

Al-Bashir Calls World's Bluff on Darfur

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International community pretends al-Bashir has agreed to a AU-UN "hybrid operation", even when all the evidence argues against such a conclusion. Fearing that President Omar al-Bashir may be on a list of Sudanese to be indicted soon of war crimes and crimes against humanity in Sudan's western region of Darfur, the African Union's heads of state and government have lost their collective nerve and withdrawn their undertaking to appoint al-Bashir as their new chairman.

Having promised the Sudanese president the top AU post a year ago, their credibility and that of the AU itself was at stake when the leaders convened for their annual summit in Addis Ababa at the end of January.

They knew that if they kept their word, pledged a year earlier at their summit in Banjul, Gambia, they would create a bizarre situation and leave themselves wide open to severe criticism and ridicule. As chairman of the AU, al-Bashir would have been expected to be an impartial mediator in the conflict in Darfur where he and his Sudanese military have been accused of genocide.

The message the AU would have sent to the world was that it condones impunity. The AU's senior civil servant, Professor Alpha Oumour Konare, chairman of the AU Commission, repeatedly urged leaders of member states to find a solution to the Darfur conflict. United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon, only a month into his new job, addressed the opening session of the summit and told Africa's political leaders "that the story of Darfur is "a tale of broken hope

Sudan's foreign minister Ali Sadiq warned the leaders gathered in Addis Ababa, the Ethiopian capital, "African heads of state will have to stick to their word, otherwise what is the point for the AU to hold "meetings and reach agreements

In a move designed to help al-Bashir save face, the AU decided that John Kufuor, Ghana's president, would assume the chairmanship because his country is this year celebrating its 50th anniversary of independence.

South Africa's president Thabo Mbeki, a master of obfuscation, was chosen to explain the backdown over al-Bashir. He told journalists at the summit, "He [al-Bashir] acknowledged the significance of Ghana's celebration of its independence." Mbeki later added, "The AU felt that everything should be done to commemorate the historic independence of Ghana in 1957. The decision taken by the AU assembly in Addis Ababa, concerning who should chair the union during 2007, had absolutely nothing to do with humiliating or rejecting Sudan and President Omar al-Bashir

But Jendayi Frazer, the United States' Under-Secretary of State for Africa, attending the summit, did not mince her words, "The AU's choice clearly shows that African leaders want the conflict in Darfur to end. I hope Bashir heard the message loudly

The withholding of the promised chairmanship from al-Bashir hinged on the question of whether the situation in Darfur had improved in the past year and whether Sudan had honoured peace agreements it has signed

In fact, most analysts are agreed that the crisis in Darfur has deteriorated since January 2006, with an increase in attacks by government forces and its militia allies on the civilian population and rebels in the vast western region which is about the size of France

Many aid organisations have been forced to close down and the UN secretary general's envoy, Jan Pronk, was summarily expelled from Sudan after he published details of Sudanese military attacks in the region

A group of six aid agencies - Oxfam International, Save the Children, Action Against Hunger, Care International, the Norwegian Refugee Council and World Vision - issued a statement at the summit stating that aid workers are facing violence on a scale not seen before in Darfur. People in need are left without help because humanitarian organisations cannot do their work. Attacks on civilians are again rising and forcing more people to flee their homes, said the agencies

The conflict has dragged on far too long and is now worse than it's ever been," said Irungu Houghton, Africa policy advisor for Oxfam Great Britain. "To wait any longer [for a peace deal] puts hundreds of thousands of lives in danger and risks a total breakdown of the entire humanitarian response. Today must be the time the AU, the UN and the international community say enough is enough

Over the past four years, it is estimated that more than 300,000 have been killed in the Darfur fighting

The six Aid organisations said in their statement that splits in the rebel movements and a widespread lack of accountability "have left Darfur increasingly lawless, leading to the direct targeting of aid workers". Aid workers in the town of Gereida, where there is a massive camp for people driven from their homes by the fighting, were in January raped, beaten and subjected to mock executions by government-aligned militia fighters, said the statement. The UN said twelve relief workers have been killed in Darfur in the past six months - more than in the previous two years combined

Houghton told IWPR that it was still too dangerous for aid workers to return to the Gereida camp, which is home to 130,000 refugees

At a media conference held in Addis Ababa by a group of 40 non-governmental organisations opposed to the proposed chairmanship of al-Bashir, spokesman Alioune Tine drew attention to a statement made by President Paul Kagame of Rwanda

Kagame said what is happening in Darfur is the mass extermination of people," said Tine. "It reminds him" of what happened during the Rwandan genocide of 1994

The conflict in Darfur has spilled over into neighbouring Chad and the Central African Republic. Rebels supported by Sudan attacked the Chad capital, N'djamena, in April last year. In November last year, the AU's Peace and Security Council held special meetings with Chad and Sudan about the conflict between the two countries. When AU heads of state on the last day of their summit discussed the report of the Peace and Security Council, sparks flew between the leaders of Sudan and Chad with allegations and counter-allegations being thrown around, with Sudan charging Chad of supporting some of the Darfur rebels

