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**Darfur Descending: No Time for Apathy on Sudan**

*By Kofi A. Annan*

When I visited Darfur last May, I felt hopeful. Today I am pessimistic, unless a major new international effort is mustered in the coming weeks.

I visited a village whose people had returned after fleeing from violence and were living in relative safety, thanks to the presence of troops from the African Union (A.U.). True, this was only a beginning. Much of the vast region was prey to sporadic violence, with more than a million people living in camps. But thanks to a massive relief operation led by the United Nations, the number dying from hunger or disease was falling dramatically. A cease-fire, admittedly flawed, was in place. Peace talks between the Sudanese government and the rebel movements, ably mediated by A.U. representatives, were proceeding in Abuja, Nigeria. It was hoped that agreement could be reached by the end of the year.

There were other positive signs. The U.N. Security Council had referred the situation to the International Criminal Court and had decided in principle to apply targeted sanctions to individuals who could be identified as responsible for the atrocities of the past two years.

I wish I could report that all these efforts had borne fruit -- that Darfur was at peace and on the road to recovery. Alas, the opposite is true. People in many parts of Darfur continue to be killed, raped and driven from their homes by the thousands. The number displaced has reached 2 million, while 3 million (half the total population of Darfur) are dependent on international relief for food and other basics. Many parts of Darfur are becoming too dangerous for relief workers to reach. The peace talks are far from reaching a conclusion. And fighting now threatens to spread into neighboring Chad, which has accused Sudan of arming rebels on its territory.

Despite a chronic funding crisis, A.U. troops in Darfur are doing a valiant job. People feel safer when the troops are present. But there are too few of them -- a protection force of only 5,000, with an additional 2,000 police and military observers, to cover a territory the size of Texas. They have neither the equipment nor the broad mandate they would need to protect the people under threat or to enforce a cease-fire routinely broken by the rebels, as well as by the Janjaweed militia and Sudanese government forces.

On Jan. 12, the African Union decided to renew the mission's mandate until March 31, while expressing support, in principle, for a transition to a U.N. operation this year. The timing of this transition is still being discussed, including at this week's A.U. summit in

Khartoum. This puts the Security Council on the spot. The U.N. Charter gives the council primary responsibility for international peace and security. And in September, in a historic first, U.N. members unanimously accepted the responsibility to protect populations from genocide, ethnic cleansing, war crimes and crimes against humanity, pledging to take action through the Security Council when national authorities fail.

The transition from the A.U. force to a U.N. peace operation in Darfur is now inevitable. A firm decision by the Security Council is needed, and soon, for an effective transition to take place.

But let no one imagine that this crisis can be solved simply by giving the present A.U. mission a "U.N. hat." Any new mission will need a strong and clear mandate, allowing it to protect those under threat, by force if necessary, as well as the means to do so. That means it will need to be larger, more mobile and much better equipped than the current African Union mission. Those countries that have the required military assets must be ready to deploy them.

Such a force would take the United Nations months to deploy. In the meantime, the A.U. mission must be maintained and strengthened. We cannot afford any gaps or any weakening of the force in place. Last May the African Union and the United Nations organized a donor conference in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, to raise money and logistical support for the A.U. force. A follow-up conference is planned for Feb. 20. At the same time, the massive relief operation must continue, and be fully funded, so that Darfur's people continue to receive clean water, food and other vital supplies.

Finally, and above all, much stronger pressure must be brought on all parties -- the rebels as well as the government -- to observe the cease-fire and commit themselves to the Abuja peace talks with a sense of urgency. The current delays are inexcusable; they cost lives every day. Those negotiating must be reminded of their personal responsibility.

One thing is clear: Whatever external force is sent to Darfur can provide at best only temporary security to the people there. Only a political agreement among their leaders can secure their future and the return of 2 million of them to their homes.

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