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**Darfur: A peaceful option**

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While no one knows for sure how many people have died in the conflict in Darfur, western Sudan, more than 2.6 million are suffering because of it, and urgently need assistance.

Villages have been burnt, crops uprooted, men murdered, women raped, children abducted. And 1.9 million people have been displaced from their homes within Sudanese territory. Others are still at home but prevented from planting the crops on which their lives depend. If food does not soon reach them, they too will be forced to go search of it, swelling already overcrowded camps.

For a period, crimes against civilians in Darfur were not on the front pages. But for well more than a year, they have been. That it took intensive coverage in the world media to prompt action is a reproach not only to Sudan, but to the whole world. Even today, those who try to bring the crisis in Darfur to an end do not have the kind of support they need.

Our two organizations have come together to prevent further suffering. The United Nations is in the lead in bringing relief to the victims, and in seeking to end impunity for those who have committed the most heinous crimes.

The African Union is in the lead in providing security on the ground, and in efforts to revive political negotiations -- which alone can bring lasting peace and which are now scheduled to resume on June 10 in Abuja, Nigeria.

In recent months, the situation has stabilized, and fewer large-scale crimes have been reported. A massive U.N.-led humanitarian operation is under way, with more than 10,000 humanitarian workers (mostly Sudanese) delivering food, water, shelter and other lifesaving relief to as many as 1.8 million people. Where AU troops are on the ground, their heroic efforts have made a real difference: People are less exposed to predatory violence, many have returned to their villages, and attacks have decreased.

The humanitarian situation is thus undoubtedly better in some areas than a year ago. But access remains limited, harassment of humanitarian workers has increased, and insecurity remains unacceptably high. Hundreds of thousands of war-affected people do not receive the help they need, and the AU troops are still far too few to deploy through the whole vast territory.

Relief workers are often harassed by local authorities, and sometimes even attacked, kidnapped or threatened with violence. Nongovernmental relief workers from abroad find it increasingly hard to obtain visas. And trucks delivering aid are hijacked, often by rebels. Early this month, two drivers for the World Food Program were killed, in separate incidents. As a result, aid does not get to many of those who most need it.

The international response falls short in two lethal ways:

1. Another \$350 million in aid is needed to help more than 3 million people survive the rest of this year.
2. More troops, police, aircraft and other transport, training and logistical support are needed to enable the AU to protect much of Darfur's population.

As part of our efforts to address the Darfur crisis, we have jointly convened today's donor conference in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia: to give the rest of the world -- especially the wealthy countries with the means to contribute, and whose media and public opinion have been most vocal about the need to halt atrocities -- an opportunity to rally and give practical support to the Africans actually doing something on the ground.

This conference will complement the one held in Oslo last month, at which \$4.5 billion of aid was pledged to Sudan, mainly to support the fragile peace which has at last been achieved between north and south after a 21-year civil war.

Indeed, Darfur can only benefit if the rest of the Sudan is at peace, and if the new government of national unity (due to take office in July) leads the whole country in a new, more inclusive direction. Thus the 10,000-strong peacekeeping force the United Nations is now deploying in the south will help make peace viable throughout the country, including Darfur.

But action is urgently needed in Darfur, on three fronts:

The humanitarian effort must be fully funded, and safe access for relief workers -- both inter- and nongovernmental -- must be fully guaranteed by all parties.

The AU force must be expanded without delay, and bolstered by logistical and financial support, so it can provide real security throughout Darfur, allowing the people to return to their homes and resume cultivating their crops. African states that have promised troops must provide them promptly, and donors must provide the means for those troops to deploy.

Both the government and the rebels must bring their forces and allied militias under full control, and ensure they fully respect the cease-fire and humanitarian law.

And the parties to the conflict must negotiate a political agreement offering solid guarantees for lasting peace. The AU and the wider international community can and must help.

But in the end peace will only be made, and kept, by the Sudanese people themselves.

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