

ODUMUNC 2009 Issue Brief
Security Council
The Situation in Darfur
And Spillover to Chad



“Peacekeeping in Darfur Hits More Obstacles”

Lydia Polgreen (New York Times, March 24th, 2008)

As Darfur smolders in the aftermath of a new government offensive, a long-sought peacekeeping force, expected to be the world's largest, is in danger of failing even as it begins its mission because of bureaucratic delays, stonewalling by Sudan's government and reluctance from troop-contributing countries to send peacekeeping forces into an active conflict.

The force, a joint mission of the African Union and the United Nations, officially took over from an overstretched and exhausted African Union force in Darfur on Jan. 1. It now has just over 9,000 of an expected 26,000 soldiers and police officers and will not fully deploy until the end of the year, United Nations officials said.

Even the troops that are in place, the old African Union force and two new battalions, lack essential equipment, like sufficient armored personnel carriers and helicopters, to carry out even the most rudimentary of peacekeeping tasks. Some even had to buy their own paint to turn their green helmets United Nations blue, peacekeepers here said.

The peacekeepers' work is more essential than ever. At least 30,000 people were displaced last month as the government and its allied militias fought to retake territory held by rebel groups fighting in the region, according to United Nations human rights officials.

For weeks after the attacks, many of the displaced were hiding in the bush nearby or living in the open along the volatile border between Sudan and Chad, inaccessible to aid workers. Most wanted to return to their scorched villages and rebuild but did not feel safe from roaming bandits and militias.

A week spent this month with the peacekeeping troops based here at the headquarters of Sector West, a wind-blown outpost at the heart of the recent violence, revealed a force struggling mightily to do better than its much-maligned predecessor, but with little new manpower or equipment.

Despite this, the force is managing to project a greater sense of security for the tens of thousands of vulnerable civilians in the vast territory it covers, mounting night patrols in displaced people's camps and sending long-range patrols to the areas hardest hit by fighting. But these small gains are fragile, and if more troops do not arrive soon, the force will be written off as being as ineffective and compromised as the one before.

"We really don't have much time to prove we can do better," said Brig. Gen. Balla Keita, the Senegalese commander of the roughly 2,000 troops in West Darfur, just one-third of the expected total for the area.

"God gave the prophets the ability to achieve miracles so that people would believe. So people here will believe when they see improvements on the ground. And that cannot wait for more troops. We need to do better with what we have."

The deployment of the biggest peacekeeping force in modern history in one of the most

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remote, hostile and forbidding corners of the globe was bound to be a logistical nightmare.

Darfur is landlocked, water is scarce, the roads are rutted tracks crossed by the mud and sand traps of dry riverbeds.

But those problems pale in comparison with the diplomatic and political struggles the mission faces.

When previous large missions were organized in Congo, Liberia and Sierra Leone, the central governments in those countries had collapsed or were so weak that they had little choice but to accept peacekeepers. The government of Sudan agreed to accept United Nations-led peacekeepers in Darfur only after a long diplomatic tussle and under a great deal of pressure.

The progress to get the mission in place has been slow, and much of the blame for this has been placed at the feet of the Sudanese government. For months after the United Nations Security Council approved the force, Sudan insisted on limits on its makeup and independence, demanding the power to dictate which countries contributed troops, to shut down its communication systems when the government carried out offensives and to restrict the movement of peacekeepers at night.

Ultimately, the government signed a compromise agreement with the United Nations allowing the force to operate, but Sudan was successful in insisting that the vast majority of troops come from African countries, and will be supplemented by soldiers from other regions only if suitable African troops cannot be found.

This has delayed the force's mission, because African armies are not usually able to deploy quickly with equipment and training to meet stringent United Nations standards, United Nations officials and Western diplomats said. Sudanese government officials have argued that African troops are up to the job, and that non-African troops would be seen as neocolonial interlopers.

These problems have raised fears that the United Nations force would suffer the same fate as the African Union force, which was hobbled from the start by a weak mandate, which was to observe a cease-fire, not protect civilians. The thousands of troops deployed by Rwanda, Nigeria, Senegal and other nations were mainly there to protect the military observers, who were unarmed, and the unarmed civilian police, whose job it was to guard the camps for the internally displaced people.

But the original cease-fire was quickly violated, and later agreements failed to bring peace. The African troops soon were seen, perhaps unfairly, as useless note-takers who visited the scene of atrocities long after the evidence had been carried off and the dead buried, gathering testimony that seemed to disappear into a bureaucratic black hole.

