EVAP Episode 37_ Niemat Ahmadi

Fri, Nov 01, 2024 3:45PM 44:53

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

atrocity prevention, human rights advocacy, Darfur conflict, genocidal attack, rapid support forces, sexual violence, humanitarian aid, civilian protection, accountability, women empowerment, capacity building, international advocacy, peace negotiations, civilian government, women participation

SPEAKERS

Niemat Ahmadi, Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall, Speaker

- Speaker 00:00
- Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall 00:08

 Welcome to Expert Voices on Atrocity Prevention by the Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect. I'm Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall, Research Director at the Global Center. This podcast features one on one conversations with practitioners from the fields of human rights, conflict prevention

one on one conversations with practitioners from the fields of human rights, conflict prevention and atrocity prevention. These conversations will give us a glimpse of the personal and professional side of how practitioners approach human rights protection and atrocity prevention, allowing us to explore challenges, identify best practices and share lessons learned on how we can protect populations more effectively.

Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall 00:47

Today, I'm joined by Niemat Ahmadi, the Founder and President of Darfur Women Action Group, a women-led anti atrocities organization that amplifies the voices of those most impacted by the ongoing violence in Sudan. Thank youfor joining us today, Niemat.

- Niemat Ahmadi 01:01
 It's my pleasure, and thank you for the opportunity.
- Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall 01:04

 Niemat, can you share a bit about how you personally became involved in human rights

advocacy in Sudan and about your current work with the Darfur Women Action Group.

Niemat Ahmadi 01:14

I actually my activism started earlier, when I was I think it was in middle school. I have this tendency of like, when seeing something, I want to do something about it. And back then, I don't know what that means, but I just jump into action. And then by the time I was going to college, I volunteered for a nonprofit organization that in our hometown, mostly like work in the rural area of my hometown, founded by local people from about 16 village council to serve their community, and that was supported by Oxfam Great Britain. So thatkind of introduced me to NGO world. And I really like what they were doing. So I started volunteering, and I ended up working for Oxfam briefly, Oxfam Great Britain and emergency relief before I go to college, and that can open my eyes to the issues and problems that are affecting our community and what we haveto do about it. So by the time I was in college, I was already ahead of my peers in terms of like, knowing what is going on in our society, and also being, going to Khartoum from Darfur you see the disparity in the development in everything, and also the way that people from remote or regions that are inhabited by indigenous Africans in Sudan, like, Darfur, South Sudan, before it is separation, there was a clear, clear, like, disparities in everything. And that kind of motivated me in a good way, that there is something for me to do, and that informed even what I was going to study and what and how I'm going to involve. And after I graduated, my plan was very clear that I will go home to Darfur and will start working around to help our community and help my family for about three to four years, and then my plan is to come back and do my Masters. And I had this plan that I will create my consulting company try to help government and NGOs to have realistic but also effective development policy in the country. So that was the plan. Unfortunately, after my graduation, I started working for international NGOs, and we had the opportunity to go around help people providing development assistance and training village committees to create their own organizations and helping women who are working on women empowerment projects, education, all of that, and I was so excited and felt motivated by the impact I see that we make in our community. But all of a sudden that was stopped in one day when the genocidal attack in Darfur started. And that is the time when the biggest shock of my life happened. But then still that tendency of jumping into action, even though it was not safe, but I wanted to do something about it so our organization ceased its operations, but we as a group of women, organize and immediately start going out, because at that moment, people were attacked in the rural area, and they flee and come to my hometown. And given the fact that the firstareas to be attacked was the area surrounding my hometown, the remote village and suburbans of that area, people were fleeing, coming to the town, and then the government soldier and the younger it will push them back. So we started immediately organizing to help these communities. So that is how I started.

Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall 06:12

Within the the current context of the conflict ongoing in Sudan today. Can you give an overview of the situation in Darfur?

