

An Opportunity in Darfur

Editorial

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DURING A VISIT to The Post on Tuesday, Sudan's U.S. ambassador, Khidir Ahmed, stated that his government wanted more African Union peacekeepers in the territory of Darfur, where some 300,000 civilians have perished. Moreover, he claimed, his government would be happy for this force to have a clearer mandate to protect civilians rather than being limited to monitoring the ostensible cease-fire in the province. These declarations stand in contrast to Sudan's previous policy of opposing a strong mandate, of hampering the African Union's movements by denying fuel for its helicopters and even of shooting at one of its aircraft in December. The United States and its allies should take Sudan's new position at face value and organize an expanded peacekeeping mission quickly.

The importance of seizing this opening is clear from listening to Brian Steidle, a former Marine captain who describes his experience as an adviser to the African Union peacekeepers in The Post's Outlook section today. Mr. Steidle's experience shows that African deployment has been at least sporadically effective. In December, for example, the African Union deterred an expected government attack on a town called Muhajeryia by stationing 35 troops there. By deploying 70 troops and 10 observers in the ruins of another town that had been razed by government forces, it emboldened about half the villagers to return home.

Mr. Steidle has other good things to say about the African Union deployment. The 300 military officers who make up the observer mission are drawn from all over Africa and are committed to their mission; they hope that their presence in Darfur shows that Africans can address their own problems. But Mr. Steidle's overwhelming message is more somber. Like every other military expert, he begins by saying that the African Union force is too small to cover a territory the size of Texas. The 300 observers are accompanied by a protection force of fewer than 2,000; Mr. Steidle says at least 25,000 are needed. The African Union also needs better equipment. When Mr. Steidle left Darfur in February, the force had the hardware to send satellite e-mail but could not actually use it, since nobody had negotiated service with a satellite company.

The awful truth is that Sudan's openness to an expanded African Union mission probably reflects these weaknesses. The government thinks it can score diplomatic points by issuing an invitation that the world will leave on the table, even though acting on it could save lives by the thousand. To get more peacekeepers into Darfur, the African Union would have to negotiate the details with Sudan's government; it would require diplomatic and technical support from the United Nations, more troop contributions from African countries, and more money and logistical backup from the United States and its allies.

But recent experience shows that the United States is unwilling to invest the effort to make these disparate actors work together; only two-thirds of the currently mandated African Union deployment is on the ground.

So long as Sudan shut the world out as it killed Darfur's civilians, it was the primary culprit for atrocities that amount to genocide. But if Sudan's government is inviting the world into Darfur, the moral burden shifts a bit. The United States and its allies are being challenged to show that they care about genocide enough to shake off their passivity and organize a peacekeeping force. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and her new team at the State Department must rise to this challenge, so that stories like the saving of Muhajeryia are no longer the exceptions.

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