur refugee camp, flew in after signalling concern over progress in African Union plans to more than double its monitoring force to 7700 troops.

Referring to intensive US diplomacy on Darfur, she said: "The US cannot do this alone ... We need everybody to make a maximum effort, including the AU and including other members of the Security Council."