Bin Laden calls for jihad in Darfur
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By Yara Bayoumy

DUBAI (Reuters) - Al Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden urged his followers to prepare for a long war against Western would-be occupiers in Sudan’s Darfur region, according to an audiotape attributed to him which aired on Sunday.

The speaker, who sounded like the Saudi-born militant, also said on the tape broadcast on Al Jazeera television that the West’s shunning of the Hamas Palestinian government showed it was waging a "Crusader-Zionist war" on Muslims.

"I call on the mujahideen and their supporters in Sudan ... and the Arabian peninsula to prepare all that is necessary to wage a long-term war against the Crusaders in western Sudan," bin Laden said, accusing the West of seeking to divide Sudan.

Sudan hosted bin Laden in the 1990s, but on the tape he criticised Khartoum for not enforcing Islamic sharia law throughout the country and made clear his call to arms in Darfur was in spite of his differences with the Sudanese government.

Criticising a U.S.-backed peace deal between Khartoum and southern rebels, bin Laden accused the United States of planning to send "Crusader troops to occupy the region and steal its oil under the cover of preserving security there".

Some U.N. troops have arrived in southern Sudan, the first of an expected 10,000 peacekeepers to be sent there. Sudan is resisting pressure for U.N. peacekeepers to deploy in Darfur.

"This means that we are coming up to a new Qaeda in Darfur similar to that in Afghanistan," Faris bin Houzam, a journalist who specialises in al Qaeda, told Reuters.

Bin Laden accused Washington of fuelling strife in the country.

The United States is pressing for U.N. sanctions against the Sudanese government for its part in the Darfur conflict, which erupted in 2003 when mostly non-Arab tribes revolted, accusing the Arab-dominated authorities of neglecting them.

Khartoum retaliated by arming mainly Arab militia, known as Janjaweed, who began a campaign of murder, rape and plunder that drove more than 2 million villagers into squalid camps in Darfur and in neighbouring Chad. Khartoum denies responsibility.

"WAR AGAINST MUSLIMS"
Bin Laden said the Darfur crisis and Western efforts to isolate the Palestinian government since Hamas won January elections were part of an anti-Muslim campaign.

"Their rejection of Hamas affirms that it is a Crusader-Zionist war against Muslims," he said, although he also criticised the Islamist group for breaking what he said was a taboo against "joining infidel assemblies".

He said people in the West shared responsibility for their countries’ "war against Islam".

In the brief excerpts of the tape that Al Jazeera aired, he did not repeat his assertion in the last audiotape attributed to him broadcast on January 19 that al Qaeda was preparing attacks in the United States but was open to a conditional truce with Americans.

But his remarks about the complicity of Westerners in the policies of their governments appeared to be an argument that they were fair game for revenge attacks by militants.

"The war is a responsibility shared between the people and the governments. The war goes on and the people are renewing their allegiance to its rulers and masters," bin Laden said.

"They send their sons to armies to fight us and they continue their financial and moral support while our countries are burnt and our houses are bombed and our people are killed."

An Al Jazeera official declined to say how the channel had obtained the tape. A U.S. intelligence official said technical analysis was under way to determine its authenticity.

Al Jazeera did not say if the tape was dated, but it would have to have been recorded after March 14 because of bin Laden’s reference to an Israeli raid on a West Bank prison on that date.

"What your ally, Israel, did by invading and demolishing the Jericho prison with complicity from the United States and Britain is example enough about the flagrant violations against our nation and brothers," bin Laden said on the tape.

The Qaeda leader, on the run since the U.S. campaign to oust Afghanistan’s Taliban government in 2001 after the September 11 attacks, said Western leaders had ignored his truce offers.

"They do not want a truce unless it is from our side only ... they insist on continuing their Crusader campaign against our nation and to loot our wealth," bin Laden said.

Bin Laden and his right-hand man, Ayman al-Zawahri, are believed to be hiding in a mountainous area on the border between Pakistan and Afghanistan.

Bin Laden also called for boycotting the United States and European countries over the controversial cartoons lampooning Islam’s Prophet Mohammad first published by a Danish newspaper.

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(Additional reporting by Firouz Sedarat and Inal Ersan)