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Billions of Promises to Keep

By Kofi A. Annan

THIS is a make-or-break year for Sudan, Africa's biggest country. In Oslo this week, donor countries pledged \$4.5 billion in aid to Sudan, but while I applaud the donors' generosity, promises alone are not enough.

Time is running out for the people of Sudan. We need pledges immediately converted into cash and more protection forces in Darfur to prevent yet more death and suffering. If we fail in Sudan, the consequences of our actions will haunt us for years to come.

After more than two million dead, four million uprooted, and 21 years of warfare, southern Sudan is at last on the threshold of peace. It is, of course, a volatile, fragile peace. Violence, disease and displacement are still daily realities in this desperately impoverished region, where one in four children die before the age of 5, nearly half of all children are malnourished, and only 5 out of 100 girls attend primary school.

Peace will not be easily consolidated in such an environment. Nor will it come on the cheap. Indeed, roughly half all countries that emerge from civil war lapse back into violence within five years. International support is urgently needed to help Sudan weather the rocky transition from war to peace.

The needs are many -- and immediate. More than three million civilians, displaced by violence, can now return to southern Sudan and rebuild their lives. Two million of them need food aid. If people are not fed, if former soldiers are not reintegrated or retrained, peace will quickly unravel.

The billions pledged this week can help. But hungry people cannot eat pledges. Through long and bitter experience we've learned that donor pledges often remain unfulfilled. In Cambodia, Rwanda, Liberia and elsewhere, a large percentage of promised funds failed to materialize, and many lives were lost as a result.

For example, in 1992, donors pledged \$880 million for Cambodian war rehabilitation; three years later, only \$460 million had been delivered. Nearly a year after donors promised \$1 billion to deal with the devastation caused by the 2003 earthquake in Bam, Iran, less than 20 percent of the money had been delivered.

Clearly, we must do better in Sudan. I urge donors to convert their generous pledges into cash without delay. And I urge the public to hold them accountable for their promises.

This time, let us keep our commitments, and not turn a blind eye to a whole generation of Sudanese who have earned this peace and desperately need it.

In Darfur, rations at camps already have been cut -- and soon Sudan's rainy season will begin, making aid more difficult and costly to deliver. In a matter of weeks we will run out of food for two million people.

No one really knows how many people have died in Darfur since the conflict began, but some analysts estimate it could be 300,000 or more. If the situation deteriorates further, up to four million people -- two-thirds of Darfur's population -- may need food aid by summer's end.

But more than food aid is needed -- we also need to hold the perpetrators of violence in Sudan accountable. The International Commission of Inquiry, which I appointed at the request of the United Nations Security Council, has amply documented the murder, mass rapes, abductions and other atrocities committed in Darfur, as have many others. We know what is happening in Darfur. The question is, why are we not doing more to put an end to it?

Last summer, the Security Council, the United States and the European Union all said Darfur was their top priority. But it was only last month that the Security Council agreed to impose sanctions on people who commit violations of international law in Darfur and, in a historic first, to refer the situation in Darfur to the prosecutor of the International Criminal Court, thus taking a critical step toward ending the prevailing climate of impunity. Last week I handed the prosecutor the sealed list of those identified by the Commission of Inquiry.

While we are grateful to African leaders for their contributions thus far, we need thousands more -- and not today or tomorrow but yesterday.

After all, giving aid without protection is like putting a Band-Aid on an open wound. Unarmed aid workers, while vitally necessary, cannot defend civilians from murder, rape or violent attack. Our collective failure to provide a much larger force is as pitiful and inexcusable as the consequences are grave for the tens of thousands of families who are left unprotected.

We saw this all too well in Bosnia a decade ago. Back then, Bosnian civilians watched the aid trucks continue to roll while their neighbors were gunned-down in full daylight. "We will die with our stomachs full," they used to say. Are we now going to stand by and watch a replay in Darfur?

I also urge all those with influence over the warring parties to persuade them to return quickly to the negotiating table and agree on a political settlement.

In this watershed year for Sudan, it is vital that the international community move speedily to provide the resources to consolidate a fragile peace in the south, and to protect

civilians from recurring violence in Darfur. We know what we need: money to help win the peace in the south, more African Union boots on the ground to help end the atrocities in Darfur, and political pressure to settle the conflict. It's that simple, and that essential.

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