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## **China Urges Quick Darfur Solution Ahead of President Visit**

Chinese Assistant Foreign Minister Zhai Jun urged a quick resolution to the Darfur crisis and denied any US pressure on China ahead of a presidential visit next month.

Zhai told reporters that he had discussed with State Foreign Minister Ali Ahmed Kerti on Monday a visit planned by President Hu Jin Tao to the Sudan "in the beginning of February," the Darfur issue and the mutual relations.

"Any solution to the Darfur problem should be made with the consent of the Sudanese government," said the Chinese official, suggesting that the problem be resolved "politically and as soon as possible with the support of the international community."

He denied any pressures being exercised by the United States on China to persuade Sudan to accept the deployment of UN peacekeepers in Darfur.

"There are no pressures on China," he said, adding: "Our relations with America are not at the expense of our relationship with other countries and do not contradict our ties with the Sudan."

Sudanese Foreign Ministry spokesman Ali al-Sadek said Zhai's visit was to discuss preparations for the Chinese president's visit, a recent visit to China by US envoy to Sudan Andrew Natsios, and bilateral relations.

"The two sides agreed that the Darfur problem should be resolved politically, bearing in mind respect for the Sudan's independence and territorial integrity, and that any settlement to the conflict should be approved by the government," said Sadek.

He added that the two sides "stressed that imposition of sanctions on the Sudan would only complicate the problem and would not be conducive to resolving it."

The UN's special envoy to Sudan, Jan Pronk, who was expelled from the country for comments he made on Darfur, has said that China could play "an important role" in international diplomatic negotiations with the Sudanese government.

"Some members of the (United Nations) Security Council have some leverage," Pronk told the BBC in November, adding that debt relief and the lifting of trade sanctions could also help ease the situation.

"If there is any country which could play an important role, it is China ... China never put a lot of pressure (on Sudan). The pressure came in particular from the other members of the Security Council."

At least 200,000 people have died as a result of fighting, famine and disease in Darfur in the west of Sudan. More than two million people have fled their homes since rebels launched an uprising in early 2003, prompting a scorched earth response from the military and its Janjaweed militia allies.

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