

CAIRO (Net) — A Sudanese paramilitary group attacked civilians in the war-scarred region of South Darfur, killing at least seven people and wounding 20 more, local activists and a rebel group said Friday.

The assault in the troubled province came a week after government-linked armed groups stormed a protest camp in North Darfur and killed 13 people.

The latest attack was staged Thursday by armed men who opened fire on people headed to their farms in the town of Gereida, some 107 kilometers (66 miles) south of South Darfur's provincial capital, said Mohamed Abdel-Rahman al-Nayer, a spokesman for a rebel group known as the Sudan Liberation Movement.

Seven people were killed, said Adam Regal, a spokesman for a local organization that helps run displacement camps in Darfur.

Late Friday, al-Nayer put the death toll at 15, saying several more people had succumbed to their wounds.

The flashes of violence in Darfur have threatened to destabilize the country's fragile political transition. In April of last year, a sweeping pro-democracy protest movement toppled longtime autocrat Omar al-Bashir, ushering in a transitional government jointly composed of civilian and military leaders.

Al-Bashir is imprisoned in the capital, Khartoum, on corruption charges, although the International Criminal Court has sought for a decade to arrest him on charges of genocide and crimes against humanity over his role in the Darfur conflict.

Sudan's government has vowed to end the conflicts in the country's far-flung provinces in hopes of slashing military spending, which eats up 80% of the national budget.

Rebel groups from Darfur and southern Sudan have for months engaged in peace talks. As part of a wider effort to hold former officials to account, the public prosecutor has pledged to investigate alleged atrocities in Darfur.

Yet sporadic violence continues, with each new attack fueling fears that ruling authorities may not deliver on their promises.

"The militia that committed this crime is supported by the old regime," al-Nayer said, referring to the Rapid Support Forces, a paramilitary unit drawn from the Janjaweed militias accused of mass killings and rapes in Darfur in the 2000s.

The group continues to wield power in Khartoum. Gen. Mohammed Hamdan Dagalo, the unit's commander, is deputy head of Sudan's ruling council.

There was no immediate comment from the Rapid Support Forces about Thursday's attack.

"We are calling on the government to play its role in protecting civilians, arresting criminals and disarming the militias," al-Nayer said.

Sit-ins have sprung up across Darfur in recent weeks as people, mostly those displaced by the waves of fighting in the region, press demands for unhindered access to their farmlands and the resignation of provincial security officials, who they say fail to protect them against frequent paramilitary attacks.

A government delegation earlier this week visited the protest camp of Fata Borno in North Darfur, the site of the recent deadly crackdown. There, Gen. Abdelrahim Hamdan Dagalo, deputy commander of the Rapid Support Forces, pledged to launch an investigation into the dispersal of the sit-in and deploy forces to better protect farmers during the agricultural season, according to Sudan's state-run news agency.

Yet soon after the delegation met, footage surfaced online from Gereida, showing a woman carried on a stretcher with a bullet lodged in her head, homes torched in an alleged arson attack — and later — shrouded bodies lowered into a mass grave.

Meanwhile, a several hours' drive north, around 32 activists were arrested in a dragnet targeting protesters and displaced people this week, said Regal, the camp spokesman.

In a statement Friday, the Khartoum-based Darfur Bar Association confirmed that several advocates had been swept up in North Darfur, including one of its own attorneys providing legal aid for detainees in Kutum, where security forces dispersed another protest camp last week.

The arrests of lawyers and advocates sends "a clear message" that transitional authorities are continuing the same repressive Bashir-era tactics, the association said.