Niemat Ahmadi 06:21

Unfortunately I'm very saddened to come after 20 years of the first genocide in the 21st century to speak about another mass atrocities and genocide in Darfur.As you know, the April 15 war started in Khartoum and Merowe. This vicious cycle of violence that started as a form of

power struggle between these two generals quickly spread to across the Sudan, and Darfur has been the most impacted because for the fact that you see clear confrontation between the Rapid Support Forces and the Sudan Armed Forces in places like Khartoum, and other regions. But when it comes to Darfur, it is a systemic attack against a specific group of people by the Rapid Support Forces. In most cases, they were not Sudan Armed Forces, but the Rapid Support Forces, instead of them claiming to be fighting against the Sudan Armed Forces, unfortunately, they are systematically targeting people. So today, the entire Darfur is being controlled by the Rapid Support Forces. And just to explain to you what the situation look like as of now, that the Rapid Support Forces, when they come into the city, they first make sure that they destroy loot all the food storage, the markets, including pharmacies, and they burn the remaining. They loot people's properties, loot vehicles, so that people trying to flee are unable to flee becausethey don't have means to flee. And by doing so, they actively eliminate all the survival means for people, and that is why millions of people are trapped right now in Darfur, with exception of people from West Darfur who were forced afterthe massacre and ethnic cleansing that took place in El Geneina they were forced to flee in mass border crossing of civilians that have not been seen in recent history, mostly killing men and young people, raping women systematically and telling women, in some instance that you should be happy that now you will have our child in El Geneina. When they massacred people and killed the governor, they said, now we have liberated El Geneina, or West Darfur, from the "eabd" which is the word "slave" in Arabic. And they said it is nolonger called Dar Masalit. It is now Dar Arab, Dar which is the homeland of Masalit, now with the homeland of the Arab. So you see the intent and the systemic intention of removing, killing these people, exterminating them, but also uprooting them from their land and replacing them with Arabs groups and that, I thought, it should have shocked the world conscience and prompted them act. Unfortunately continued, and after that, they go city after city, villageafter village, targeting mostly cities and areas that inhabitant by the indigenous African tribes of Masalit, or Sagawa, and unfortunately, these are the same group: those were targeted 20 years ago for the Darfur genocide that started inearly 2000/2002/2003 and now the entire Darfur is being controlled by the Rapid Support Forces, with exception of El Fasher. It is a capital city of North Darfur state, but also is a historical capital of Darfur region, with systemic attack continued to be perpetrated every day for the last four months, it's El Fasher house, about 2 million people, most of whom are the most vulnerable groups, internally displaced people from 20 years ago who remain in camps. There is this large the largest two camps in Darfur Abeche camp and Zamzam camp. And this has not just limited to the outskirt of El Fasher, but before the large scale attack in El Fasher, they have burned the Rapid Support Forces have burned about 40 villages from the area surrounding El Fasher with intent to eliminate all food and goods coming to El Fasher, in preparation to isolate the people in El Fasher from any supplies, and after which they started attacking the city. Recently, they also systemically targeted four hospitals in El Fasher, the only remaining hospital that many people were transferred to receive treatment, including those who have wounded and then women facing emergency cases, children with severe or acute malnutrition, were in those hospitals. They bombed the hospital while patients are inside the hospitals, most of the El Fasher citizens, they move into Zamzam camp right now, many have been trapped in their homes, while the Rapid Support Forces is targeting civilians. Also the Sudan Armed Forces using air strike, randomly, bumping mostly hit civilian residents, public services, including electric service, water sources, markets and other public services like schools and hospitals. So today, people in El Fasher don't have many options. Unfortunately, they either remain and die by bullets or air bombardment or flea, and they have no way to go, because El Fasher has no neighboring countries, has no nearby, any borders that they can cross. The closest place is Libya, which is miles and miles away, ina desert. Many people who attempted to flea died in the desert in Libya, if you were able to make it. So the situation in Darfur right now, it's the worst humanitarian and civilian protection crisis that we have not seen in our lifetime, and I don't

