

Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice met Thursday with women who had been raped during a campaign of ethnic violence in Sudan's Darfur region, as she sought to pressure the government to deal with a problem that has persisted despite an apparent easing of the humanitarian crisis.

Rice heard the women's stories during a 90-minute stop at this sprawling camp of mud-brick homes, a showpiece that has become a required stop for dignitaries visiting Darfur. Dozens of children greeted her with welcoming chants of "Marhab, marhab, ya Condoleezza," but other camp residents were kept outside a compound of seven huts while she spoke with aid workers and the group of women and gave a succession of interviews.

Rice met with about 15 women, who were shielded from public view in one of the huts, and emerged looking moved by their plight. She called their stories "unbelievable but . . . true," though she declined to discuss the details because she said she feared the women were vulnerable to retribution.

Surrounded by children clutching soccer balls in the blazing heat, Rice said she had a new appreciation for what she called "a devastating crisis for so many people," especially the women and children who told her "how hard life is here."

After talks earlier Thursday in Khartoum, Sudan's capital, Rice said she had obtained a commitment from senior Sudanese officials, including the president, Lt. Gen. Omar Hassan Bashir, to implement a plan to halt sexual attacks against women. The plan, which calls for a public campaign against violence and the prosecution of rapists, was conceived by Rice's deputy, Robert B. Zoellick, who presented it to the Khartoum government during a visit two weeks ago

But the Sudanese government has a long history of failing to meet commitments

The United States last year determined that genocide had taken place in Darfur. Bashir told Rice that the government would like to disarm the Janjaweed, but he asserted that if only the militias disarmed and not the rebels, the result would be genocide, according to a U.S. official who attended the meeting. Rice responded that the Sudanese government is responsible for security in the region.

The African Union is rapidly expanding its monitoring force in Darfur from 2,700 to 7,700 by the end of September. In an unusual operation, NATO and the European Union have agreed to airlift many of the troops to Darfur

The Brussels-based International Crisis Group, in a report this month, said that as many as 15,000 troops would be needed to protect villages from attack and women from rape outside the camps. Rice said that during her meetings in Khartoum, Sudanese officials said they would put no limit on how many African Union forces could be sent to Darfur.

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2005/07/21/AR2005072101385.html>