November 2006

DARFUR CRISIS

Death Estimates Demonstrate Severity of Crisis, but Their Accuracy and Credibility Could Be Enhanced

GAO Accountability · Integrity · Reliability

Highlights

Highlights of GAO-07-24, a report to congressional requesters

Why GAO Did This Study

In 2003, violent conflict in Darfur, Sudan, broke out between rebel groups and government troops and government-supported Arab militias. While few would dispute that many thousands of Darfur civilians have died, less consensus exists about the total number of deaths attributable to the crisis. Estimates by the Department of State (State) and other parties report death tolls up to about 400,000 for varying populations and periods of time between February 2003 and August 2005. Based on the views of experts convened by GAO and the National Academy of Sciences, interviews with estimate authors, and a review of relevant literature, this report (1) evaluates six Darfur death estimates, (2) identifies general challenges to estimating deaths in such crises, and (3) discusses measures to improve death estimates.

What GAO Recommends

To safeguard the U.S. government's credibility as a source of reliable death estimates, GAO recommends ensuring greater transparency regarding the data and methods used for such estimates. GAO also recommends that the U.S. government consider other measures suggested by the experts to help address gaps in data and improve the quality of any future death estimates. State and the U.S. Agency for International Development agreed with GAO's recommendations.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-07-24.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact David Gootnick at (202) 512-3190 or gootnickd@gao.gov.

What GAO Found

The experts GAO consulted did not consistently rate any Darfur death estimate as having a high level of accuracy; moreover, they noted that all the studies had methodological strengths and shortcomings. Most of the experts had the highest overall confidence in estimates by the Centre for Research on the Epidemiology of Disasters (CRED) and had a slightly lower level of confidence in State's estimate. Many experts believed State's lower-end estimate was too low. Additionally, the published documents describing State's estimate lacked sufficient information about its data and methods to allow it to be replicated and verified by external parties.

Estimating deaths in a humanitarian crisis such as that in Darfur involves numerous challenges. For example, in Darfur, difficulties in collecting mortality data, such as lack of access to particular geographical regions, impacted the data's quality and led to data gaps. Because of such data gaps, some Darfur death estimates relied on potentially risky assumptions and limited contextual information. Further, limitations in estimates of Darfur's population before and during the crisis may have led to over- or underestimates of the death toll. Finally, varying use of baseline mortality rates—the rate of deaths that would have occurred without the crisis—may have led to overly high or low death estimates.

The experts proposed and rated a wide range of measures that U.S. agencies could take to improve the quality and reliability of death estimates for Darfur and future humanitarian crises. Among these measures, the most highly rated was ensuring that public documentation of the data and methods used contain sufficient information to enable external replication and verification of the estimates. Other very highly rated measures include collecting and maintaining data for specific periods of time and geographic areas and housing the responsibility for making estimates in a reputable independent body.

Darfur Village Burning

Source: United States Holocaust Museum. Photograph by Brian Steidle.