

Media Breakfast Briefing

26 April 2007

Welcome to Save the Children Sweden's Media Breakfast Briefing!

Underlying all Save the Children Sweden's work is the need to work with media to campaign to secure children's rights. We are striving to support media with resources, underlying facts and in-depth analysis. We are also encouraging media to take part of our work, meet with our staff and visit our projects in the region to better understand the situation of children, and to take part in promoting child participation and children's rights. If you need an image to illustrate your story, please contact us.

In 2006, we conducted two press visits to southern Sudan, highlighting our projects and meeting children.

Please visit our website, <http://ecaf.savethechildren.se> and find out the latest news related to children's situation and children's rights in Eastern and Central Africa, or gain a deeper understanding of the current issues and ongoing conflicts in our section Special Insight. We also quarterly disseminate a regional e-bulletin, highlighting progresses and successes, but also challenges and difficulties.

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Update of the situation in Darfur

Humanitarian community skeptical on new UN impact

Background

The impact on people of the two-year conflict in Sudan's western region of Darfur has been described as the world's worst humanitarian crisis by the United Nations. More than two million people are estimated to now live in camps, having fled their homes and at least 200,000 are thought to have died during the crisis. Sudan's government and the pro-government Arab militias are accused of war crimes against the region's black African population, although the UN has stopped short of terming it a genocide.

How did the conflict start?

The conflict began in the arid and impoverished region early in 2003 after a rebel group began attacking government targets, claiming that the region was being neglected by Khartoum. The rebels say the government is oppressing black Africans in favour of Arabs. There has been tension in Darfur for many years over land and grazing rights between the mostly nomadic Arabs and farmers from the Fur, Massaleet and Zagawa communities. There are two main rebel groups, the Sudan Liberation Army (SLA) and the Justice and Equality Movement (Jem), which have been linked to senior Sudanese opposition politician Hassan al-Turabi.

What is the government doing?

It admits mobilising "self-defence militias" following rebel attacks but denies any links to the Janjaweed, accused of trying to "cleanse" large swathes of territory of black Africans. Refugees from Darfur say that following air raids by government aircraft, the Janjaweed ride into villages on horses and camels, slaughtering men, raping women and stealing whatever they can find. Many women report being abducted by the Janjaweed and held as sex slaves for more than a week before being released. Human rights groups, the US Congress and the former US Secretary of State Colin Powell all said that genocide was taking place – though a UN team sent to Sudan to find out instead said that war crimes had been committed, but there had been no intent to commit genocide. Sudan's government denies being in control of the Janjaweed and President Omar al-Bashir has called them "thieves and gangsters".

After strong international pressure and the threat of sanctions, the government promised to disarm the Janjaweed. But there is little evidence of this so far. Thousands of extra policemen have been deployed but the refugees have little faith in the Sudanese security forces. They have recently announced the trials in Khartoum of some members of the security forces suspected of abuses – but this is viewed as part of a campaign against UN-backed attempts to get some 50 key suspects tried at the International Criminal Court in The Hague.

What has happened to the civilians?

Millions have fled their destroyed villages, with many heading

for camps near Darfur's main towns but there is not enough food, water or medicine. The Janjaweed patrol outside the camps and Darfurians say the men are killed and the women raped if they venture too far in search of firewood or water. Aid workers have warned that many thousands are at risk of starvation and disease in the camps – and one million children threatened by malnutrition – especially during wet seasons when access is restricted. Over the next 18 months, up to 4 million people may be affected by food shortages, the UN warns. Attempts by security forces to persuade the refugees to leave the camps and return home have led to violence and brought condemnation from the international community. Meanwhile, a drought and a big reduction in the number of active farmers means a heavy dependence on food aid during the next few months. Some 200,000 have also sought safety in neighbouring Chad, but many are camped along a 600 km stretch of the border and remain vulnerable to attacks from Sudan. Chad is worried that the conflict could spill over the border. Its eastern areas have a similar ethnic make-up to Darfur. Lots of aid agencies are working in Darfur but they are unable to get access to vast areas – accusing the government of blocking their movements by demanding visas and using other bureaucratic obstacles. Sudan says these have been removed.

Is anyone trying to stop the fighting?

