

Last Chance for Darfur

A new UN plan for Darfur looks promising. Now it is up to member states to do all they can to implement it.

Last May, for the first time in three years, there was some reason to believe that the violence in the Darfur region of western Sudan would finally abate. Since 2003, a conflict of genocidal proportions has claimed the lives of some 400,000 Darfuris, most of whom died, directly or indirectly, at the hands of their government and its proxy militias. Then, on May 6, 2006, the government of Sudan entered into a peace accord in Abuja, Nigeria, with the largest Darfur rebel faction. Ten days later, a United Nations Security Council Resolution was issued authorizing the deployment of peacekeepers to support the accords. It was expected that the other rebel groups would soon join the Darfur Peace Agreement (as it is formally known) and a process of reconciliation and rehabilitation could begin.

Unfortunately, five months later, little has changed on the ground. There are no blue helmets in sight, and, as a result, the security situation is as dire as it has ever been. Food and medical supplies are not reaching their intended recipients. And the indiscriminate targeting of civilians continues. Humanitarian workers—the only lifeline for millions of Darfuris living in squalid refugee camps—are constantly targeted for ambush; more humanitarian workers in Darfur were killed in the month of July than in the previous three years combined. On August 10th, an exasperated Jan Egeland, the United Nations' top humanitarian official, warned that Darfur was going from “really bad to catastrophic.” Since then, the government forces in conjunction with militias have launched a brand new bloody offensive in Darfur using the same genocidal techniques as before.

An international peacekeeping force is desperately needed to protect civilians and keep lines of humanitarian access open. But the Government of Sudan has consistently refused to authorize a UN contingent in Darfur and has gone so far as to threaten peacekeepers with violence should they set foot there. Not surprisingly, governments from states that traditionally contribute the bulk of UN peacekeepers are reluctant to authorize troops for Darfur absent Khartoum's consent. Right now, the only international force in the region is some 7,000 African Union troops, whose job is to “monitor” a functionally non-existent ceasefire throughout a region the size of Texas. To make matters worse, the AU mission in Sudan (AMIS) is on pace to run out of money by the end of September unless continued funding is secured. Reports indicate that government forces stand poised to fill the power vacuum.

The situation seems hopelessly stuck. Or at least it did until August 31st, when the Security Council endorsed an ambitious plan of action for Darfur spelled out by Kofi Annan. With the Security Council otherwise consumed by back-to-back crises in North Korea and Lebanon, Darfur received scant attention from the Council this summer. But in the midst of the chaos in Turtle Bay in late July, Kofi Annan issued a little noticed yet hugely important thirty page report on Darfur. This report (pdf), and its supporting Security Council resolution, could prove to be the last, best chance to save Darfur.

Annan outlines a broad mandate for a United Nations Mission in Sudan (UNMIS) to take over from the African Union. Annan's plan for UNMIS, which currently fields an operation in Southern Sudan, would include some 17,300 peacekeepers, 2,000 police officers, and many hundreds of civilian experts to secure, rehabilitate, rebuild, and enforce a ceasefire in Darfur. Crucially, the troops would have an aggressive mandate to protect civilians and maintain lines of humanitarian access, even if it means dealing "proactively with spoilers, including in a pre-emptive manner." UNMIS would also establish Status of Forces Agreements with Chad and the Central African Republic to ensure that any spread of the conflict could be contained by a UN force.

The Security Council approved this key provision as part of Resolution 1706, which passed the Council with a vote of 12 in favor and 3 abstentions. Under the resolution, UNMIS would operate under Chapter VII authorities and have a mandate to proactively protect civilian enclaves and UN humanitarian lines to Darfur.

To be sure, assembling a peacekeeping force for Darfur will take time. And time is not on Darfur's side. So the Council endorsed an innovative stop-gap measure proposed by Annan, which the non-profit, non-partisan publication *The Security Council Report* describes as a "hybrid force, never before tried by the UN, with UN assets and personnel placed under the command of another institution [the AU]." In 18 paragraphs, Annan outlines his vision for the rapid appropriation of UN resources, which includes providing the AU with aircraft, armored personnel carriers, command and control, and logistics and communication support, as well as the drilling of water bores to support the eventual influx of troops. Parts of this hybrid force could be appropriated immediately, but other more resource-intensive initiatives would require the support of the General Assembly's budget committee and the Security Council. Resolution 1706 requires that this hybridization commence no later than October 1.

Getting international peacekeepers and police battalions to Darfur is Annan's primary objective. But after they arrive, they will have to support a political mission in Darfur with the principal goal of getting all sides in the conflict to accede to and respect May's Darfur Peace Agreement. This is no easy task. Currently, only one rebel faction and the government of Sudan have entered into this agreement. And there have been reports of repeated violations of the accords by these two parties. As envisioned by the draft Security Council Resolution, the principal political aim of UNMIS would be to promote the fledgling Darfur Peace Accords and support a grassroots reconciliation process. This latter step is critical for securing some semblance of lasting peace in Darfur.

The UN's plan for Darfur is ambitious. Unfortunately, Kofi Annan cannot wave a magic wand and make it so. He must rely on member states to pony up troops and resources for UNMIS. Annan has likened this part of his job to that of a volunteer fire chief who must beg for firefighters and trucks for every fire. So far, member states have been reluctant to commit troops for Darfur. To make matters worse, Khartoum has categorically refused to consent to a UN peacekeeping force for Darfur; at various moments, Khartoum has called such a force "neocolonialist" and has threatened it with outright violence. The problem here is that most troop contributing countries consider securing Khartoum's consent a pre-requisite for authorizing troops for a Darfur mission. Further, Khartoum's consent is necessary for the basic logistical reason that a peacekeeping force in landlocked Darfur would need access to Sudanese ports and airfields for shipments of food, fuel, and equipment.

Still, the same political obstacles that have prevented the deployment of blue helmets to Darfur since May exist to this day; countries with the most influence over Khartoum continue to refuse to make Sudan's acquiescing to a peacekeeping force a priority in their bilateral relations. Tellingly, two of those member states abstained from the Security Council votes. This was despite Annan's plea: "No effort should be spared to send [Khartoum] the simple, powerful message: international involvement will increase the chances of peace taking root in Darfur, will strengthen the credibility of the peace process and the protection of the suffering populations of Darfur. Transition to a United Nations operation should happen as soon as possible, and the international community's message should make clear that the costs of rejecting the transition could be serious and lasting."

Unfortunately for the people of Darfur, Annan by himself cannot pressure Khartoum into accepting peacekeepers. For that, he needs the support of his most influential member states, which alone have the ability to lean on Khartoum. And even with Darfur on the verge of total collapse, member states have still not made securing the entry of a United Nations force in Darfur much of a priority.

The United Nations has presented its member countries with a workable plan that could be Darfur's last chance for rescue. It is now up to member states to respond with urgency commensurate with the calamitous situation on the ground. Should they fail to live up to their responsibility to protect the people of Darfur, the window could be closed on the region for good. Alternatively, should member states make the implementation of Resolution 1706 a top priority in international relations and diplomacy, Darfur could be provided the momentum necessary to bring about a lasting peace. It is up to member states to decide which future they want for Darfur.

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