

## Sudanese President Calls for Cease-Fire in Darfur

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Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir declared an immediate cease-fire in Darfur and called for the disarmament of militias active in the western region to quell a conflict that has killed about 300,000 people

"I hereby announce our immediate unconditional cease-fire between the Armed Forces and warring factions" in Darfur, Bashir said in a speech today in the capital, Khartoum. He called on rebel groups to begin peace negotiations.

Bashir made the cease-fire announcement at the close of the Sudan People's Initiative, a forum of political parties and civil society organizations brought together to try to find a solution to the conflict in Darfur. Rebel groups boycotted the initiative, calling it a public-relations effort.

Luis Moreno-Ocampo, the chief prosecutor of the International Criminal Court reported in July that he's seeking the arrest of al-Bashir. Moreno-Ocampo alleges al-Bashir bears "criminal responsibility" for genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes in Darfur, where as many as 3 million people have been forced to flee their homes.

Bashir said the cease-fire would have to be monitored by the African Union and the United Nations, which are deploying a joint force of peacekeepers in the region.

Almost a year after the mission began, the peacekeeping force, known as Unamid, has deployed less than half its mandated 26,000 soldiers, police and staff.

The UN-AU mediator for Darfur, Djibril Bassolé, called the results of the forum an "important stepping stone" that reflects a "clear political will" to end the region's conflict. He said he would contact all belligerent parties to reach consensus on the cease-fire.

"The challenge is how can you translate good ideas or good intentions to an improved reality on the ground in Darfur?" Alberto Fernandez, Chief of Mission at the US embassy in Khartoum, told reporters at the forum's closing ceremony. "That's the question, that's the challenge for all of us."

One of Darfur's most powerful rebel groups, the Justice and Equality Movement, or JEM, said yesterday that it would not accept a unilateral cease-fire. JEM attacked the capital in May.

"For JEM to go into an actual cease-fire, we have said categorically that JEM will go into it only where there is a framework of agreement, declaration of principles, and a timeframe for cease-fire," El-Tahir El-Faki, the speaker of JEM's Legislative Council, said by phone from London yesterday. "Without that, we are not interested in any talk that is not going to be substantiated by improvement on the ground."

JEM is demanding a commitment to make Darfur's three states a semi-autonomous region like South Sudan was under a 2005 peace deal that ended a 21-year civil war.

The group also wants the government to release its fighters who were condemned to death following JEM's attack on the capital.

The violence in Darfur began when rebels seeking a larger role in Sudan's political life and a bigger slice of the country's expanding oil wealth attacked the government.

Government-backed Arab militias, known as the Janjaweed, have been accused by rights groups such as Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International of committing atrocities in the region.

A peace agreement signed by the government and one rebel faction in 2006 in Abuja, Nigeria, failed to halt the violence.

Rebel leaders who refused to sign the accord, including Abdel Wahid Nur, said that agreement didn't provide enough guarantees for disarmament of the Janjaweed, compensation for war victims and political representation for Darfurians.

Bashir said he endorsed the recommendations that emerged from the Sudan People's Initiative, including the release of Darfuri political prisoners, compensation for war victims and a referendum on whether the three states of Darfur should become one region.

He promised to create a special committee to implement the recommendations.

The recommendations did not specifically address a proposal to appoint a vice president from Darfur, as the government has done for South Sudan, and instead left a decision on the matter for future negotiations.

The government has set aside as much as 40 million Sudanese pounds (\$18 million) in the 2009 budget for individual and collective compensation, Bashir said.

It will also undertake a series of initiatives to improve development and services in Darfur, including building schools and a high voltage power line, he said.

``This government &ndash;- under external pressure -&ndash; will always take a step to organize events, telling the outside world they are serious about a case," Salih Mahmoud Osman, a human rights lawyer from Darfur, said in a Nov. 1 interview in Khartoum. ``But unfortunately -&ndash; and it's been an attitude for years now - &ndash; they can also easily back away from any commitment tomorrow."

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