The government and the two rebel groups signed a ceasefire last April but this has not held. Subsequent African Union brokered peace talks in Nigeria have failed to make much progress though agreement has been reached on banning military flights in Darfur and on humanitarian aid. Some 7,000 African Union troops have slowly been deployed in Darfur on a very limited mandate. Khartoum is resisting allowing them to beef up their powers to disarm combatants. The United Nations has been criticised for doing too little, too late. The Security Council agreed to impose travel bans and an asset freeze on those who commit atrocities in Sudan's Darfur region. A dossier of evidence compiled by a UN commission has also been passed to the ICC in The Hague along with the names of top war crimes suspects. The Sudan government has hinted that it may let Darfur run its own affairs more if this would help solve the crisis. It has agreed to let southern Sudan have its own government as part of a deal to end 20 years of conflict in that region.

UN troops to Darfur

The Juba peace talks have been widely perceived by stakeholders Sudan's long-awaited agreement to the UN-AU *Heavy Support package* for Darfur has been cautiously greeted by the international community, but both the UN and AU admit that the task of setting up the operation has just begun. "The *Heavy Support package*, as its name indicates, is not the robust force Darfur needs," said UN Under-Secretary-Gener-

ral for Peacekeeping Operations Jean-Marie Guehenno after a meeting with AU Chairman Alpha Oumar Konare this week. "It is a support package to lay the ground for a future robust force."

The current AU Mission in Sudan (AMIS) force of 7,000 deployed in the region is understaffed and underfunded, creating a crucial need for improved security for internally displaced persons (IDPs) in camps and aid workers. AMIS has also come under attack from unknown gunmen and lost seven men in April. It now plans to establish two battalions to protect its men and the upcoming support package.

"This is going to be critical to the Heavy Support package in view of the deteriorating situation in several places in Darfur because these kinds of enablers [and] resources, including civilian personnel, need to have security," said Guehenno. The package is the second part of a three-step operation consisting of a Light Support package, a Heavy Support package, and an AU-UN Hybrid force; and primarily aims to aid AMIS.

Tuesday's agreement with the Sudanese government allows the UN to continue planning for the USD289.9 million Heavy Support package in order to ensure its deployment in the months ahead.

The package

The package will include a signals unit, communications unit, and logistics staff who will be deployed as part of the 2,250 military personnel. No infantry will be deployed, but the personnel include helicopter pilots, and military tactical staff, among others. Currently, the UN is holding meetings with troop-contributing countries to determine who would be willing to send personnel to Darfur.

"The troops should be predominantly African," said Konare. "If this is not possible, we will look - with the approval of the Sudanese government - outside the continent."

A contingent of 301 police officers will be deployed, along with 1,136 civilian personnel to work on human rights issues, humanitarian affairs and civilian logistics, among other proposals. But only 150 civilian workers will be international staff. All Light Support and Heavy Support UN-supplied workers will wear a blue beret with a distinguishing green armband, according to AU Commissioner for Peace and Security, said Jinnit. The blue and green represent the UN and AU, respectively. "This is another story of course when you reach the hybrid operation," he said.

The USD21 million Light Support package has almost been completed, with a logistics, personnel, equipment, and humanitarian aid component. Eighty percent of all personnel have been recruited or identified - 105 military specialists and 30 police, according to a senior UN official.

But much more work lies ahead in the next few months that is critical to the success of both the current AU operation and the proposed UN support package. According to UN officials, the goal is to free up AMIS troops so they can carry out their mandate; but support needs to be given as soon as possible.

Funding

In order to place two more AMIS security battalions on the ground, funding must be forthcoming, according to Jinnit, especially because six security battalions were approved in September last year, but none have been placed due to lack of funds.

"Let's be honest. Without any sustainable financing, this will not be as sustainable as expected. Really, how can countries volunteer troops when they see that those they send are not able to survive financially?" an exasperated Konare said to reporters.

Tuesday's announcement by the Sudanese comes after months of disagreement over proposals to boost international peacekeeping efforts in Darfur.

Continued cooperation is essential for the success of the operations. For example, in order to accommodate more people and troops, the government will have to provide land and water resources for camps to be built.

Diplomats in New York are, however, optimistic that the transition from the Light package to Heavy package will pave the way for the estimated 20,000-strong Hybrid force, the most controversial part of the plan for the Sudanese government

"You never know; we are talking about the situation today," Congolese Ambassador to the UN Basile Ikoube said.

"If you have to wait six months before the Hybrid operation can take place, it will be impossible to determine what will happen on the ground in the meantime. But it is a good step."

(CRIN - Children's Rights Information network, www.crin.org)

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