



The Ploughshares Monitor

Winter 2007, volume 28, no. 4

Balancing security and politics in Darfur

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The international community has acted to substantially improve the political and security situation in Darfur. United Nations Security Council (UNSC) Resolution 1769 (2007a), passed in July 2007, mandated a new hybrid UN-African Union peacekeeping force for Darfur. This UN-AU force could set important precedents on the practical application of the doctrine of the responsibility to protect (R2P), a concept Canada has taken a lead in developing and promoting.

The challenges that remain are exemplified by the failure of the talks between Darfur rebels and the Government of Sudan on 27 October. In addition, persistent hostilities and fighting on the ground, diplomatic hurdles, and difficulties related to quickly setting up a huge hybrid force must still be resolved and overcome.

Background

The conflict in Sudan's western province of Darfur between rebels and government-supported militias known as the Janjaweed has killed at least 200,000 people and displaced more than two million since 2003. The African Union Mission in Sudan (AMIS) was established in 2004 in Darfur and consists of about 7,000 personnel. AMIS and the rest of the international community have so far been unsuccessful in bringing peace to this region.

Since 2004 Canada has contributed \$441-million for humanitarian assistance, peacebuilding, and reconstruction, making Canada the fourth largest donor to the Darfur mission (CBC News 2007). Canada has contributed trainers, equipment, vehicles, air transport support, as well as diplomatic support to the AU's mediation efforts.

On 5 May 2006 the Darfur Peace Agreement (DPA) was signed by the Sudanese government and one rebel faction—Minni Minawi's bloc of the Sudan Liberation Movement/Army (SLM/A). A breakaway faction of the SLM/A and the rebel group Justice and Equality Movement (JEM) refused to sign the deal, demanding a greater share of the wealth and power. After the DPA, the SLA and the JEM split into several splinter groups, some along ethnic lines.

Since the signing of the DPA, the Sudanese army, the Janjaweed, and multiple rebel forces have continued military activities in Darfur, resulting in a recent upsurge in violence, death, and displacement.

Hybrid peacekeeping force for Darfur: A new precedent

This year has seen momentum build towards the establishment of joint operations between the UN and AU in Darfur and the reigniting of the political process jointly mediated by the AU and UN to bring all rebel groups into discussions. UNAMID, the AU/UN hybrid operation in Darfur established by UNSC Resolution 1769, will incorporate existing AMIS and UN personnel and will consist of about 26,000 police and military troops. These forces are mandated to restore security for humanitarian aid activities, protect civilian populations, verify the 2004 ceasefire implementation, and assist an inclusive political process mediated by the AU and UN. UNAMID will also monitor the UN arms embargo that has been in place since 2005. Because Resolution 1769 is a Chapter VII resolution under the UN Charter, UNAMID forces can take “necessary action” to protect themselves, prevent interference in the implementation of the DPA, prevent armed attacks, and protect civilians.

A key element of the mechanics of the hybrid force will be the single command and control system under the UN. Close UN and AU collaboration will be required to ensure coordination of complex logistics and decision-making.

Reports have indicated that enough African troops or police officers have already been pledged for the mission; however sufficient pledges for air transport have yet to be secured (IRIN 2007). On 2 August Canada announced that it would contribute an additional \$48-million to facilitate the transition of AMIS to the AU-UN hybrid force (CBC 2007). The hybrid force, which is estimated to cost about \$2-billion in the first year, is now engaged in pre-deployment activities (UNSC 2007c) and is due to deploy in January (CNN 2007).

Parallel or linked: Working toward a political solution

While efforts are proceeding to establish an international force on the ground in Darfur, a parallel process is underway to arrive at a political solution. Talks convened in February 2007 to convince non-signatory rebels to join the 2006 Darfur peace deal have been ongoing. The rebels and the Government of Sudan met three times between February and July. Unfortunately, some important rebel representatives have boycotted the talks, including Suleiman Jamous, the SLM humanitarian commander formerly detained by the Sudanese government, and Abdul Wahid el-Nur, president of the SLA, now living in France.

