



Doomed to failure

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November 2, 2007 8:00 PM

http://commentisfree.guardian.co.uk/eric_reeves/2007/11/with_terrible_predictability_p.html

With terrible predictability, peace talks in Sirte, Libya between the Khartoum regime and Darfur's various rebel groups broke off yesterday, having accomplished nothing other than to reveal the poverty of international efforts in halting the ongoing genocide in Sudan's western region. Nor was progress made in fashioning a ceasefire, the essential context for meaningful negotiations. Instead, Khartoum - which had [announced](#) with much fanfare a unilateral ceasefire when talks opened on October 27 - launched the very next day what may be a final solution to its Darfur problem: the United Nations, Human Rights Watch and journalists in the region are all reporting Khartoum's [assaults on camps](#) for displaced persons, including violent relocation of civilians to insecure areas.

The host of the Libyan talks was Muammar Gadafy, who for decades has armed groups on both sides of the Chad/Darfur border. No regional actor has done more to destabilize this volatile region than Gadafy. Many of the brutal Janjaweed militia in Darfur were first armed by the highly erratic Libyan leader as part of his "Islamic Legion." So how did Gadafy see his role as host to what should have been critical peace talks? He described the first great episode of genocide in the 21st century as "[a quarrel over a camel.](#)" Such contemptuous dismissal of the massive atrocities, committed by Khartoum in response to the insurgency that emerged in 2003, reveals all too much of Gadafy's views - and makes clear why Libya was recommended to UN secretary-general Ban Ki-moon by Sudan's military strongman and president Omar al-Bashir during their early September meeting. Although strenuously warned in advance by human rights and humanitarian groups of the danger of Libya's hosting Darfur peace talks, Ban accepted the invitation - without consulting the rebel groups expected to appear at the talks.

The most important of these groups did not show up in Sirte. There has been an unconscionable [fractiousness](#) on the part of rebel political leaders and military commanders. The broad split between those fighting on the ground and those living abroad is complicated by the failure of both to do enough to represent the views and needs of civilians in the camps. But if attention has been mainly on divisions, it is important to recognize that these divisions are not between parties of equal significance or comparable moral equities.

The rebels who [attacked the African Union base near Haskanita](#) in September have little in common with the rebel movement in North Darfur - principled men such as Jar el-Naby and Suleiman Marajan. Moreover, there are prospects for reunification: Suleiman Jamous, the rebel humanitarian leader and widely respected elderly conciliator, begged the UN and AU mediators for more time before going ahead with the talks. He is confident that much more progress toward unity can be made in matter of weeks. (Jamous was released after more than a year's imprisonment by Khartoum only in September.) On November 1, Jamous announced that a number of significant figures in the rebel faction that signed the ill-fated Abuja peace agreement in May 2006 are abandoning their brutal and incompetent leader, Minni Minawi, to join the primary rebel group, the Sudan Liberation Movement/Unity.

But instead of working effectively for rebel unification, AU and UN mediators have worked part-time on this enormously difficult and complex task, and concentrated their efforts in Khartoum, not on the ground in

Darfur. They have fashioned no effective way to bridge the gap between commanders on the ground and leaders in exile. And, disgracefully, they have done almost nothing to ensure that civilian voices from the camps, including those of traditional leaders, are heard in the talks.

But the real reason for the failure in Sirte is that neither the UN nor the AU is willing to confront Khartoum with meaningful consequences for its serial violation of UN resolutions and its continuing obstruction of humanitarian aid and the deployment of the hybrid UN/AU peace support operation authorized by the security council in July. Nor has Khartoum paid a price for its systematic renegeing on the north/south comprehensive peace agreement of January 2005. Nor has it been held accountable for its failure to implement the terms of the disastrously consummated Abuja peace agreement, including compensation payments, releasing of development funds, or security arrangements, including disarming of the Janjaweed.

Quite simply, the rebels and the people of Darfur have no reason whatsoever to trust that a negotiated agreement will mean anything. Over 18 years in power, the National Islamic Front (National Congress party) regime that dominates a merely notional Government of National Unity in Khartoum has never abided by any agreement with any Sudanese party - not one, not ever. Why, Darfuris ask, should they or the international community expect this occasion to be different? Even the Janjaweed have been betrayed by Khartoum, which has reneged on various promises to give expropriated land to these Arab militia groups. Inter-tribal violence now plagues Arab populations in Darfur as well as non-Arab or African peoples - and only Khartoum's cynical divide-and-rule objectives are furthered.

When asked what they want, the people of Darfur will of course say they wish for a peace agreement. But they recognize all too clearly that such an agreement, with appropriate guarantees and guarantors, is a very long way off. What they plead for desperately is security - to have their lives protected now, not many months from now. And they wish with similar urgency that security be provided to humanitarian operations that continue to contract and diminish in efficacy. Some 4.2 million Darfuris now depend upon humanitarian aid; these people know all too well how acutely vulnerable they are to the consequences of large-scale humanitarian withdrawal.

Peace talks for Darfur will succeed only if there is enough pressure on Khartoum to negotiate in good faith. That cannot be generated without significant cooperation from China, which has so far adamantly opposed all threats of sanctions against Khartoum, signaling to the regime that diplomatic obduracy will be rewarded. Creative, diligent and sustained negotiations with responsible rebel leaders are also essential, with the governing assumption that if there is a critical mass within the fractured political and military leadership, potential spoilers can be partially sidelined or eventually brought on board a consensus negotiating position, broadly representative of Darfuris, including civil society. It is an assumption, not a clear road map. But no other assumption seems to promise a way forward. Decisions about the location of the next round of talks and Darfuri representation at them must be by consensus, even if unanimity is clearly impossible. Such consensus cannot be achieved anywhere but on the ground in Darfur.

In the interim, the deepening security crisis facing civilians and humanitarians must be squarely addressed. Urgent deployment of the formed police units authorized by the UN must become a priority. If the camps explode in violence, as they are poised to do, hundreds of thousands of civilians - largely women and children - will die. For them, a peace agreement will have no meaning at all.