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African Union Peacekeepers' Stay in Darfur Is Extended as Accord on U.N. Force Is Awaited

By Warren Hoge

UNITED NATIONS — The African Union declared Wednesday that it would strengthen and extend the life of its peacekeeping force in Darfur and seek to persuade the Sudanese government to accept United Nations participation in the violence-torn area.

The decision averted the feared possibility that all international forces would depart from Darfur at the end of this month, when the African Union troops were scheduled to leave.

They originally were to give way to a new United Nations force, but Sudan has adamantly refused to accept United Nations involvement despite public outcries over the increasing danger to the residents of Darfur, the region in the western part of the county where 200,000 people have died and 2.5 million have been driven from their homes.

The African Union's 15-member Peace and Security Council met here on Wednesday to discuss the refusal of President Omar Hassan al-Bashir of Sudan to accept the deployment of 22,000 United Nations soldiers and police officers. That force, called for in a United Nations Security Council resolution on Aug. 31, would replace the 7,200-member African Union force that has admitted it does not have the resources to curb the violence in Darfur.

"The U.N. must play a role when regional arrangements cannot contain a conflict," Blaise Compaoré, the president of Burkina Faso, said after the meeting, which heard from Secretary General Kofi Annan and Mr. Bashir.

"For now the Africans will continue to act while working to improve relations between the Sudanese government so that eventually the U.N. can become involved if regional efforts fail," Mr. Compaoré said.

Mr. Bashir on Tuesday reiterated his unconditional opposition to the United Nations force, saying that it would constitute a recolonization of his country and that he would allow only African Union peacekeepers. He also charged that the crisis had been exaggerated by rights groups and Jewish organizations to raise money for themselves.

"That was yesterday," said one African Union official, who said she could not comment for attribution on a closed-door session. "Today he was very different."

Mr. Compaoré said, "We had the impression that in our discussions with the Sudanese they are willing to work with the United Nations."

He said the agreement reached Wednesday by the African Union council would extend the mandate of its force for three months, until Dec. 31. The force will be strengthened, he said, “through contributions from Africa, logistical and material support from the U.N. and a commitment by the Arab League to fund the operation.”

He supplied no numbers, but the African Union official said she expected that a technical meeting of the group would take up the specifics at a meeting on Thursday.

Mr. Compaoré, whose country is chairman of the council this month, said the group would appeal for an end to hostilities and for the fulfillment of a peace accord brokered by the African Union that has not been agreed to by all parties in the conflict. It has been systematically violated since it was signed in May.

“We will try to foster better relations between Sudan and its neighbors,” Mr. Compaoré added. Mr. Bashir on Tuesday accused Chad and Eritrea of sending fighters into Darfur.

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