

Rebels and government-backed militias in Sudan's Darfur region are still carrying out attacks, raping women and creating a climate of fear, although violence in the region has declined in the last year, Secretary-General Kofi Annan said Thursday.

While the number of civilians killed in Darfur has dropped from over 300 in January to less than 100 in June, people remain afraid to venture far from camps, Annan said in a report to the U.N. Security Council.

Additionally, the number of people affected by the Darfur conflict increased from just over one million in May 2004 to 2.9 million in June 2005, he said. This includes nearly 1.9 million refugees still in Sudan, over 200,000 refugees in Chad, and nomads and other drought-affected people.

"Darfur may be a less active war zone than it was a year ago, but violations of human rights continue to occur frequently and active combat has been replaced by a suffocating environment of intimidation and fear, perpetuated by ever-present militia," Annan said.

The report came as Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice went to a Darfur refugee camp for a first-hand view of conditions there

She also demanded - and got - an apology after security forces at the residence of Sudanese President Omar el-Bashir manhandled U.S. officials and reporters traveling with her

In May 2004, the relief effort could only get food to 400,000 needy people. Today, over 1.9 million are being reached, Annan said.

Preliminary results from a year-long World Health Organization-led survey which ended in June indicate the mortality rate in Darfur has dropped below the international crisis threshold of 1 death per 10,000 persons per day, he said.

Nonetheless, Annan warned that "as the war drags on, it is certain that the ranks of the conflict-affected population will only continue to grow while the ability or willingness of the international community to maintain its current level of assistance may diminish."