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Sudan Blocking West's Efforts to Help

By Sally Buzbee

CAIRO, Egypt—The warnings from the United Nations, Europe and the U.S. are dire: The war-ravaged Darfur region of Sudan is headed toward disaster, and Sudan's government must allow in peacekeepers to prevent it.

But with Sudan resisting, there may be little the West can do to avert a sharp deterioration in the world's worst humanitarian crisis.

Overshadowed by crises like Lebanon, Afghanistan and Iran, and with threats of its own to wield, Sudan looks set to stymie the West's efforts to help Darfur's people for months, if not years, to come.

The African Union tried to put off an immediate collapse of the situation, announcing Wednesday that it will extend the mandate of its peacekeepers in the vast, war-ravaged region through the end of the year. The mandate had been due to run out at the end of the month.

But that only maintains the status quo: a peacekeeping force that all agree is too small and ineffective to stop violence that has only grown in recent months—with no long-term international strategy in place to help.

If the AU force eventually is forced to pull out of Darfur and Sudan continues to fight the deployment of a replacement U.N. force, the impact could be sharp.

Many international aid workers would likely depart—perhaps within weeks.

That could leave Darfur's suffering people facing even more starvation and attacks from government-backed militias. If Sudan launches a big military offensive against rebels in the region, the situation could worsen and the number of refugees sharply spike.

Of course, Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir still could agree to accept U.N. peacekeepers. But that seems unlikely with the president sounding more confrontational each day—claiming that Jewish groups are behind the West's push for peacekeepers and that international aid groups exaggerate Darfur's suffering.

He also has accused the U.N. of wanting to re-impose colonialism.

The West has retorted sharply: U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan warned Sudan would be held accountable for the fate of those in Darfur, while President Bush appointed a special American envoy and said the U.N. should act even if Sudan resists.

Thousands of people around the world rallied last weekend to protest the violence and urge world leaders to intervene. The fighting—which began in early 2003—started between ethnic African tribes and the Arab-led government. The government now has been accused of unleashing militiamen blamed for rapes and killings, although it denies any involvement in the violence.

At least 200,000 people have died and more than 2 million people have been displaced.

Despite their strong words, the United States and the U.N. have not yet applied the pressure needed—backed by strong consequences—to make al-Bashir blink, said Lee Feinstein, an expert on the U.N. and international diplomacy at the Council on Foreign Relations in New York.

What's needed is a "systematic, diplomatic campaign that would bring along other countries and have real leverage with Khartoum," Feinstein said.

Key to that may be China, the biggest buyer of Sudan's oil and thus one of the few countries with the carrots and sticks to make it listen. China this week did say it had urged Sudan to consider peacekeepers but made clear it felt the decision was Sudan's.

The United States and its allies are mulling whether there are other ways to force al-Bashir to be more cooperative on Darfur, such as intervening militarily without his permission.

But Sudan has been clever in its opposition—accusing the West of imperialistic aims rather than humanitarian ones—and European troops are sure to be leery of leaping into yet another hostile morass when they already are heavily committed in Lebanon.

African troops under U.N. mandate could be another option, but so far al-Bashir has resisted even that. And a warning from Osama bin Laden's al-Qaida terrorist group that it will fight any Western-allied force in Sudan is sure to give both Western and African governments pause, with Islamic militants strong in nearby Somalia.

Why has Sudan's government been so determined to keep out a U.N. force?

Some experts believe al-Bashir simply wants to be able to attack rebels in Darfur without interference.

Others think al-Bashir worries that a U.N. force might inevitably be followed by a U.N. investigation into alleged war crimes by his government. The specter of another former African leader, Liberia's Charles Taylor—in jail on war crimes charges—is said to haunt him.