think we will see in any place, the hunger has been already declared. Famine has been declared and back in February of this year, UNICEF or Doctors without Borders, stated that a child dies every two hours. That threshold has been surpassed now, and people who feel at El Fasher have not received any humanitarian aid, because the last humanitarian who remain in El Fasher, they were forced to flee after the intensive attack recently. So the situation in Darfur right now, I think if nothing is being done we will see the highest mass deaths of civilians that is unprecedented. We have been calling and talking to the international community, but things seems to me, very slow, but also the warring parties are adamant to continue fighting without regard tocivilian life, but in Darfur all civilians are the one who are bearing the brunt of all the attacks.

Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall 15:31

Yeah, it really stands out the way you said that what's happening now is unprecedented number of deaths and a level of harm not seen in your lifetime. Given you know the the comparison to what happened in Darfur 20 years ago, it just shows how stark the current situation is. I know you've mentioned the attack on the hospital that was treating women and children and instances of sexual violence, but what are the specific risks or unique impacts of the current situation on women and girls in particular?

Niemat Ahmadi 16:08

Well, unfortunately, in this recent war in Sudan, sexual and gender-based violence become the defining feature of this war. From day one, women were targeted for abduction all forms of sexual violence, including sexual slavery, forced marriages and many women have been abducted. Until today nobody knows there whereabouts. Families were silent by the fear of retaliation, and in Darfur, today, the more we see the attack, the more incidents of sexual and gender based violence that are reported. And we see from those who are on theground and eyewitnesses report that every day you see attack escalated, that means escalated attacks on women and escalated cases of sexual and gender-based violence. The youngest victim has been a seven-year-old child, and women of all ages have been systematically targeted in a way that is unprecedented, unfortunately, and it is increasing. What is really hard is that there is no access to services or treatment for women or either trauma counseling or psychosocial support. People are on the run constantly, so families are left with very limited options. Sometimes they have survivors who are in dire need of health assistance, but there is no place nearby that you can reach and in order to take survivors to far away places, it takes a lot and families have to make those choices between helping their entire family survive with the little thats left for them, or help transport the survivors to receive medical attention. And in most cases, that is not even an option in Darfur, in many areas, going, a few hospitals that remain functioning are fully controlled by the Rapid Support Forces, like in the Nyala, in - and in El Geneina victims and survivors their families, they cannot go to these hospitals because these arehospitals that are fully controlled by the attackers. UNICEF tried really hard to provide medical supply to set up their hospitals or clinics to help people the Rapid Support Forces systemically restricted the medical supply coming into the area, the insecurity have forced them out, so women are left with no option, and in all our conversation with those who are working on the ground, with survivors that we talk to and families that sexual and reproductive health has been the biggest gap. Because also, even in Khartoum and in other places. In the areas in eastern Sudan and northern Sudan, where there is relatively safe and stable areas that many specialized doctors

have left that country because in the early days in the attack, there was systemic targeting of medical personnel and also abduction of doctors. Sometimes, because of the Rapid Support Forces, wanted to take them away so they can take them to remote areas to treat their wounded soldiers. And so the situation for women is really dire, as of now.

Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall 20:18

Can you tell a little bit about the work that your organization is currently doing amidst the situation in Darfur?