A Town in Ruins

All of that has changed with the new hybrid mission. The force has a robust mandate to protect civilians. But that is easier said than done, said Maj. Sani Abdullahi, the man in charge of

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the single company charged with fending off roaming militias and rebels to protect tens of thousands of displaced villagers in a handful of camps and thousands more vulnerable residents of remote villages.

One Sunday morning, Major Abdullahi, 34, a wiry Nigerian officer who served in peacekeeping operations in Sierra Leone and Liberia, led a few truckloads of troops to visit Abu Sorouj, one of the towns flattened by a recent government offensive in West Darfur.

The town is just a few dozen miles away, but the drive took three bone-crunching hours. Abu Sorouj was attacked nearly a month earlier, and most of the villagers had fled, some to Chad. They said they were blocked by the Chadian authorities from reaching refugee camps. So within days, some were returning, afraid of losing their land if they became long-term displaced people living in camps.

Before the attack, Abu Sorouj was a bustling town of hundreds of mud-brick huts roofed with thatch, clumped together in sprawling family compounds. It had a cinder-block school and clinic supported by a nongovernmental aid agency.

Today, it is an apocalyptic scene of ashy ruin. The residents who have returned salvaged what they could, sifting through the blackened rubble to find cooking pots, bedsteads and buried troves of grain.

Fadila Ahmed Mahamat, a great-grandmother whose legs are withered stalks, sat amid the charred ruins of her home, digging holes in the sand with bare, gnarled hands to construct the frame of a makeshift dwelling out of branches from a pen that had been used to keep sheep.

"Everything is gone," she said. "I have nothing."

Surveying the scene, Major Abdullahi let out a low whistle.

"My God," he said. "Look at this."

A few of the town's sheiks remained, and they clamored to tell him their complaints. Arab gunmen, whom the villagers here call janjaweed, roam the edge of town, they told Major Abdullahi, coming at dawn and dusk to steal what little remained here. The women could not go to the river to collect water. The men could not leave the town to find big branches to build shelters.

"We need security," one said.

"Why don't you patrol more often?" another asked. "When you come, the janjaweed stay away for two or three days."

Major Abdullahi told them: "We don't have the number of troops on ground we need. As soon as we do, we will spread out. We are doing everything we can to make you feel more secure."

All talk ceased as a pickup truck loaded with government soldiers drove up. An officer jumped out, smiling with an outstretched hand. But his smile was tense, and after some pleasantries he asked why the peacekeepers had come.

"The place is secure," said the officer, Maj. Amar Ibrahim. "Even the Arabs who ride on

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camels and horses and harass people, we have patrols to chase them away."

Major Abdullahi smiled and nodded.

"We really appreciate that and commend your efforts," he said through an interpreter. "But we really need to ask you to do more. People still do not feel safe."

Despite the agreement giving the peacekeepers free rein, government troops complain about their presence. Major Abdullahi said he must be careful not to alienate these troops because he must rely on them to help provide security. "The reality is we need to work with them," he said. "It does no good to antagonize them."

Major Abdullahi checked his watch. It was noon, and already he had to think about heading back. The armored personnel carriers, which had been provided to the African Union by the Canadian government and had been battered by years of abuse in Darfur's harsh conditions, were already acting up. Two flat tires and engine trouble had made the journey to Abu Sorouj slow. But he could not risk being stuck on the way back.

He promised the sheiks that he would return soon, but he could not say for sure how soon that might be.

The Task Ahead

It is unclear how exactly the deployment of troops in Darfur can be speeded up, given the built-in constraint that African troops be used first. Western activists concerned about Darfur say the Sudanese government is primarily responsible and have demanded that China, Sudan's main trading partner and one of its suppliers of weapons, join other countries to press Sudan to allow troops of any origin the troops to deploy quickly.

While the Sudanese government has been blamed for some of the delay, United Nations requirements have also slowed the force, some diplomats and political analysts say.

The deployment "is not principally being delayed by the Sudanese government," said a senior Western diplomat in Khartoum, Sudan's capital, who is not authorized to speak publicly. Other problems, like the United Nations bureaucracy and the reluctance of troop-contributing countries, were as much to blame, the diplomat said.

There is certainly no lack of money. Rodolphe Adada, of the Congo Republic, the mission's civilian chief, said the force had a budget of \$1.7 billion. What it needs is troops and equipment, and neither has been easy to get. More pressure on the Sudanese government, he said, would not help matters. "What more pressure can be put on the Sudanese government," he said. "All the decisions have been taken. There is nothing left to say. What we need to do is act."

Some countries are reluctant to commit troops in an active conflict with no peace agreement or even a working cease-fire.

"The international community had two choices -- get a peace accord and deploy the mission after, or send the mission anyway," Mr. Adada said. "It chose the latter. But how do you keep the peace when there is no peace to keep?"

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