

A culture of impunity for rape in Sudan's Darfur region means women like Mariam, assaulted and left for dead, say they don't even bother to report the attacks to police, aid workers and officials said.

Mariam, who was too afraid to give her full name because she was worried about reprisals for discussing the taboo subject, says women are most at risk when they leave the refugee camps that house around 2 million mostly women and children.

She arrived at the al-Bileel camp near the state capital Nyala after fleeing her home in South Darfur state six months ago. She says she watched as her 12-year-old cousin was raped, and then was subjected to the same assault.

"I was out looking for firewood not far from here when this man dressed in green khaki grabbed me and started beating me with his gun," she said. Mariam was then raped and beaten for an hour. She lost the sight in her right eye for more than a month.

"The police don't investigate anything so we don't even bother to report it anymore," she said.

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All sides of the conflict have committed the crime, she said -- the main rebel group, the Sudan Liberation Army (SLA), and the Arab militias, known locally as Janjaweed.

"One woman said first the Janjaweed came and raped her village. Then the SLA came and raped," [said Canada's special envoy for peace in Sudan, Mobina Jaffer] rape is a weapon of war here."

"There is absolute impunity," she added.

The government in Khartoum had routinely denied or dismissed reports of rape since the rebel uprising began in February 2003 and punished groups reporting the attacks.

The Medecins Sans Frontieres (MSF) aid agency felt the full brunt of the government's censure after it published a report earlier this year detailing hundreds of attacks.

Authorities arrested two senior MSF officials for spying and publishing false information, although the charges were eventually dropped weeks later.

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