

VOA News

AU to Double Size of Darfur Peace Mission

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The African Union plans to more than double the size of its peace mission in the volatile Darfur region of western Sudan.

The African Union's Peace and Security Council plans to increase the number of peacekeeping troops in Darfur to 7,700 by the end of September. The group had initially planned to add about 1,000 troops to the 2,200 already in Darfur.

AU spokesman Adam Thiam says the troop increase will enhance security in the region.

"We need more troops to be able to cover the maximum areas, because Darfur is the size of France, as you know," said Mr. Thiam. "Where the AU troop is, there is less insecurity. Insecurity is happening also because many areas are not covered."

Mr. Thiam says the AU is calling on its 53 member states and international donors to supply the funding and equipment needed to support the increase. He did not specify what this amount would be.

Earlier this week, the AU asked NATO to begin talks on how the military alliance can help the pan-African organization's mission in Darfur.

NATO ambassadors reportedly agreed to hold exploratory talks, perhaps next month.

An analyst with the International Crisis Group, David Mozersky, says he is pleased with the latest developments, and hopes they will bear fruit.

"I think it's an excellent step forward towards stabilizing Darfur," he said. "The only question would be, are there other alternatives that can see this happen even more quickly, even before September? Working with some of these other institutions, is there a way to get this done immediately?"

He says the conflict is mostly indirectly responsible for an estimated 10,000 deaths in Darfur each month.

AU officials say they are aware that the solution to the Darfur crisis must be political, not military. They say measures need to be taken immediately to bring stability to the area while a political solution is being worked out.

The Darfur conflict, which broke out in early 2003, has claimed tens-of-thousands of lives, and displaced more than 1.5 million people.