Niemat Ahmadi 20:26

Well, our organization has been faced with unprecedented challenges, because before the war we were running about five projects, and most of these projects were capacity building, movement building organizing, and we only had one project that is GBV prevention, access to justice and then documentation of human rights violation. When the war started, all those projects were suspended because most of those projects were meant for the interim period during the transition, and we were hoping for a transition when the war started, all the internationals have left the country, including international humanitarianagencies and our people left with nobody but themselves, and we immediately jumped into action, even though we did not have enough resources. We haven'tdone humanitarian before because our organization has very small, limited capacity, but we jump into action because there was this huge gap. We immediately started fundraising with the diaspora communities individual donors, and immediately set up volunteer groups everywhere that there is a need. And until today, we have volunteers and teams in Zamzam camp that are providing assistance to those in need. In addition to documenting human rights violations and documentation of GBV. We also set up safe spaces called Women Empowering Women Centers, as safe space for survivors to receive treatment and counseling and also to be away in a safe place where they can't heal. In those areas are all run by local focal points and volunteers who are trained even before the war started, because the way we use is to train people from within the community, so that in the event that international NGOs or those who are coming from outside and unable to operate, that we still have people who are trained in the community to be able to render services and helpfor their community, and that is what have helped our organization to stay the course and be able to provide support for our community. We also are documenting GBV cases. We also help with protection for human rights defender, mostly women human rights defenders, and then also relocation of survivors. In addition to our international advocacy, we have done hundreds of briefing since the start of war to members of the international community, including UN Security Council. We did advocacy around Human Rights Council. We collaborated with the Fact Finding Mission and Panel of Experts trying to make sure that these agencies are able to reach those who can inform their reporting, and we also have been doing advocacy around accountability. We have been the first to prompt the prosecutor's office about the pattern of the attack in El Geneina in West Darfur, that exhibit the systemic attack that we have witnessed in 2003. But this even worse, and we urge them to look into that. Luckily, the prosecutor, Karim Khan, was able to extend the jurisdiction of the ICC to the current crimes. We also have been briefing US government officials that are working on Sudan. Also briefing USAID, their Sudan team, people that are on humanitarian, every now and then briefing international NGOs working on Sudan and speaking to IGAD, African Union. The organizing, work has mainly been organizing civil society groups and making sure that these policy makers, hear from them, especially women, civil society diaspora, civil society, and also human rights defenders, some of those who fled the country and living in the neighboring country right now, but they are fully informed. They know what is going on, and they can better inform the policy makers. We've been also advocating for delivery, urgent delivery of humanitarian aid, as well as calling for authorization of forces to protect civilians. I'm just coming back from New York for almost three days, a busy week in New York, also spoke at the commemoration of the mandate of the Secretary General's representative on sexual violence in conflict zone. As well as also have private meetings with several member states who are working on options currently for delivery of humanitarian aid to Sudan, as well as also seeking advice for civilian protection options and needs on the ground and what else that needed to be done. So we, despite the size of our organization, limitation of resources, we have been all over the place because of the dire situation, but also the need, especially in the early days, when the war started, and there are not many people, all those in Sudan were cut off, especially cutting the communication services has been worse than cutting food and water, because people were led to die simply because they were unable to make that call. So at that time, we move aggressively to reach everyone who may do something to help with regard to the situation in Sudan and Darfur. And in the early days, the media was focused heavily in Khartoum, but there wasnt attention on that forum as a remote areas like South Kordofan. So we also made sure that we draw attention to these areas, that we speak to policy makers, that we speak to media and others, and we also organize people. People in the diaspora are so traumatized because the entire country has been in this crisis situation, and every single person have lost a family member or have a family member trapped somewhere that they need to get them from A to Z. So people are so overwhelmed, traumatized, we also wanted to make sure that we continue to coordinate and organize our community, encourage them to do something, and that encourage them to collectively work, to do something to especially advocating and exercising pressure on the international community. So we have been also participating in several other group like the advocacy groups that are doing advocacy on Sudan, with our international partners, doing advocacy around

