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Sudan Blocks UN Human Rights Mission over Envoy

By Opheera McDoom for Reuters

KHARTOUM — Sudan will not allow a UN human rights team to visit unless they replace a member of the delegation who Khartoum says is biased, a Foreign Ministry spokesman said on Monday.

A six-member UN rights team was due to arrive this week in Sudan to investigate alleged abuses in Darfur. But the government has said they will not get visas.

"We have ... issues about one specific person in the delegation," Foreign Ministry spokesman Ali el-Sadig said.

"Before coming to Sudan this person made comments which were totally not objective and so this person is unacceptable to us and must be changed before this delegation will be allowed to enter Sudan."

Another source in the Foreign Ministry said Sudan objected to the presence of Guyanese Bertrand Ramcharan, the former UN deputy high commissioner for human rights.

"He made comments referring to genocide and saying the government needed to do more right after he was appointed," the source told Reuters.

Sima Samar, the UN special rapporteur for human rights in Sudan, visited Darfur last August. The Geneva-based UN rights council has been criticized for its ineffectiveness on Darfur.

Washington calls the four years of rape, murder and pillage in Darfur genocide, a term Khartoum rejects and European governments have been reluctant to use.

A U.N.-appointed commission of inquiry found no genocide, but said heinous war crimes no less serious than genocide had taken place in Darfur. It also said individuals may have acted with genocidal intent.

The International Criminal Court (ICC) is due to present its first case on Darfur this month. Experts estimate 200,000 people have been killed and 2.5 million driven from their homes.

The dispute underlines the tense relations between Sudan and the United Nations as UN envoy for Darfur Jan Eliasson and his African Union counterpart, Salim Ahmed Salim, began their first joint visit to Sudan to reinvigorate the stalled peace process.

Last year Sudan expelled the top-ranking UN official in Sudan, Jan Pronk, and has hindered visits by top UN officials, most notably former humanitarian chief Jan Egeland.

Eliasson said the matter of visas for the UN rights delegation was still under discussion. "We ... hope that we will find a solution very soon," he said.

UN spokeswoman Marie Heuze said in Geneva she had no immediate comment on Khartoum's move to block the mission.

Rebel Conference

Salim and Eliasson will head to Darfur this week to talk with rebel factions to begin the long road toward reconvening peace talks to end the violence.

In May 2006 only one of three rebel factions signed an AU-mediated deal, after many rounds of exhausting talks.

Since then, Darfur's divided rebels have been an obstacle to peace talks. Commanders in the field have been trying for months to convene a conference to unite their ranks.

But the AU said the government bombed rebel positions, thwarting any hope of a meeting. President Omar Hassan al-Bashir confirmed the bombing, which he said responded to rebel attacks.

European foreign ministers expressed concern over the bombing on Monday, issuing a statement in Brussels denouncing bombing in North Darfur by the Sudanese Air Force which disrupted a planned rebel commanders' meeting.

Salim said after meeting Sudan's foreign minister in Khartoum he expected the government to support the conference.

European foreign ministers also expressed concern that the Darfur conflict was spreading across the border to Chad and the Central African Republic (CAR).

Sudan's state news agency said Bashir and the presidents of Chad and CAR would hold a mini-summit this week at a Franco-African summit in Cannes, France, to try to strengthen strained relations between the three neighbors.