



USIPeace Briefing

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Negotiating Peace in Darfur

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As the planned deployment of the joint UN and African Union (AU) hybrid peacekeeping force to Darfur begins, these institutions are placing more emphasis on finding a lasting political solution to the conflict in Darfur. After the failure of the Darfur Peace Agreement (DPA), the international community realized the importance of involving all the key rebel movements in peace negotiations. Planned peace talks in Sirte, Libya have been delayed in an effort to convince key rebel leaders to participate.

Mr. Ahmed Ibrahim Diraiqe, governor of Darfur from 1980 to 1983 and chairman of the Sudan Federal Democratic Alliance, addressed USIP's Sudan Peace Forum in November 2007. He discussed: the origins of the conflict in Darfur; the issues surrounding the upcoming peace negotiations and the deployment of the UN Mission in Darfur (UNAMID), the hybrid force; and the need for a common vision to resolve the persistent issues of marginalization and insecurity in Darfur and other regions of Sudan. This *USIPeace Briefing* summarizes the discussion.

Roots of the Darfur Conflict

While the conflict in Darfur is often characterized as an ethnic dispute between Arabs and Africans, at its core the problem is one of political, social, and economic marginalization. Its origins lie in a dispute between nomads and farmers. Historically, Arab nomadic groups migrated south seasonally, leaving their territory in search of water access and land for grazing from January to June before returning to their own lands. As drought and desertification made their territory less sustainable, the Arabs stopped returning to the north, remaining instead on the southern land. This brought them into conflict with the mostly African farmers who had previously settled there. As the nomads took to looting their villages, the indigenous farmers fled the area. When the Sudanese government failed to intervene to stop the violence, farmers began forming militias to protect themselves and their land. This militarization of the conflict coincided with the labeling of it as a dispute between Arabs and non-Arabs, an ethnic polarization that further complicated the situation.

This land dispute took place against a backdrop of political, economic, and social marginalization of the people of Darfur on the part of the central government. For decades, Darfurians—like many Sudanese in the east and south—were not adequately represented in the political decision-making process in Khartoum. Mr. Diraiqe noted that Darfurians have not traditionally held leadership positions, and that ministers from Darfur are usually at the junior level. This lack of political power resulted in a lack of development, both socially (particularly in sectors such as education and health) and economically, especially in agriculture.

The third element of the conflict in Darfur is the violent response of the Government of Sudan (GOS) to the Darfurian uprising. The bombing of villages by the GOS and rebel groups it supports has led to a more severe IDP problem in Darfur than in the east or even in the south of Sudan. Thus, in addition to resolving the political, economic, and social problems at the root of the conflict in Darfur, the insecurity of Darfurian IDPs and refugees must also be addressed before the conflict can end.

Finally, the Islamic fundamentalist ideology of President Omar Bashir's regime has inflamed conflict in Darfur, as well as in eastern and southern Sudan. GOS rhetoric pitting Arabs and non-Arabs against each other has isolated non-Arabs and led to what Mr. Diraige calls an identity crisis in Sudan. He warned that this feeling of oppression by Arab Sudanese could lead to southern independence and also to increased demands for independence by non-Arab Darfurians.

Efforts to End the Conflict

Since the breakdown of the DPA following the conclusion of peace talks in Abuja in May 2006, the governments of Slovenia, Eritrea, and Libya have all attempted to facilitate unity among various rebel groups. Following talks in Eritrea and Libya in July 2007, the parties met in Arusha, Tanzania in August 2007 for talks sponsored by the UN and AU, where parties to the conflict approved a roadmap for Darfur sponsored by the international community. The October 2007 gathering in Sirte between rebels and the GOS was intended to launch phase three of the roadmap—formal peace negotiations.

The absence of key rebel leaders from the Sirte meeting—Khalil Ibrahim of the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM), Abdel Wahed of the Sudan Liberation Army/Movement (SLA/M), and Abdallah Yehya of the SLA/M Unity faction—led to the postponement of the talks.¹ AU and UN representatives have traveled throughout the region, including to Juba, Arusha, Nairobi and Sirte, in support of efforts to convince these rebel leaders to attend future negotiations. The AU and UN representatives also convened a meeting of the governments of Chad, Eritrea, Egypt, and Libya—the neighboring countries that have been the most heavily involved in the conflict and that have some degree of influence over the GOS or rebel groups—in Sharm el-Sheikh in early December 2007.

