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Chirac Urges Sudan to Accept Darfur Force

President Jacques Chirac has urged Sudan to agree to a peace force for strife-torn Darfur at an Africa-France summit that is likely to be his last foray on the world stage.

Speaking at the opening of the summit, Chirac described the conflict in Darfur as "a humanitarian catastrophe that is threatening the region."

"I am calling on the belligerents and the government of Sudan (...) to accept the deployment of a peace force, to halt the attacks, to respect the civilian population and humanitarian workers, to accept the impasse and the horror of this policy and to choose reconciliation," Chirac said Thursday.

At least 200,000 people have been killed and more than two million displaced in Darfur since fighting broke out between rebel groups and government forces in February 2003, according to the United Nations.

Khartoum agreed in December to allow the United Nations to provide technical and material support to an AU peace force that has failed to stop the violence in Darfur.

But Sudanese President Omar al-Beshir, who was attending the Cannes summit, is balking at the idea of UN peacekeepers in Darfur, where a government-backed Janjaweed militia is battling rebels.

It remained unclear whether a meeting planned for later Thursday between the leaders of Sudan, Chad and the Central African Republic to discuss Darfur would go ahead after Chad said it would serve no purpose.

More than 30 African leaders are attending the two-day summit that is seen as Chirac's farewell to Africa before he announces in the coming weeks that he is stepping down after 12 years in office, setting the scene for a leadership change after the April-May election.

Chirac, 74, also urged leaders to strengthen democracy and the rule of law and asserted that France would maintain high levels of financial aid to the continent.

"The stability of states depends above all on the democratic timetable and holding regular elections. Crises often take root during contested elections that tarnish the legitimacy of the newly elected," Chirac said.

"The rule of law must be strengthened," he said, adding that civil society across the continent "is awaiting more fairness, transparency and freedom."

Chirac counts many of the African leaders as close friends such as Omar Bongo Ondimba, who has ruled Gabon for 40 years and ranks as Africa's longest-serving president.

Taking a more personal tone, Chirac in his address spoke of his "love for Africa, its lands, peoples and cultures."

"I know that it is exceptionally dynamic. I have confidence in its future and have the conviction that the new Africa is on the move."

Ghanian President John Kufuor, whose country currently leads the 53-nation AU, and Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak also emphasized that Africa was changing.

"Africa can no longer be described as a continent adrift," said Kufuor, before listing democratic gains and economic growth at around five percent.

"We want the idea that Africa is rich and Africans poor to be relegated to the past," said Mubarak.

The 24th Africa-France summit is being held under the theme "Africa and world balance", with special focus to be put on the continent's oil and mineral wealth at a time when China is making an unprecedented push on that front.

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