

Darfur Peacekeepers Put on Hold

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Hybrid UN/AU force left in limbo, as fighting continues in Darfur and neighboring Chad. The Sudanese government this week postponed signing an agreement that allows United Nations and African Union peacekeepers in Darfur, despite the fact that final details of the deal have been hammered out.

The indefinite delay has left the fledgling UN force of some 9,000 peacekeepers in limbo as the humanitarian situation in Darfur continues to deteriorate.

Called the Status of Forces Agreement, the deployment deal, which was due to be signed on February 6, outlines not only how the force will be composed and equipped, but also when, where and how it will conduct peacekeeping duties in Darfur.

"[SOFA] is important to the work of the hybrid [force] because it specifies the duties and responsibilities of each party," said Nouredine Mezni, the spokesman for the United Nations Assistance Mission in Darfur, UNAMID.

Although the UN and AU peacekeepers have officially been deployed since January 1, the deployment agreement is being looked at again following a Sudanese army attack on a UN convoy in a remote area of the country in early January.

While Sudan took responsibility, saying it had not been told in advance of the convoy's movement, it rekindled discussions between UN envoys and the Sudanese government that took place on the sidelines of last week's AU summit in Addis Ababa.

At issue was Sudan's objection to the conduct of night flights by UN aircraft, as well as a demand that UN disable its communications system during so-called emergency situations. Additionally, it had insisted that the UN force be composed of only units from African nations.

Khartoum, however, reportedly backed off these demands, and Mezni told reporters this week that both the UN and the AU were satisfied with the agreement.

"All the key issues have been resolved," UN Under-Secretary-General for Peacekeeping Operations Jean-Marie Guehenno said last week in Addis Ababa. "On the composition of the force, we understand the position of the government is that [it will be] predominantly an African force.

"We want at the same time to prepare for the deployment of a few non-African units for capacity that might not be available in Africa."

Added to the force will be an infantry battalion from Thailand, two special forces units from Nepal, and a Scandinavian engineering unit.

But when the UNAMID force will be brought up to strength and fully equipped remains unclear. So far, the force consists of only about 9000 soldiers out of a projected 26,000.

Meanwhile, the UNAMID struggles to work with the largely ineffective AU force of 7,000 troops and police who have been unable to stop the violence in Darfur.

Mezni said one of the problems facing UNAMID was that its UN members have not yet provided necessary aircraft and equipment for the mission.

"The work of UNAMID is a package, so that must be provided with all its needs to perform the mandate," said Mezini.

The situation has been further complicated by the fighting in neighboring Chad in which Chadian rebels have laid siege to the capital of N'Djamena. Fighting has also erupted in Chad's eastern regions which border Darfur and which also contain hundreds of thousands of refugees from Darfur.

An estimated 200,000 people have died and at least 2 million have been displaced since fighting broke out in 2003 between Sudanese forces, allied janjaweed militias and other armed groups. Across Darfur's desolate lands, the murder of civilians and rape of women and girls continues.

One of the most vocal critics of the Sudanese government and its lack of cooperation with the UN peacekeepers has been the Justice and Equality Movement, JEM, a key Darfur rebel group.

In a wide-ranging and exclusive interview with IWPR recently in The Hague, JEM's head of training and strategic planning Abdullahi Osman El-Tom, put much of the blame for the on-going tragedy in Darfur on the international community and its apparent lack of commitment.

"Sudan has completely outmanoeuvred the international community," said El-Tom by stalling on such issues as "the selection of the [peacekeeping] force and where they come from."

The willingness to bend to Sudan's will undermines people's faith in the UN, he said. To stabilise Darfur will require troops that have the confidence of those who are being victimised, he said.

"If the troops are selected by [Sudanese president Omar] al-Bashir, people will take them as not neutral," he said, because the refugees already know that "friends of al-Bashir are unlikely to protect them".

El-Tom said al-Bashir has manipulated the UN by claiming to favour peace, but in reality "he wants peace, but on his own terms. He wants peace while remaining control in Darfur".

Al-Bashir has insisted that the UNAMID force be comprised of solely African units because he knows they won't interfere with the on-going attack on towns and villages in Darfur, he said.

“We know those who are pulling strings in the African Union are the African presidents,” said El-Tom, “and many of them have absolutely no commitment to humanitarian principles,” and they may even “feel threatened by them”.

China, which is a major developer of Sudan’s oil, shares Khartoum’s disregard for human rights, said El-Tom.

JEM, which late last year attacked a Chinese oil operation and kidnapped some Chinese oil workers, may strike again because it is an effective tactic against Sudan, El-Tom told IWPR.

He also encouraged the international community to carry out the International Criminal Court’s arrest warrants against two Sudanese.

In April 2007, ICC judges issued warrants for Sudanese government minister Ahmed Harun, and janjaweed commander Ali Kushyb. However, Khartoum has refused to accept the jurisdiction of the ICC over crimes in Darfur, insisting that the Sudanese justice system can try the suspects.

“We don’t trust the legal system in Sudan at all,” said El-Tom, adding that “maybe in future that will change”.

In the meantime, he urged the ICC to become more active and issue indictments against other higher ranking Sudanese officials.

“I would of course [have] wanted the ICC to move higher, but I would like to think other fellows [are] coming,” said El-Tom. “Kushyb and Harun would not have acted if they had not been instructed by some other people high up.

“The international community sometimes comes up with this stupid justification that [more indictments] will obstruct the peace forces. I don’t think so. It will speed it up. It will put a red line on the sand that this is a line you cannot cross.”

El-Tom agreed that despite the efforts of the international community, Sudan remains defiant. Among al-Bashir’s recent gestures was the naming the notorious janjaweed commander Mousa Hilal to a cabinet advisory position.

“Al-Bashir just makes things more difficult for himself,” said El-Tom. “Why appoint someone like this who was a criminal even before the current crisis started?”

The answer, said El-Tom, was simple, “Al-Bashir wants to send a message to the international community to say look, I can do whatever I want to do.”

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