Two recent developments have allowed the Sudanese government to get away with increasing atrocities in the Darfur region, warned John Ashworth, a spokesman for Sudan Focal Point, who is visiting Australia on behalf of Caritas Australia during Project Compassion to warn about the worsening of the Sudan crisis.

"The Asian tsunami has taken the media's attention away from Darfur. And the recent peace settlement in the South, announced in early January, has given many in the West the impression that the Darfur crisis is now over," said Mr. Ashworth.

"But in fact, nothing could be further from the truth. The situation for people in the Darfur region has actually worsened - and is likely to deteriorate even more," he said.

Mr. Ashworth said the attention that the Asian tsunami has received encourages Sudan observers because it shows many people want to alleviate the suffering of those less fortunate than themselves.

"But unfortunately, it means that people are not getting the information about the Sudan that they deserve and so are under the impression that the crisis has finished," he said.

"Many people do not realise that the headlines relating to peace negotiations in the South are actually about a different conflict. There immediate reaction to the headlines is to feel relieved that the conflict is over but of course it isn't," he said.

"This reaction is understandable because people are desperate for closure to situations that reveal so much despair," he said.

Mr. Ashworth said that the difference between the issues in the South and Darfur needs to be understood to put both situations in their proper context.

The Darfur region is actually a region of the North. The conflict in the South - which now appears to be settled - has actually been on-going for many years, causing tsunami style suffering 'many times over'," he explained.

"The South of the Sudan has been marginalized by the Sudanese government for many years. It is hard to imagine the lack of investment that has been made in the people of the South. They have nothing, little in the way of infrastructure and no state commitment to, for example, education and health.

"They have no roads, no water, no electricity and no telecommunications services. If there are hospitals or similar service supplied at all, this is usually by the Churches and NGOs.

"In the 1970s oil was discovered in the South, so the strategy of the government, highly centralized in the North, then became one of dividing the loyalties of groups who had been agitating for the rights of the people in the South, so both groups would be severely weakened," he said.

It is the coalition of Churches who have worked to ensure that groups in the South are not cynically turned against each other, Mr. Ashworth said.

This is not done to antagonize the North but because if the people are united, it is far more likely that a just and lasting peace can be achieved.

"In fact, the Sudanese government began carrying out ethnic cleansing campaigns around the oil fields of the South as early as 1997," he said.

Mr Ashworth said that recent interest by the American administration in monitoring the events in the Sudan had been helpful in bringing peace to the South. The US government is motivated by its fear of Sudan's potential as a terrorist state and continues to watch the situation carefully because of plans it has for a restructured middle east. In addition, the US needs to diversify its sources of oil supply.

"All these factors mean that the US is interested in the Sudan and this has a protective effect. But unfortunately the priorities of the US are not about the long-term interests of the people of the Sudan. And many of us have grave concerns about the vulnerability of the South, once the US loses interest in it."

Mr. Ashworth said the peace agreement recently struck between the North and the South 'looks good on paper'. The people of the South have been offered a six year interim period, after which they will be given the opportunity to vote on seceding from the North.

"But the Southern Sudanese are very concerned that, given the 50 year history of agreements broken by the North that this agreement may also be undermined," he said.

So how can the people of the Australia help the Sudanese of the South?

Mr. Ashworth identified six ways.

"The first is for people to continue to remain informed about the Sudan. This is something that Caritas Australia has been very committed to.

"If people continue to educate themselves about what is happening in the Sudan then it makes it easier for them to lobby the Australian government to maintain pressure on the Sudan through international forums. The international community needs to maintain its focus on human rights and to ensure that current atrocities being committed in Darfur end immediately.

"In addition, there are oil companies, particularly in China and Malaysia that are part of your region, which need to be brought to account because their investment in Sudanese oil fields has made them complicit in ethnic cleansing and other civil rights abuses in the South. This is an issue that I urge Australians to educate themselves about.

"The second way Australia can help is to continue dialogues about how to provide the manpower needed in the South to build infrastructure. These days we no longer have the volunteer programs of the 1970s when young Europeans went to the Sudan to teach skills.

"But if young Australians can keep the Sudan in mind as they gain degrees in Development Studies and International Relations then they can offer their intellectual contribution to training and sharing of information among their young peers in the Sudan.

"The days of young westerners coming to Africa to tell the Africans what to do are mercifully over. But how to involve young people - who later go on to, for example, tech in universities and take up posts in their country's foreign office? This could be explored among Australians too.

"Thirdly, although we no longer think in terms of sending missionaries to Africa, the Church in the Sudan could badly do with those who are prepared to offer more than just financial support but a relationship where each learns about the other. Increased dialogue between our Churches would be a positive thing.

"The fourth way is for aid agencies to redefine their relationships so that they pursue genuine partnerships, not paternalistic ones. This is something that Caritas Australia is very good at, and their approach needs to be adopted by other agencies.

"Fifthly, young Australians can support the intellectual work that goes into the development of civil society. Defining and then supporting the development of civil society can be elusive but Caritas Australia has pursued this vigorously and with great success in places such as East Timor and Cambodia. If young Australians can develop strategies for sharing their knowledge further afield, for example in the Sudan, then this would be a positive contribution of solving the country's problems.

"And the sixth way is to pray. I don't just mean in the sense of getting down on your knees, although this is constructive. But I mean in the sense of taking awareness about an issue. Once you take an issue on board and develop a deep awareness of it and a concern, then you can't help but act.

"And this takes us back to the beginning, since you than are more likely to become involved in email campaigns, letter writing campaigns and other strategies designed to increase the awareness of others," he explained.

Mr. Ashworth spoke at the annual Caritas Australia lunch hosted by Premier Bob Carr at State Parliament House on Monday.