

## Breaking the Darfur Impasse

Diplomats placing fragile hope in plans for extended African Union mission, with logistical and financial support from UN.

*By Ayesha Kajee in Johannesburg*

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The Darfur Peace Agreement, DPA, is “nearly dead” and is on a life support system that “does not function”, just five months after its ratification, according to Jan Pronk, the Special Representative of the United Nations’ Secretary-General in Sudan.

The African Union-brokered deal was mortally wounded from the outset, according to a wide range of experts, given that it was rejected by two of the three major rebel forces in Darfur. The brightest thing that Pronk, a former Dutch government minister who took up his Sudan role in June 2004, could say about the DPA was that it is “in a coma”.

Ironically, and tragically, violence against civilians has intensified since the peace agreement was signed on May 5 this year between the Sudan government and one faction of the Sudanese Liberation Movement, SLM, led by Minni Minnawi. The SLM has since joined with government forces in attacks on villages sympathetic to the two rebel movements that refused to sign the DPA. The groups who refused to sign said the DPA did not provide for the complete disarmament of government militias, or give enough influence for the people of Darfur in the central government, in Khartoum.

In some areas, Minnawi’s SLM fighters and those from other rebel groups, once welcomed as the Darfuris’ sole defence against government aggression, are now viewed with the same levels of fear as the government’s Janjaweed (evil spirits on horseback) militias, notorious for their mass killings, rape, pillage and torture.

But on September 28, Minnawi accused the government, his new ally, of launching an attack on SLM headquarters in the small western Darfur town of Giraida with deliberate intent to annihilate senior leaders. SLM spokesman Al-Tayeb Khamis Mohamed said SLM forces managed to repulse the assault, with the loss of forty lives according to some reports, and he warned that the movement would withdraw from the government in Khartoum if there were any further violations of the May peace accord.

"When it becomes certain that the peace agreement was only a means for deception, it will order the senior presidential assistant [SLM leader Minnawi] to leave the Republican Palace and return to the war which will start from Khartoum," he added.

The next day government forces clashed with supporters of the rebel group in an affluent neighborhood of Omdurman, across the River Nile from central Khartoum. At least one person died. The incident underscored the simmering tensions in the

country.

“Currently both sides of this [peace agreement] are trying to solve the conflict militarily,” said European envoy Pekka Haavisto during a three-day visit to Khartoum. “This is of course as far off the peace agreement as possible. We are giving both sides the message you should act in a disciplined way, you should give peace a chance.”

In recent months, many voices across the world have been raised in “Save Darfur” campaigns, perhaps the most fashionable current catchphrase of the First World. Global rallies have called for a decisive international action to stop the violence in Darfur, an area of desert and semi-desert the size of France where an estimated 250,000 to 400,000 peasant people have been killed in the past three years and a further 2.5 million have become refugees in what many critics have described as classic ethnic cleansing by the Khartoum government. Countless others have been maimed or raped.

Hollywood heart-throb George Clooney has addressed the UN Security Council on the issue. Oscar-winning actress Mira Sorvino, who has spent two years crusading to end the Darfur violence, was invited to address the United States Congress on the crisis in September. “Entire villages have been destroyed,” said Sorvino. “Wells stuffed with dead bodies. How can we not pay attention to this?”

South Africa’s most famous clergyman, Anglican Archbishop and Nobel Peace Prize winner Desmond Tutu, has called for international sanctions against the Khartoum government, comparing the situation in Darfur with that of Rwanda where in 1994 the international community stalled, allowing 100 days of leeway for violent groups to kill about 800,000 people.

“The world can’t keep saying ‘Never again’,” he said. “The harsh truth is that some lives are more important than others in the eye of the international community. It appears that if you are of a darker hue you are always going to end up at the bottom of the pile.”

Just as the former government in Rwanda gave weapons to Hutu militias to massacre the Tutsi, so Sudan’s pro-Arab government has joined with its Janjaweed militiamen in attacking the largely ethnically African population of Darfur. The sophisticated Arabs along the Nile in Sudan have always regarded the Darfur tribes, who are fellow Muslims, as primitive. Historically, they have been widely referred to as Zurug - roughly “niggers” - and have been subjected to a prolonged “Sudanisation” campaign.

The UN Security Council last year asked the fledgling International Criminal Court in The Hague to investigate the Darfur crisis. UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan is believed to have given the ICC’s chief prosecutor, Argentina’s Luis Moreno-Ocampo, a list of 51 people who could be charged with genocide, war crimes and crimes against humanity in Darfur under the 1998 Statute of Rome that brought the court into being in July 2002.

The list was given to Annan by Italian judge Antonio Cassese, a professor of international law from Florence who was responsible for organising the International

Criminal Tribunal for Yugoslavia. Cassese was sent to Darfur by the UN Security Council with a 30-member team and returned to New York with nine crates of evidence detailing rapes, torture, looting and mass killings, most of which is presumed to have been passed on to Moreno-Ocampo.

