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Annan Says Sudan's Overture Could Pave Way for Peacekeepers

By Elissa Gootman

UNITED NATIONS — Secretary General Kofi Annan said Wednesday that the Security Council was “encouraged” that a recent message from the Sudanese government could pave the way for a large-scale peacekeeping operation in the country’s war-ravaged Darfur region.

But Mr. Annan noted that some diplomats remained skeptical of Sudan’s overtures, and he urged the Security Council to press ahead quickly with its plans to test the government’s intentions.

“Obviously, when there have been so many disappointments, it’s only natural that there will be some doubts and hesitations, and this is a challenge for the Sudanese government to prove to the international community that it means business,” Mr. Annan said. “We are going to press ahead, and I hope this time there will not be disappointments.”

Mr. Annan’s remarks followed a Security Council briefing at which a top United Nations envoy, Ahmedou Ould-Abdallah, discussed a letter Saturday to Mr. Annan from Sudan’s president, Omar Hassan al-Bashir.

The significance of the letter remains a matter of debate. While it seems to welcome a joint United Nations-African Union peacekeeping force for Darfur, it also suggests that Sudan should have veto power over how the effort is carried out.

Even on Wednesday evening, Sudan’s representative at the United Nations, Abdalmahmood Abdalhaleem Mohamad, played down the significance of Mr. Bashir’s letter, saying that Sudan had agreed not to a “joint force” of peacekeepers but to a “hybrid operation,” in which the United Nations would simply provide technical support.

“It is backstopping, logistical, technical support,” he said. “It is not a joint force, let there be no confusion of that.”

This is not the first time that United Nations officials and diplomats have expressed hope for a peacekeeping effort in Darfur. More than 200,000 people have died in Darfur, many of them from hunger and disease, since the government moved to crush a rebellion there in 2003. More than 2.5 million have been forced from their homes. The Bush administration and others have called the events there genocide.

In November, the Sudanese government agreed in principle to allow a joint United Nations-African Union peacekeeping force into Darfur. Since then, there has been disagreement on a range of issues, from the size of the force to who would command it to what kind of uniforms its troops would wear.

Mr. Annan said he believed that some of those issues had been resolved and that most Council members interpreted Mr. Bashir's letter "as a positive indication that we should build on."

"We need to be persistent, we need to be determined, we need to test it and press ahead," Mr. Annan said.

After the meeting, the Council issued a statement saying it "welcomed" Mr. Ould-Abdallah's report and that "the members of the Council underlined their willingness to continue their close cooperation with the African Union and to continue to give priority to this issue."

Alejandro D. Wolff, the acting American ambassador to the United Nations, said that Mr. Bashir's letter may turn out to be a "welcome development." But he added, "The proof of this will be action on the ground, and whether or not we will actually see a force that can take its place in Darfur to address the humanitarian crisis there and help deal with the fighting."

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