I. Introduction and key findings

In recent years, the presence of arms in refugee and internally displaced person (IDP) camps in the Darfur region has led observers to describe them as militarized. Though the term is evocative, it is imprecise and does not adequately describe the complex situations in which many displaced Darfurians are living. The militarization label has consequences that extend beyond semantics: it potentially compromises the safety of civilians inside the camps by exposing them to raids, while simultaneously diverting attention from other serious and complex dynamics.

There are currently around 2.5 million IDPs in Darfur, with an additional 230,000 Darfurian refugees across the border in Chad. At the end of 2007 there were an estimated 81 IDP gatherings in Darfur, 21 of which were organized camps (UN Human Rights Council, 2007). Only about one-third of IDPs live in large, highly visible camps, while others live in smaller camps and gatherings that share land, resources, and vulnerabilities with nearby villages. A substantial number live in towns and villages among the local population. These patterns are similar for refugees residing across the border in Chad, a large number of whom live in 12 organized camps, while others remain settled in or around villages closer to the border.

The situation in Darfur and the surrounding region has deteriorated in recent years, particularly since the signing of the Darfur Peace Agreement (DPA) in May 2006. This broad-ranging agreement aimed to create the basis for a durable peace and established mechanisms for addressing the underlying causes of the conflict, including power and wealth sharing provisions. The DPA was highly controversial, however, and at the time of the conference, was signed by only one of three participating rebel groups, the Sudan Liberation Army/Minni Minnawi (SLA/MM). Though other groups later signed a ‘Declaration of Commitment’ to the agreement, the SLA/Abdul Wahid (SLA/AW), a particularly influential actor, has refused to engage in subsequent negotiations. There is significant popular support for Abdul Wahid, and it is widely felt that...