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Blair to Propose New Darfur Initiative

By Reuters

LONDON — British Prime Minister Tony Blair said on Saturday he would propose an incentive package for Sudan as part of a new initiative to end the crisis in war-torn Darfur and get U.N. peacekeeping troops on the ground.

“In the coming weeks I will talk to other leaders to agree an initiative that sets out the help Sudan can expect if the government lives up to its obligations and what will happen if they don't,” Blair said in a statement.

The western region of Sudan bordering Chad has been plagued by political and ethnic violence since 2003. Tens of thousands of people have been killed and more than 2 million displaced by fighting between government troops, rebels and militias.

Western leaders, some African presidents and humanitarian groups are piling pressure on Sudanese President Omar Hassan al-Bashir to accept a U.N. resolution to deploy more than 20,000 U.N. peacekeepers in Darfur.

The mandate for 7,000 poorly equipped African Union troops expires on September 30 and Sudan has said they would only be allowed to extend the mission if they remain under AU control.

“The situation is unacceptable. I do not understand the government of Sudan's rejection of the U.N. force, or its threat to withdraw its welcome from the AU,” Blair said.

“The government of Sudan must agree to the continuation of the (African Union) force and transition to the U.N.”

Blair's comments come ahead of global day for Darfur planned for Sunday, when activists and religious leaders throughout the world will hold demonstrations and meetings to raise political awareness about the humanitarian crisis in the region.

A British official said Blair's aim was to get the African Union, European Union, the United Nations and the United States to back the incentive initiative at the highest level.

Incentives could include ending suspension of development and recovery aid, resolving Sudan's debt situation, establishing higher level political contacts and moving toward the lifting of sanctions, he said.

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees Antonio Guterres said international divisions had allowed the Sudanese government greater scope to maneuver.

“The problem is the international community is not clearly united in a front to make sure that things really happen,” Guterres told BBC radio.

“The fact that the international community is not really able to act together forcefully ... creates an environment in which it is much easier to do things which are being done.”

Analysts say getting Sudan's close ally China on board to deliver the message to Khartoum would be key for progress.

China abstained in the U.N. Security Council vote on the resolution for U.N. peacekeepers to take over from the AU, but Beijing has since been lobbying Sudan to let troops into Darfur.

Blair discussed Darfur with Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao during meetings in London this week and has also spoken to President Bush about the situation.

Blair's comments come a day after U.S. Oscar-winning actor George Clooney told the United Nations time was running out in Darfur and the world would be blamed for a genocide akin to Rwanda if atrocities were not halted.

On Saturday celebrities including British pop star Elton John, Irish rocker Bob Geldof and Hollywood actress Mia Farrow joined senior religious figures in signing an open letter to Blair calling on him to make Darfur a priority.

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