**ICC adds genocide charge against Sudan president**

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The International Criminal Court has added three genocide counts to the charges against Sudanese President Omar al-Beshir over the war in Darfur, in a move hailed as a "victory" by rebels.

"There are reasonable grounds to believe that (Beshir) acted with specific intent to destroy in part the Fur, Masalit and Zaghawa ethnic groups," said a new warrant issued Monday -- the court's first for genocide.

Khartoum dismissed the move as a "political" decision by The Hague-based court but the rebel Justice and Equality Movement described it as a "victory for the people of Darfur and the entire humanity".

"It will give hope to the people of Darfur that justice will be made," spokesman Ahmad Hussein told AFP.

In Khartoum, Sudan's Information Minister Kamal Obeid said that the "adding of the genocide accusation confirms that the ICC is a political court.

"The ICC decision is of no concern to us, us the Sudanese government. We focus on development," Obeid said in a statement to the official Suna news agency.

In March last year, the ICC issued a warrant for Beshir's arrest on charges of war crimes and crimes against humanity, its first ever for a sitting head of state.

But that warrant did not include three genocide charges requested by prosecutor Luis Moreno-Ocampo, who then appealed the court's decision.

In February, the ICC appeals chamber ordered judges to rethink their decision to omit genocide, saying they had made an "error in law" by setting the burden of proof too high.

UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon was "deeply concerned by the nature of charges against president Beshir", spokesman Farhan Haq told a press briefing in New York.

Ban urged the Khartoum government "to provide its full support to the work of the ICC and address issues of justice and reconciliation," he said.

In Monday's decision, the court said there were reasonable grounds to believe that villages and towns "were selected on the basis of their ethnic composition" for attack by Sudanese government forces.

"Towns and villages inhabited by other tribes, as well as rebel locations, were bypassed in order to attack towns and villages known to be inhabited by civilians belonging to the Fur, Masalit and Zaghawa ethnic groups."

It also appeared likely that "acts of rape, torture and forcible displacement were committed against members of the targeted ethnic groups", said the court.

The prosecutor had presented evidence of government forces contaminating the wells and water pumps of villages inhabited by these groups, who were also subject to forcible transfer "in furtherance of the genocidal policy", it said.

"One of the reasonable conclusions that can be drawn is that... the conditions of life inflicted on the Fur, Masalit and Zaghawa groups were calculated to bring about the physical destruction of a part of those ethnic groups."

As president and commander-in-chief, Beshir likely "played an essential role in coordinating" a common plan to this end, said the judgement.

Moreno-Ocampo, who will respond to the ruling at a press conference in Paris on Wednesday, accuses Beshir of personally instructing his forces to annihilate the Fur, Masalit and Zaghawa.

The United Nations says up to 300,000 people have died since conflict broke out in Darfur in 2003, when ethnic minority rebels took up arms against the Arab-dominated regime for a greater share of resources and power.

Sudan's government says 10,000 have been killed.

Beshir rejects the jurisdiction of the ICC, the world's only independent, permanent court with authority to try genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes, and has refused to hand over two key allies wanted for crimes in Darfur.

Rights groups hailed the ICC decision and urged world powers to work towards Beshir's swift arrest and trial, but also expressed concern the ruling could prompt further retaliation by the Khartoum government against civilians.

"President al-Beshir's stonewalling on the initial ICC warrant against him appears only more outrageous now that he's also being sought for genocide," said Elise Keppler, senior counsel with the International Justice Program at Human Rights Watch.

US President Barack Obama should make clear his support for peace in Sudan "by sending the message that consequences will result from any retaliation against Sudanese civilians as a result of this warrant, and by building stronger international support for this warrant," said John Prendergast, who co-founded the Enough Project.

During his visit to the region next week, US special envoy Scott Gration will renew his call for Beshir to "cooperate fully" with the court, State Department spokesman Philip Crowley said.