Match Battalion:

Confirmation of the Razing of Um Bartumbu Village, South Kordofan, Sudan

July 20, 2012

Screen grab from an undated cellphone video filmed by a member of the Match Battalion and obtained by SSP from Eyes and Ears Nuba. In the video, a member of the Match Battalion carries a torch through a village. The cellphone video was reportedly found on the body of a PDF militia member on or about March 2012 and released to the public on June 12, 2012.

COVER: DigitalGlobe near infrared imagery of Um Bartumbu Village, South Kordofan, Sudan taken on March 27, 2012.
At least 80 buildings in the Nuba Mountains village of Um Bartumbu, South Kordofan, Sudan were burned sometime between November 12 and November 28, 2011, according to Satellite Sentinel Project, or SSP, analysis of Landsat and DigitalGlobe satellite imagery.

The burned buildings, which comprise approximately 90 percent of the village infrastructure, appear to be consistent with civilian residential structures. The pattern in which these buildings were apparently burned is consistent with the intentional targeting of civilian infrastructure.

These findings are based on SSP analysis of near infrared imagery used to detect evidence of fire. Imagery was captured in November 2011 by Landsat 7—a satellite operated by the United States Geological Survey in a joint initiative with NASA—and confirmed by analysis of additional imagery taken in January 2012 by DigitalGlobe.

SSP’s findings corroborate new eyewitness reports that a joint unit of Sudanese forces known as the Match Battalion, comprised mostly of Sudan Armed Forces accompanied by Popular Defense Forces, or PDF, razed the village in late 2011.
In addition, SSP has obtained new videos and photographs taken by Eyes and Ears Nuba, a group of citizen journalists based in rebel-held territory in the Nuba Mountains, who traveled to the abandoned village on June 16, 2012, to document evidence of its razing. Um Bartumbu sits in a no-man’s-land in the on-going conflict between the Government of Sudan and the rebel forces of the Sudan Revolutionary Front.

An undated cellphone video obtained by SSP from Eyes and Ears Nuba shows Sudanese forces who call themselves “Katiba Kabreet,” Arabic for the Match Battalion, razing a village. In the video, Sudanese men fire guns and carry torches as residential compounds burn. Most wear matching uniforms and boots, and are dressed in a manner consistent with Sudan Armed Forces. Some wear mismatched uniforms and tennis shoes, and are dressed in a manner consistent with PDF militia forces.¹

“Matches, where are the matches? Burn this house,” one soldier commands in Sudanese Arabic. A group of soldiers stands in front of a grinding mill, and discusses whether to loot the food inside before setting fire to the mill.
The Associated Press, which first reported the existence of the cellphone video on June 12, stated that the AP could not confirm the location or date of the alleged razing. The Government of Sudan denied that the village was razed and asserted that the video is a piece of rebel propaganda.

Four days after the AP report, an Eyes and Ears Nuba team led by American citizen journalist Ryan Boyette traveled to Um Bartumbu, equipped with cameras that feature built-in GPS to record the geo-coordinates of each photo. They also made available to SSP video interviews with eyewitnesses, including a rebel soldier, a village elder, and a woman displaced from the village.

A Nuban soldier from the Sudan People’s Liberation Army-North, or SPLA-N, rebel force reported that she obtained the cellphone video from the dead body of a PDF militia member following a reported battle on or about March 2012 in the Jebel Toma area of the Nuba Mountains. She reported that she recognized the man, whom she identified as Mahdi, because he came from her hometown of el-Feid, South Kordofan.

The Nuban soldier reported that she had been present, and protecting civilians, when forces aligned with the Government of Sudan razed el-Feid in the spring of 2011.

SSP analysis of the cellphone video, corroborated by photos and satellite imagery, confirms that the mill in the cellphone video is consistent with the grinding mill located at Um Bartumbu.

New photos and a new video interview with a village elder, taken by Eyes and Ears Nuba and obtained by SSP, show that the mill’s generator, door, windows, and roof have been removed and the walls of the structure appear to be scorched. In these photos and videos, taken on June 16, 2012, it is apparent that all but a few buildings have been burned and their roofs have been removed.

This visual evidence corroborates eyewitness reports that Sudanese forces returned to Um Bartumbu later in the spring of 2012 to loot valuable zinc roofs and any metal doors and windows from buildings in the village except the mosque. DigitalGlobe satellite imagery shows that the roofs of the buildings in Um Bartumbu remained as of March 27, 2012.

The elder reported that the village’s population of Muslims and Christians—comprised of some 50 Nuban homesteads, including approximately 250 adults from the Kawalib ethnic group and an unspecified number of children—abandoned Um Bartumbu when the Sudanese forces arrived. He reported that Um Bartumbu had supported the
Sudan People’s Liberation Movement-North, or SPLM-N, political party, and had been relatively prosperous, as evidenced by the fact that villagers jointly purchased a grinding mill powered by a generator. They had also built a community storehouse for preserving foodstocks, including 300 bags of sorghum, plus some sesame and beans, according to the elder.

In addition, the Enough Project interviewed humanitarian sources who reported that the village and surrounding area were a stronghold of support for the SPLM-N political party. Humanitarian sources also reported to the Enough Project that the village had hosted a small clinic, a grinding mill, a mosque and a Sudanese Church of Christ.

The systematic destruction of Um Bartumbu, through the razing of civilian infrastructure, can constitute a crime against humanity and represents a gross violation of human rights.

