

January 29, 2007

## **Ban Demands UN Presence in Darfur**

By Mark Tran

The UN secretary general Ban Ki-moon today called for the urgent deployment of a joint UN-African force to stop the "scorched earth policies" in the Darfur region of Sudan.

In a speech at the opening of an African Union summit in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, Mr Ban turned up the pressure on Khartoum, which has rejected plans to deploy UN troops to back up an ineffective AU force.

"We must work to end the violence and scorched earth policies adopted by various parties, including militias, as well as the bombings which are still a terrifying feature of life in Darfur," Mr Ban told some 50 African leaders, including the Sudanese president Omar al-Bashir. "The toll of the crisis remains unacceptable."

In a further humiliation to Mr Bashir, the AU for the second year running turned down Sudan's bid for the chairmanship of the organisation because of Darfur. The AU chose Ghana to head the 53-member bloc.

"By consensus vote President (John) Kufuor of Ghana has been elected to the presidency of the African Union," Alpha Oumar Konare, the AU's chief executive, told reporters.

Mr Bashir was promised the opposition a year ago, but faced opposition from several African countries and human rights groups. Countries with peacekeeping contingents in the western region of Darfur, such as Senegal and South Africa, were among those who opposed Mr Bashir's chairmanship.

Sudan's neighbour Chad reportedly threatened to withdraw from the AU if Mr Bashir was chosen. Relations between the two countries have deteriorated as the Darfur conflict has spilled over the border.

Chad has had to cope with an influx of thousands of refugees and has accused Sudan of backing Chadian rebels, while Sudan says Chad supports Darfur insurgents.

"Thousands of people have been killed by government-backed militia in the region, and African Union forces would have been put in an untenable position if Sudan were to have been granted the leadership of the African Union," said Amnesty International.

"The AU already deferred a decision to grant the chairmanship to Sudan in 2005 and 2006 due to Sudanese government violations in Darfur - we're pleased that African governments have not changed their stance given the persistent failures of the government of Sudan to stop human rights abuses in Darfur."

Relief groups say more than 200,000 people have been killed and 2.5 million displaced in the region since rebels took up arms against the central government in 2003. Khartoum is accused of indiscriminate retaliation against civilians and of arming the Janjaweed paramilitary group, which is blamed for the worst atrocities.

The AU has 7,000 soldiers and monitors in Darfur but has been largely impotent to stop the abuses against civilians because of a lack of men and equipment.

Mr Bashir has agreed to allow some UN peacekeepers into Darfur to support a small force deployed by the AU, but only 40 have arrived, and Khartoum is dragging its heels over further deployments.

To add to the crisis, the French aid group Medecins du Monde today said it was pulling out of Darfur because the violence in the region posed too high a risk to its workers.

Medecins du Monde, or Doctors of the World, has "suspended its activities in Darfur for an undetermined period of time," the group's director of international missions, Eric Chevallier, told the Associated Press.

"The balance between the help we were able to provide and the risks our staff were taking had reached breaking point," Mr Chevallier said.

Other aid groups have reduced their staff in Darfur because of the violence, and warned that they might be forced to withdraw completely. But Doctors of the World is the first major aid group to pull out.

Six other international charities said yesterday their work will soon be paralysed unless urgent action is taken to end the rising violence. Mr Ban also called for aid workers to be allowed to operate in Darfur.

Copyright 2007  
Guardian News and Media Ltd.