The rebel leaders who refused to attend the Sirte meeting have various reasons for doing so. Some object to Libya hosting the peace negotiations, since it is led by an Arab regime and is seen as a supporter of the GOS. However, Mr. Diraige noted that the AU and UN have been accepted as the official mediators of the Darfur conflict, and that the interference of any host government will not be tolerated. Wahed has refused to participate in negotiations until UNAMID is deployed and the security situation on the ground improves. Some rebels also expressed reservations about negotiating with the GOS following the withdrawal of the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM) from the Government of National Unity (GNU); now that the SPLM has rejoined the GNU, this argument may be moot.

Perhaps the biggest obstacle is that more established rebel leaders refuse to participate in negotiations that include newer factions that splintered from preexisting rebel groups. The fracturing of rebels has become an increasing problem in Darfur, in terms of the negotiating process as well as the security situation on the ground. Andrew Natsios, the former US

presidential envoy to Sudan, recently estimated that 27 rebel groups or factions now exist in Darfur, nearly double the number that existed only one year ago.² Lesser-known rebel leaders who withdrew from the primary movements are more anxious to be accepted, so they attend negotiations; however, leaders of the original groups want these breakaway factions to reunite before negotiations can take place. Mr. Diraiqe compared the splintering of Darfur's rebel groups to the SPLM split during Sudan's civil war, which led to violent infighting between factions and delayed the achievement of the movement's goals.

The Challenges Ahead

Mr. Diraiqe stressed the need for a common vision on the way forward that will resolve the problems of marginalization and insecurity, both in Darfur and throughout Sudan. Since the issue of marginalization in Darfur is similar to that in eastern and southern Sudan, and the GOS has negotiated and adopted peace agreements with these regions, there is no argument the GOS can make to avoid negotiating a peace agreement in Darfur. While some in Darfur advocate a form of separation or self-determination for the region, Mr. Diraiqe argued that a federal system of government, with power-sharing provisions that would prevent the central government from continuing to dominate the various regions of Sudan, would be an appropriate end state.

A common strategy for restoring security to Darfur is also necessary. Mr. Diraiqe stated that IDPs are fed up with the fighting and want a solution to the conflict so they can return to their homes. They are frustrated with the rebel leaders for not uniting and resolving the conflict. This includes Wahed, whom some portray as the man with the key to resolving the Darfur conflict. His network in IDP camps is extensive, although some are beginning to complain that his increasingly difficult demands are prolonging peoples' misery. Mr. Diraiqe expects the Darfurian people to eventually conclude that Wahed will not be able to deliver on the promises he is making.

The best chance for restoring security in Darfur, Mr. Diraiqe believes, is UNAMID. It must make the GOS stop bombing people and villages; in order to do that, UNAMID needs a strong mandate that will allow it to impose security. Noting the GOS attempts to delay or impede UNAMID's deployment, Mr. Diraiqe argued that the GOS will continue to play such games until the international community imposes consequences that compel the GOS to modify its behavior.³ In his view, the international community has been too lenient on the GOS, and has not punished Khartoum for flagrantly defying the wishes of the international community. As one example, he noted that Ahmad Harun continues to serve as Sudan's Minister of State for Humanitarian Affairs despite his February 2007 indictment by the International Criminal Court for complicity in attacks on civilians in four West Darfur villages in 2003 and 2004.⁴ He emphasized the importance of the international community's enforcement of UN mandates and of holding UN member states—including Sudan—to the obligations set forth in the UN charter. Otherwise, he says, the credibility of the UN and the broader international community will continue to erode among people in Darfur and throughout Sudan. This will only add to the challenges already faced by the international community as it seeks a political and security solution to the conflict in Darfur.

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¹ “Factbox: Who is attending Darfur talks, who is not,” Reuters, October 27, 2007,

<http://www.reuters.com/article/africaCrisis/idUSB464770>

² Address at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, December 7, 2007.

³ On January 8, 2008, UN officials accused GOS-controlled armed forces of attacking a UN supply convoy the night of January 7, 2008. A Sudanese civilian who was driving with the convoy was injured. “UN protests after Darfur attack,” *BBC News Online*, January 8, 2008, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/7177837.stm>

⁴ “Sudan has failed to cooperate with International Criminal Court, prosecutor says,” UN News Centre, December 14, 2007, <http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=24933&Cr=sudan&Cr1>