Endnotes:


BEFORE: The DigitalGlobe near infrared satellite image (above), taken on September 11, 2011, shows the Sudanese village of Um Bartumbu prior to the village being destroyed by fire. The vegetation around the village (which appears red in the near-infrared imagery) appears healthy and unharmed. The village itself does not appear to be damaged in any way.

Near Infrared Imagery Explained
Near infrared imagery presents healthy vegetation in shades of red, with the healthier vegetation appearing a brighter shade of red. Conversely, vegetation that has been destroyed by fire appears dark gray in color. The clear delineation between the healthy and burned vegetation makes accurate analysis possible.
Landsat 7 satellite imagery from November 12, 2011 shows the main area of Um Bartumbu village to be unburned (burns appear black or gray in near-infrared satellite imagery, while healthy vegetation appears red). Imagery from November 28, 2011 shows clear evidence of fire in the main area of the village. Landsat 7 is operated by the United States Geological Survey in a joint initiative with NASA. Note: In 2003, Landsat 7's scan line corrector failed, causing an anomaly which looks like lines across the image. However, the data that is present is still scientifically valid and useful.
Comparison of a DigitalGlobe near infrared image (left) captured on September 21, 2011 before the burn, and a Landsat 7 satellite image (close-up, right), using the Sudanese Church of Christ as a reference point to show the burn scar in Um Bartumbu village on November 28, 2011.
AFTER: The DigitalGlobe satellite image (above), taken on January 22, 2012, shows the Sudanese village of Um Bartumbu, after it has been apparently destroyed by fires. A large portion of the vegetation within the village and the surrounding area has sustained extensive fire damage. Evidence of burning extends more than 6 miles (10 km) to the west and south of the village. Although it is clear that the great majority of the village infrastructure suffered fire damage, satellite imagery alone cannot confirm the destruction of the Sudanese Church of Christ, storerooms, mosque, or grinding mill because the metal roofs appear intact at the time this image was taken.
Photos and DigitalGlobe satellite imagery show Um Bartumbu village’s Sudanese Church of Christ and its adjoining storehouse on March 27, 2012 (near infrared), on January 22, 2012 (close-up, inset) and June 16 (photos). In the January and March images, the roofs appear intact. The June photos show that the roofs have been removed. This corroborates eyewitness reports that Sudanese forces returned in spring 2012 to loot valuable zinc roofs.
Photos and DigitalGlobe satellite imagery show the communal grinding mill in Um Bartumbu village on March 27, 2012 (near infrared), June 16 (inset photo) and January 22, 2012 (close-up). In the photo, a village elder stands in front of the mill. The mill’s generator, door, windows, and roof have been removed and the walls of the structure appear to be scorched.
Grinding Mill

(Top Left): Interior of grinding mill at Um Bartumbu. Humanitarian sources interviewed by the Enough Project reported that Um Bartumbo had hosted a grinding mill, a clinic, a mosque, and a Sudanese Church of Christ.

(Bottom Left): Screen grab from an undated cellphone video filmed by a member of the Match Battalion and obtained by SSP from Eyes and Ears Nuba. In the video, Sudanese forces who call themselves the Match Battalion approach this structure, identify it as a mill, and discuss whether to loot it and take any food inside before burning it.

(Bottom Right): Exterior of grinding mill at Um Bartubu. An elder from Um Bartuba reported that the villagers pooled their resources to purchase a communal grinding mill, powered by a diesel generator. The mill represents a relatively rare resource for a small village in South Kordofan, Sudan. The elder reported that in the spring of 2012, Sudanese forces looted the mill of its generator and red metal windows and doors, as well as the valuable zinc roofs from the mill, the clinic, the church, and several storage facilities. He reported that since the mill is now fully exposed to weather, the structure is crumbling.
Photos and DigitalGlobe satellite imagery show a civilian residential structure in Um Bartumbu village on March 27, 2012 (near infrared), June 16 (inset photo) and January 22, 2012 (close-up). The civilian residential compound was apparently destroyed by fire, as evidenced by the burn marks in the near infrared imagery and confirmed by photos captured by Eyes and Ears Nuba.
Photos and DigitalGlobe satellite imagery show the village mosque in Um Bartumbu village on March 27, 2012 (near infrared), June 16 (inset photo) and January 22, 2012 (close-up). The imagery of the mosque shows that it is the only building in the village from which the roof was not taken sometime between March and June, 2012. However, a village elder reported that the wind blew down one roof panel, which remains on the ground.
About the Satellite Sentinel Project and the Partners

SSP launched on December 29, 2010, with the goals of preventing a return to full-scale civil war between northern and southern Sudan as well as detecting, deterring and documenting threats to civilians along both sides of the border. SSP focuses world attention on pending incidents of mass violence in the Sudans and uses imagery and analysis to generate rapid responses on human rights and human security concerns.

The project works like this: A constellation of three DigitalGlobe satellites passing over Sudan and South Sudan captures imagery of possible threats to civilians, detects bombed and razed villages, or notes other evidence of mass atrocities or pending mass violence. SSP analyzes the imagery, open source data, and information from sources on the ground to produce reports.

The Enough Project contributes field reports, policy analysis, and communication strategy and, together with Not On Our Watch, pressures policymakers by urging the public to act. DigitalGlobe provides high-resolution satellite imagery and analysis conducted by the DigitalGlobe Analysis Center.

SSP is the first sustained public effort to systematically monitor and report on potential hotspots and threats to human security in near real-time.

SSP is primarily funded by Not On Our Watch. To support the Satellite Sentinel Project, donate at satsentinel.org.