Niemat Ahmadi 28:47

international foras, like Human Rights Council and others to ensure that we influence, including advocating for the renewal of the mandate of the Fact Finding Mission, continuation of the Panel of the Experts also have been calling for accountability, extension of jurisdiction of the ICC to entire Sudan, expansion of the embargo to cover Sudan, but also enforcing the existing one. So we have been doing a lot, actually, and we are doing things that we have not done before as an organization, but when it comes to the need of the people on the ground, we want it. I know it is not enough, but we want it at the least, to keep the hope that we, our people, are not forgotten, that they know that we are here for them, that we do our best. We may not be able to respond to their need, but that we have not abandoned them, and that is what we are trying to do. We also have presence in Uganda. We brought some of our Khartoum team to Uganda currently are working to support our Sudan team. We also have established presence in South Sudan, and we are on the process to register to operate in Chad. We as an organization, we wanted to be where our people are because of the need, even those who fell into Chad are still facing lots of challenges. Their humanitarian and emergency need have yet to be met, and we wanted to be there to inform, help inform, the service provider, humanitarian aid, and also policy maker, including where to put the funding, as well as being there to help those who fled. They are such a large number of civilsociety groups who fled with

their families from West Darfur or from across the Sudan, but they are now living as refugees in exile. We want to put them to work to provide an umbrella for them so that they can be able to render services, as they used to do back in Sudan.

Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall 31:06

I really appreciate how you started that by talking about how you did a lot of work in capacity building, and then had to pivot. I think it really highlights the wide spread effects of an atrocity situation. It's about more than just attacks on civilians and the devastation that leaves in its wake. It's also all progress on capacity building gets halted, and in many cases, goes backwards because you can't continue your program. So it's an important thing to keep in mind, in these situations, I appreciate that you mentioned that. Given that you've been doing so much advocacyat the multilateral level, as well as with different governments and the regional organizations, what are the immediate steps youthink must be taken to prevent further atrocities in Sudan, and what is the long term outlook for peace and stability?

Niemat Ahmadi 32:05

The most pressing urgent need and the steps that need to be taken right now is urgently deliver desperately needed humanitarian aid. It's really sad to see that international community, including the United States, are looking to get the warring parties stop before they can deliver humanitarian aid. And I believe humanitarian aid should not be wait until the war stops. It is the same way that we deliver humanitarian aid in Ukraine while the war is still ongoing, because sometimes you can't control those who rage war, but you can at least control your decision to help those in need, and that is not the case in Sudan. They're trying to bring parties together, trying to get ceasefire. And these are the people who created the suffering in the first place. They are the one who are perpetrating these crimes, and they are the one who are putting these people inthis dire condition, so you don't expect much of them. And what we need to see is that humanitarian aid be delivered cross border, air drop, all options that are available. We even identified route for humanitarian aid delivery, like Tina Crossing from Chad to West North and Central Darfur can be used, border of South Sudan to South Kurkhal and Nuba Mountains. El Fasher Airport is away from the fighting and it can be used by the UN planes to drop food for those in need, and there are many options that can be used. Number two, we are also urgently calling for civilian protection, and we urge the UN to authorize forces that will protect civilians at the least some areas with large number of displaced and camp like El Fasher was two of the largest displacement camps and the most vulnerable groups that are currently dying in silence. Niyala, where there is a largest camp in South Darfur, El Geneina, where ethnic cleansing have been brutally perpetrated, at least enabling these people to create a demilitarized zone with international regional forces that can not just protect civilians, but also enable. All the humanitarian actors and agencies to work safely on the ground so that they can be able to reach those in need and also accountability. I think this two step will create an enabling environment forinvestigation to take place, to document these atrocities and established records so that we can pursue accountability. And I do believe that the current crisis in Sudan is the cost of impunity for crimes committed in Darfur, including genocide, war crimes and crimes against humanity that was perpetrated 20 years ago. Most of those indicted are yet to be brought to justice, and I believe the generals were thinking, if it worked for Bashir, then it worked for us, if we can keep our weapon, keep the power, kill everybody, and we can get away with impunity, and that is what they have been doing, literally. And that's why

