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Sudan Blocks UN Investigators from Darfur Trip

By Noel King

Sudan's government has blocked a United Nations human rights team from entering the country to investigate alleged atrocities in Darfur. The government has questioned the objectivity of one team member and has called for him to be replaced.

The six-member team was scheduled to arrive in Khartoum Tuesday, but the members were refused entry visas.

Sudanese Foreign Ministry spokesman Ali al-Sadiq says his government wants Bertrand Ramcharan removed from the team.

Ramcharan, a former United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights has, in the past, referred to the Darfur conflict as genocide.

"The whole issue is about the composition of the team. There is a particular person who has a previous extreme position against the government of Sudan," he said. "Immediately after he was appointed member of the team, he made a public statement that does not qualify him. He spoke about human rights violations and genocide. From our part we are going to facilitate their mission the best we can. But we want people who are non-partisan, who are professionals."

Al-Sadiq says he is confident that the United Nations and Sudan will reach an agreement soon on the team.

The United States also calls the conflict, in which experts estimate at least 200,000 people have died, genocide.

The United Nations does not use the controversial term. In early 2003, rebels from predominantly African tribes attacked Sudan government positions in Darfur, complaining that the remote region remained undeveloped due to neglect by the central government.

Many people accuse the Khartoum government of arming Arab militias, known as janjaweed, to conduct a scorched earth campaign against African villages in Darfur.

American Nobel laureate and anti-landmine activist Jody Williams leads the U.N. investigation team.

The team was formed during an emergency session of the U.N. Human Rights Council in December, and will report its findings to the council next month. Tensions between

Sudan and the United Nations have grown since last August, when the Security Council voted to send more than 20,000 peacekeepers to Darfur.

Sudan refused the U.N. troops entry, saying that an African Union force can stem violence in the embattled region.

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