The round of peace talks scheduled to begin 27 October was effectively postponed. While it had been anticipated that direct negotiations between rebels and government forces might take place at this meeting, key rebel leaders, el-Nur and JEM’s Khalil Ibrahim were absent. Plans for November include consultations in “Libya and elsewhere with all

sides” before the last stage of the peace talks are held in Libya in December (UN News Centre 2007).

Security challenges

The diplomatic momentum could be further jeopardized by continuing hostilities on the ground in Darfur. The rebel leader of a breakaway faction of the SLM, Ahmed Abdel Shafie, “said in a statement that continued violence in Sudan’s remote west meant that ‘the parties to the conflict in Darfur are not yet prepared to enter into genuine political negotiations’” (Heavens 2007). In recent months the security situation in Darfur has dramatically deteriorated, resulting in the evacuation of staff and the restricting of operations by many aid agencies.

A recent attack on AU troops, in which 10 soldiers were killed, 30 were missing and seven were badly injured (BBC News 2007), was the worst since their deployment to Darfur. It is being blamed on a splinter group that broke away from a faction called SLA United. There are also indications that Arab tribes, bandits, and factions accused of killing civilians are now fighting one another over the “spoils of war” (Gettleman 2007). Other reports suggest that the proliferation of small arms and the recruitment of child soldiers are on the rise. An Amnesty International report of 24 August (2007) stated that the Sudanese government is continuing to deploy offensive military equipment in Darfur, despite the UN arms embargo and peace agreements. According to reports cited by UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, the Sudanese armed forces and at least seven rebel and opposition groups in Darfur are recruiting and using children to fight (UNSC 2007b).

Insecurity in Darfur hurts efforts to achieve a political resolution to the conflict. UNAMID could help to improve security, especially if there is a coordinated approach between the peace process and security.

Testing the responsibility to protect

Since the Darfur crisis first gained international attention in 2003, many have framed the required response by the international community within the Responsibility to Protect doctrine. R2P states that, in cases where a state is unwilling or unable to protect its people, the international community has the responsibility to take collective action to protect them. R2P is applicable in cases of genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing, and crimes against humanity. As an emerging norm in international law, R2P gained further recognition when it was endorsed by world leaders at the 2005 UN World Summit Outcome Document (UNGA 2005).

Canada played a key role in the articulation of R2P by sponsoring the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty, and has continued to invest its resources and prestige in advancing the doctrine. Commentators have pointed to Darfur as “the real test of Canada’s and the world’s resolve to move the responsibility to protect to full recognition in international law” (Siebert 2006). More than four years after the crisis has gone from very bad to even worse in Darfur, the international community has finally acted on its responsibility to protect by authorizing the AU-UN hybrid force.

Resolution 1769 maintains the “sovereignty of the Government of Sudan,” but does not explicitly reference R2P by reaffirming Resolution 1674 on the protection of civilians in armed conflict, noting the provisions of paragraphs 138 and 139 of the 2005 World Summit Outcome Document (UNGA 2005).

While this AU-UN force may be far too late in deploying for what the R2P doctrine envisioned as early international action to prevent atrocities, it could still provide some practical guidance in the application of R2P. To do so, clear rules of engagement for troops will be required. These will be a challenge to create because of the different operating procedures of the countries that contribute troops and the different organizational cultures of the AU and UN. The rules will be needed early and must be articulated clearly to provide maximum legitimacy for action in situations in which civilians require urgent protection. Otherwise, there will be fatal delays while rules are cleared through bureaucratic procedures.

Conclusion

The security situation and the political solution are intrinsically linked in Darfur and must be addressed comprehensively. Canada and the world face an enormous challenge in effectively establishing UNAMID in a politically volatile and insecure environment.

In October 2007 Emily Schroeder married and assumed the name Emily Alexander.

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