accountability is very important. So then these three steps will set the stake for future peace. And when we say peace, I think it has been a norm in Sudan, that international community, including the United States, they come when it comes to resolving the crisis, and we have seen this with the situation in Darfur, South Kordofan and Blue Nile, they could only negotiate with a harmful individual those with guns, with power, and maybe a few of traditional political parties, people who have reinforced the policies of the dictators and the regime that is destroying the Sudan. People like civil society groups, lawyers, women, civil society leaders and human rights defenders, youth, are not invited to the table and when the solutions are made so we are repeating the same scenario of having those who created the problem in the first place controlling the destiny of the people of Sudan again and again, and we have seen that in the interim period, the very sad situation of a missed opportunity that were there into 2019 when youth, women and civil society group were able to force a 30 years of dictator out, but then we had the military jump in again, and they were allowed to control everything, and here we are facing what we are fearing back then. So I think to establish a sustainable and lasting peace is that the two warring parties must not be allowed to be a part of any political process in the future to determine the future of Sudan. There is a need for a civilian government. And we a group, when I say we, it is a coalition of, Darfuri civil society organization with others from historically marginalized, conflict affected areas. We have developed an approach that calling for in the interim period to have a multi regional interim government that is not affiliated with political parties, it's not affiliated with the military groups, but at least selecting people, or giving peopleto select their representation from various regions of Sudan and also bring theirvision for the future of Sudan, so that we can combine the priorities of the people of Darfur with the priorities of the people of the East and the North and the Center, to have the priorities of the people of Sudan, then that will inform the process of setting up the interim period while working toward transforming the country to the future of stability and lasting peace.

Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall 39:23

In light of the unique abuses faced by women and youth in Sudan, as well as the immense role they've played in supporting their communities physically as well as socially, over the past year and a half, how important is it for women and youth to have a role in any political process going forward?

Niemat Ahmadi 39:49

I think women, the Sudanese women have important role to play, and this supposed to be informed by what women are doing right now, and what they have done over the last 30 years of Al Bashir ruling, of the years of the long standing crisis in Darfur despite being victims of the most brutal attack on them, women have demonstrated outstanding resilience and courage to stand up for themselves their communities. In the recent war, when the international community fled the Sudan, it felt gloomy and it felt like the end of the walls for the people of Sudan, but women have stepped up with youth and volunteer groups they immediately started, and they serving as frontline humanitarian workers, feeding the hungry, documenting atrocities, providing medicine for those facing chronic diseases, identifying safe route for people fleeing to safety. And at the same time, keeping the international community informed. And when it comes to negotiation, they women's voices are mostly sidelined or silence. And this time around, I think we must prioritize women's participation from the start, whether it is we as Darfur Women Action Group and our network, large network of city society, we're calling

for women participation to be from the start, whether it is deescalation of violence, achieving ceasefire or negotiating political settlement, including also human decision on humanitarianaid distribution, women must be included in participating in all level of decision making. I think participation of women is not a value added, but it is right and essential. And I do believe that Sudanese women will change the fate of Sudan. And it is a great investment that we invest in those qualities, and we must exercise pressure on those who are working to resolve the crisis in Sudan that without women participation, Sudan will not be in peace. Any solution to Sudanwill not be made because of the role that women have been playing, and the advantage that we can achieve with having women on the table, and for the fact that no woman in Sudan have perpetrated war crimes or crimes against humanity or rape or conducted a coup. Women have been, when these generals are raging war, women are serving the community. They are making peace, they are organizing, they are documenting, and they are speaking to theinternational community. They are seeking solutions. And I think that is a place to put our investment in, and this time around, we're not going to be nice to those who are making solution, to invite women to the table as a value added, but to include and integrate women's voices, women's agenda. And we are working really actively with women groups to develop unified women agenda, so that they can proactively involve in every aspect of resolving the crisis in Sudan and establishing sustainable peace, including also women inclusion in the accountability processes. And we do bring women to advocate around the ICC, but also for future accountability that women must be included in the accountability processes, not as victims and witnesses, as usually do, but as advocate and policy shapers of the court and any of the future accountability processes.

Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall 44:20

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