AU senior sources told IWPR that South Africa's foreign minister Nkosozana Dlamini Zuma warned heads of state that the conflict in Darfur also threatens the recently attained peace agreement in South Sudan. After years of conflict, a Comprehensive Peace Accord, CPA was signed in January 2005 between the Islamic government of Sudan and the rebel Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army, comprising Christians and animists, ending Africa's longest-running conflict

However, the accord is under tremendous pressure. The young regional government of South Sudan continually accuses Khartoum of breaking the CPA agreement. It says al-Bashir's government is not allotting it the promised share of Sudan's

oil revenues and has not set up some of the required joint north-south commissions

At the two-year anniversary of the CPA in Juba, capital of the south, in January, Salva Kiir, president of the semi-autonomous South Sudan accused al-Bashir in public of supporting die-hard rebel factions in the south who have turned on the territory's emerging government. He repeated the old allegation that Khartoum unleashed militias on civilians in the south, just as it has done with the Janjaweed (which translates literally as "evil spirits on horseback"), a traditional Arab militia, in Darfur

A small force of poorly-equipped, poorly-funded and deeply demoralised AU peacekeeper soldiers in Darfur have been unable to put a lid on the violence. Amnesty International recently reported, "Although the African Union peacekeepers in Darfur have a mandate to protect civilians, they have frequently failed to do so even when informed of impending attacks on civilians

A year ago, the AU asked the UN to take over peacekeeping operations in Darfur because the international body has access to better funding. But, with Chinese support on the UN Security Council, Sudan obtained veto power over the deployment of up to 22,500 blue helmets in Darfur

China, which has developed Sudan's oil resources and imports two-third of the production, has provided al-Bashir and the his government in Khartoum with more than 10 billion US dollars in commercial and capital investments over the past decade. It is also the regime's primary supplier of weapons, weapons technology and weapons engineering expertise. Some of the Chinese arms are manufactured in three weapons plants in Sudan

Visiting Khartoum in February, Chinese president Hu Jintao pledged to build a new presidential palace for al-Bashir

Former UN secretary-general Kofi Annan, in one of his last initiatives before handing over to Ban Ki-Moon, called a high level summit on Darfur in Addis Ababa last November. Here Sudan, the AU and the UN reached a tentative agreement on a "hybrid operation" in Darfur

Phase 1 entails a "light support package" of 70 UN staff officers and support personnel to the AU mission. In Phase 2, "heavy support" would be given, consisting of more officers as well as vehicles and equipment. In Phase 3, the number of peacekeepers will be pushed up from the current 7,000 to around 21,000

But Sudan has stymied the whole operation by raising reservations and objections to the details of Phase 2.

Sudan expert Professor Eric Reeves, of Smith College in Northampton, Massachusetts, said it takes little analysis to realise that al-Bashir and his National Islamic Front, NIF, government have no intention of ever allowing the AU-UN "hybrid operation" to begin. "Yet the world continues to pretend that al-Bashir and the NIF have somehow agreed to such a putative force, even when all the evidence argues against such a conclusion," said Professor Reeves

.Such empty bluffs, and all they imply are not lost on Khartoum's ruthless survivalists"

If left to the AU, security in Darfur will continue to deteriorate. Morale, according to humanitarian workers" on the ground, has plummeted and all too many of the AU troops have simply hunkered down, refusing to incur the risks associated with escorting humanitarian convoys, providing security for humanitarian ".operations, or protecting civilians, either in camps or rural areas

Fiona Lortan, senior political officer in the AU's defence and security division, told IWPR that the situation in Darfur will not improve unless the government accepts the entire "hybrid" peacekeeping package. "The AU does not have the capacity to end the conflict," she said. "If the situation is not resolved soon, the suffering and death toll in Darfur will increase. It is clear that the AU is not able to keep the government forces and ".the different rebel groups in check. They need the support of the UN as soon as possible

Meanwhile, the Khartoum government is waiting with bated breath for the impending announcement by Luis Moreno-Ocampo, the chief prosecutor of the International Criminal Court in The Hague, of indictments for war crimes, crimes against humanity and genocide in Darfur. The ICC is believed to have been investigating 56 people. Fear that charges and warrants for arrest will be laid against al-Bashir was one consideration for the AU when it withheld its chairmanship from Sudan's head of state. But, based on its record so far, the fledgling ICC will avoid laying charges against "big men" and concentrate its huge resources on "small fry" - in which case al-Bashir and his NIF colleagues will be able to celebrate at having .called yet another of the world community's bluffs on Darfur

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Africa :Location

ICC - International Criminal Court :Focus

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