In one case, a teenage student told Cassese she had experienced a mass rape at her boarding school at Tawila, northern Darfur, by Janjaweed wearing Sudan Army uniforms. In Cassese's 176-page report, the girl described Arab militiamen arriving in a lorry at 6am while government soldiers surrounded the school.

"When they attacked the boarding house they pointed the guns at the girls and forced all 110 of them to strip naked, took their valuables and all of their bedding," the schoolgirl told Cassese. "My friend was taken from the group, blindfolded, pushed down to the ground on her back and raped.

"Other girls were screaming as they were raped. After the rape, the Janjaweed started burning and looting."

Omar al-Bashir, Sudan's president, is vigorously resisting an August 2006 UN resolution calling for the deployment of up to 20,000 peacekeeping troops in Darfur. Al-Bashir cites a loss of sovereignty and fears that Sudan, once ruled by the British, will be "recolonised". Sudan's defence minister, Abdel Rahim Mohamed Hussein, has warned defiantly, "Darfur will become the graveyard of the United Nations and foreign intervention."

The 7,700-strong African Union, AU, peacekeeping mission in Darfur was scheduled to end its operation on September 30, but will now stay in place until the end of the year pending continued negotiations on the installation of UN soldiers.

Withdrawal of the under-equipped, under-funded AU force would have created a peacekeeping vacuum, which the Sudan Army was preparing to exploit by increasing its own strength in Darfur. The Khartoum government has used clauses in the 86-page DPA to draft thousands of police and soldiers into Darfur, ostensibly to monitor the ceasefire. But civilians and aid workers allege that these forces are bolstering the government-backed Janjaweed. During September, the Sudan Airforce resumed bombardments of Darfur villages, a flagrant violation of the DPA ceasefire accords.

In a situation of increasingly hideous complexity and under-reporting from the field, the government's renewed aggression has so angered rebel commanders from Minnawi's SLM that they are threatening to abandon the DPA, even if Minnawi himself clings on to the senior government post he secured as part of the DPA. The chain-smoking Minnawi was sworn in during August in Khartoum as an assistant to President Al-Bashir, a post that would also eventually make him the head of a semi-autonomous government in Darfur under the peace deal.

One Minnawi commander, Abdulrahman Abdallah, told the Washington Post that unless an effective international force is deployed "the government will go back to its strategy, which is genocide, and inevitably we will go back to the bush".

Under the UN plan, reached as the result of a Security Council resolution, the current

AU troops in Darfur would become “blue helmets” and form the core of a peacekeeping mission, bolstered by UN brigades from around the globe. But Pronk has admitted to reporters that Khartoum is unlikely to “accept a UN transition any time soon”.

Meanwhile, the AU force, while lauded for its attempts to protect refugee camps in Darfur from Janjaweed, government and now SLM marauders, has been totally inadequate to cover the vast region. Its mandate is also too limited to enable it to prevent attacks on civilians beyond the camps. African commanders, in leaked classified reports to journalists, complain that the Sudan government treats them like fools, denying AU soldier fuel for patrols while its own army in close alliance with the Janjaweed continues the ethnic cleansing of Fur, Zaghawa, Masalit and other tribes in Darfur who are perceived to be African.

Darfurians say government militiamen often gallop their horses and camels into refugee camps within sight of AU troops.

The inability of AU troops to prevent such carnage has led to a loss of confidence by civilians in its effectiveness. The AU lost further credibility when it agreed with the Khartoum government that widely-supported rebels who refused to sign the DPA should be excluded from the Darfur Ceasefire Commission, which is tasked with “verifying and guaranteeing” the so-far entirely notional ceasefire.

The AU has been unable even to prevent the theft of its vehicles and those belonging to humanitarian aid agencies. In north Darfur alone, where 350,000 people are cut off from food aid as a result of the intensified fighting, several AU vehicles and more than 25 aid vehicles have been hijacked since May and eleven Sudanese aid workers killed.

Although the fighting has been depicted in journalistic shorthand as between paler-skinned Arabs and black Africans, even this is a gross over-simplification of a complex situation. While the mayhem in Darfur is without doubt a humanitarian disaster of immense proportions, the fact is that intermarriage over countless generations has made physical distinction in Darfur between Africans and Arabs almost impossible.

The struggle is rooted in tangled cultural, ethnic and tribal loyalties that have been dissected only in rambling academic writings. The generalised root of the conflict is in historical land disputes between nomadic pastoralists originally of Arab ethnicity on the lower, drier lands, and settled agrarian farmers, originally of African origin, especially in the well-watered, 10,000-foot-high Jebel Marra mountains and the plains of southern Darfur.

The modern conflict is also inextricably bound to the politics of natural resources, in Darfur and Sudan generally. Sources in Khartoum across party political lines corroborated to IWPR that Darfur has unexploited oil reserves, with potential also for uranium, copper and bauxite mining.

