

Biggest Rebel Faction in Darfur Poised to Sign Peace Deal

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KHARTOUM, Sudan, Friday, May 5 — The leader of the largest rebel faction in Darfur told negotiators he will sign an agreement pushed upon him by top African and Western diplomats in a frantic, all night session as a third deadline to end the carnage in Darfur slipped past last night.

Minni Arcua Minnawi, whose Sudan Liberation Army is the main rebel group fighting government forces and their militia, agreed to sign a modified version of the accord agreed to by Sudanese officials at 9:15 Friday morning in Abuja, Nigeria's capital, where the peace talks are taking place.

"They have agreed to sign despite reservations," said Nouredine Mezni, spokesman for the African Union, which is negotiating the peace talks.

The agreement of the largest faction is a major breakthrough that came as the talks teetered on the brink of collapse, with two of the three rebel groups rejecting the deal outright and walking out. Despite intense pressure from African heads of state and diplomats on three rebel groups fighting an insurgency to sign an accord endorsed by the government of Sudan. Negotiators must now go back to the government of Sudan and ask if they will accept the modified agreement.

"Now the next step is to go to the government and say we have got one key partner," said a member of one of the diplomatic teams working to secure a deal.

With the agreement of one rebel faction, negotiators hoped that the other groups would jump on board "to avoid getting left behind," said the diplomat, who asked not to be named because of the sensitivity of the talks.

On that reed of hope that an agreement might still be reached, the talks resumed just after 9 a.m. Four hours earlier, when the talks broke for the night, negotiators and diplomats expressed deep frustration that the rebel groups had refused to budge on their demands.

“The return of peace depends on their actions in the next three hours,” said Salim Ahmed Salim, the chief African Union negotiator, seeming tired and frustrated as he announced the developments in Abuja.

“There two million people in camps, there are people dying everyday,” said Robert B. Zoellick, the American deputy secretary of state. “The people in Darfur need the leadership of the movements to seize an opportunity for peace.

Late on Thursday, the Nigerian president, Olusegun Obasanjo, had invited all the negotiators to his presidential villa to provide a formal setting for the signing, should it come. In New York, Kofi Annan, the secretary general of the United Nations, called an emergency meeting on Sudan and asked representatives from 18 nations, plus the European Commission, the Arab League and the African Union, to press both sides to reach an agreement.

The efforts appeared to be the culmination of a week of intensive negotiation over a draft peace agreement intended to end more than three years of carnage in the Darfur Province of Sudan that has left more than 200,000 people dead.

As the midnight deadline approached in Nigeria, where the peace talks were held, the diplomats and heads of state gathered in a plush conference room on the grounds of the presidential villa. With 40 minutes to go, negotiators for the rebel movements arrived, dressed in suits and ties, not military fatigues, as they wore the day before. But no one said a deal had been reached.

“Our people sent us here to bring back their rights,” Abdul Wahad al-Nur, the chief negotiator for one of the factions of the Sudanese Liberation Movement, who later rejected the agreement, said at the villa. “We cannot accept anything less than their minimum rights.”

Last Sunday, Sudan accepted a peace agreement drafted by the African Union, but the rebel factions balked, and mediators put off the Sunday deadline for 48 hours. On Monday, Robert B. Zoellick, the American deputy secretary of state, arrived in Abuja and

began directing the negotiations. Then on Tuesday, the mediators gave the negotiators another 48 hours, to end at midnight on Thursday.

On Wednesday, Mr. Zoellick and his staff reopened the draft agreement and started making modest changes, trying to win the rebels' support. And on Thursday, both government and rebel officers reacted to the changes positively, but by late Thursday neither had signed.

At the presidential villa, the diplomats and heads of state were prepared to lean on the rebels to agree. As the midnight deadline slipped past, the negotiations appeared to continue, but with a tense and frantic air as diplomats made last-minute efforts to meet the brinkmanship of the rebels, who stood outside the conference room, apparently still undecided about whether to accept the deal.

Mr. Zoellick stepped outside to speak to Mr. Nur, spending more than 20 minutes intensely engaged in a conversation with him, then returned to the conference room, while Mr. Nur remained behind.

If rebel leaders "fail to grasp their best chance for peace, then Darfur faces a cataclysm," wrote Alex de Waal, an expert on Sudan who is a member of the African Union mediation team, in an open letter made public on Thursday.

"All those who believe in peace for Darfur will ask ourselves whether we did enough to bring it about, and the needless deaths that occur will scar our consciences. Today is the day."

In an address at the 100th anniversary dinner for the American Jewish Committee in Washington on Thursday, President Bush renewed his call for the United Nations and NATO to help shore up African peacekeeping efforts in Darfur, saying, "We must understand that the rape and the murder and the suffering must be stopped." Flanked by Chancellor Angela Merkel of Germany and Mr. Annan, he added, "We will not tolerate the genocide taking place in that country."

The proposed revisions of the agreement would allow a few thousand rebels to join the Sudanese Army instead of a few hundred, and would force the government-backed janjaweed militias to disarm and withdraw at an earlier stage than previously stipulated.

Abdulrahman Zuman, spokesman for the Sudanese government negotiating team, said Thursday that while the overall agreement was not open to negotiation, a very narrow band of details was being discussed. "We are not ready to open any subject in the agreement for further discussion," Mr. Zuman said. "The only issue now under discussion is the American suggestion about what they call the reintegration of the rebels in the Sudanese Army and police and other security agencies of the Sudanese government."

The agreement, if reached, would open several possible avenues for alleviating the human crisis afflicting Darfur, where two million people are homeless and a million more depend on relief agencies for food. Sudan has indicated that it will grant permission for United Nations peacekeeping forces to take up stations in Darfur if an agreement is reached, as similar United Nations forces did in southern Sudan after a north-south peace treaty to end decades of civil war was signed last year.

What is more, many refugees could presumably return home and begin planting crops before the rainy season begins this summer. As it is, shrinking donations, harassment of aid workers and escalating violence have forced charities to reduce food aid to the victims of the conflict to only half the caloric intake needed to stave off malnutrition.

Even with an agreement, myriad potential pitfalls lie ahead, all tied to the deep animus and suspicion with which each side regards the other after more than three years of war.

The proposed agreement calls on the government forces and allied militia to disarm and withdraw behind cease-fire lines. "We have carefully plotted every military position and militia camp, and mapped cease-fire lines and demilitarized zones," Mr. de Waal wrote.

"Disarming the janjaweed is a top priority," he added. "We insist that the government first confines all militia to camps, takes away their heavy weapons, and has a staged process for disarming them well before the rebels have to move" to containment sites.

Even if an agreement is reached, United Nations officials acknowledge, the janjaweed militia and the rebels have broken many cease-fires in the past.

"We know full well that a deal between government and rebels cannot solve all Darfur's complex problems," Mr. de Waal wrote. "And so we propose a 'Darfur-Darfur Dialogue and Reconciliation' to be held within 60 days, at which representatives of every group in

the region can meet to begin the process of stitching the social fabric back together again.”

Lydia Polgreen reported from Khartoum, Sudan, for this article, and Joel Brinkley from Washington. Senan John Murray contributed reporting from Abuja, Nigeria.

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