Sudan currently produces 250,000 barrels of oil a day - beyond Darfur, in central and southern Sudan. Leading buyers of Sudan’s oil include China, Russia and France,

each permanent members of the UN Security Council. These commercial interests have played a significant part in the role played by these countries in securing, or blocking, significant UN action against the Khartoum government over Darfur. Several countries which buy oil from Khartoum have been identified as arms suppliers to the Al-Bashir government. In Darfur, the lure of oil and human rights concerns are inextricably linked.

In Britain, the former colonial ruler until 1956, parliament's powerful foreign affairs committee has called for British disinvestment from Sudan, particularly by the Shell Oil Company, British Airways and Rolls-Royce, over the Darfur conflict.

Committee member Richard Younger-Ross commented, "There has to be a point where companies say, 'You are not the sort of people we can do business with.' We can't stand by and watch genocide."

The six million dollar question has become - what form should, or can, intervention take?

Pronk advocates as the minimum required some form of "intensive care", because Darfuris continue to die in their thousands.

General Romeo Dallaire, the Canadian head of the UN peacekeeping force in Rwanda in 1994, warns that the genocide that happened under his watch is being repeated in Darfur. Dallaire, who had a massive nervous breakdown after failing to persuade UN headquarters to reinforce his inadequate troop strength in Rwanda, said, "I am disgusted with the lame and obtuse responses coming from the Western world.

"It makes me sick. The feelings I had of abandonment [by the UN and the big powers] in Rwanda are exactly the same I feel today in regards to Sudan. We're just doing exactly the same thing again in a situation that's astonishingly similar to what happened in Rwanda."

Despite the provisions of the Geneva conventions, the UN Security Council seems unlikely to advocate intervention under Chapter Seven, which would enable it to go beyond passive defence and monitoring to engaging in combat with Sudanese armed forces and militias in order to save surviving Darfurians. Given Khartoum's firm "no" to a UN role, such an intervention would require an Iraq-style invasion, which, although it has adherents in North America, has been ruled out by Britain whose armed forces are already overstretched in Afghanistan and Iraq.

There are fears also that an invasion would be interpreted as undermining Sudan's sovereignty and catalyse an Islamic backlash in a country where al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden lived from 1991 to 1996. Issuing a taped call in April this year to Muslims to reject UN intervention in Darfur, Bin Laden said, "I call on the mujahedeem [Islamist fighters] and their supporters, especially in Sudan and the Arabian peninsula, to prepare for a long war against the crusaders and plunderers in western Sudan [Darfur]."

Islamist politicians in Khartoum are already under internal pressure for risking potential secession by Christians and animist Africans in the oil-rich south, who have

been given considerable autonomy. They are in no mood to allow a similar breakaway in Islamist Darfur.

The Arab League, European Commission and African Union have all been holding talks in the region aimed at strengthening the AU troop component now in Darfur at least until the end of the year. Arab League Secretary-General Amr Moussa has said that funds to bolster the AU peacekeepers could be provided by the League.

But, given that rejection of the UN has become the central plank of Sudan's foreign and domestic policies, this offers only a feeble answer. Government helicopter gunships loaded with rockets take off daily from military bases throughout Darfur to hit rural targets. AU troops, patrolling towards the town and surrounding refugee camp of Tawilla, turned back recently when news came in that it was being attacked by government forces.

Tawilla has been a target of particularly intense assault by Janjaweed forces and government warplanes. No one knows how many people have died there in the continuous assaults. But the commander of the AU forces that retreated from the mayhem told reporters, "We are too few and not well equipped - it makes me furious. We just patrol, show our faces, and we come back to our base.

"This is my ninth [foreign] mission, but I have never worked in a situation like this, in terms of mandate, equipment, and procedures. We only investigate and report when something happens, but we don't do anything about it."

Amidst much diplomatic hand wringing about a situation that seems intractable short of invasion by an international force, said officials, diplomats and peacekeepers have begun placing fragile hope in the option they call AU-Plus. In its formative stages, as Darfurians continue to be killed, AU-Plus would involve an extended AU mission with logistical and financial support from the UN.

"What we want first of all is to avoid ... a Rwanda syndrome where the international community does not fulfill its responsibilities," said José Manuel Barroso, President of the European Commission, at the end of a recent visit to the region. "We support a stronger humanitarian and security presence in Darfur to avoid a tragedy."

Condoleezza Rice, the US Secretary of State, said, "The Sudanese government needs to understand that no one is trying to impinge on Sudanese sovereignty. That is not the issue here. But there is a responsibility to protect the weakest, and Sudan has not done that."

But these words seems to represent hope over experience. While hardly anyone associated with the Darfur tragedy believes AU-Plus will be the answer to what the UN has officially dubbed "the world's biggest humanitarian disaster", it may well be the only alternative to break the current impasse and incrementally allow the entry of more peacekeepers as well as some UN assistance.

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