

The need to put an end to the suffering in Sudan

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Arab solidarity should not blind us to what is going on in Sudan. Atrocities should not be condoned just because the perpetrators are Arab brothers in Sudan. It is welcome news from Kenya that the Sudanese government and southern rebels have pledged to end Sudan's long civil war by the end of this year.

Sure, a lot of pressure was applied on both sides by ambassadors of the UN Security Council members who had convened an unusual session in Nairobi to try to bring peace to Sudan. They have secured a document signed by the government and the Sudan People's Liberation Army pledging to complete a final peace accord by Dec. 31 to end the 21-year civil war that has devastated the lives of millions in Sudan and its neighbours.

Of course, it is not the first time that the two sides have pledged to make peace. Sudanese Vice President Ali Osman Taha and rebel leader John Garang made similar pledges to complete an accord last year, but the promise was not fulfilled. Both of them attended the Nairobi meeting and were told in no uncertain terms that the bloodshed and atrocities in southern Sudan had to end or face UN Security Council action.

It looks likely that the UN pressure, coupled with the realisation on both sides of the futility of continuing the conflict, might do the trick this time. While the Nairobi meeting produced an accord on the conflict in the south of the country, it could not come up with a breakthrough to end the strife in Darfur in western Sudan, an equally if not more pressing problem.

"I regret to report that the security situation in Darfur continues to deteriorate," Secretary General Kofi Annan told the meeting on Thursday,

has assured the world that it is no longer supporting the Arab Janjaweed militia against the African tribals in Darfur. The world finds it hard to accept that argument since reports from Darfur indicate otherwise. Perhaps the Janjaweed militia has turned into a monster of Khartoum's creation which has broken free from the control of its creator. Even at that, the Khartoum government has the responsibility to move against the militia and put an end to its atrocities.

On the other hand, there is a steady flow of arms to the Darfur rebels that keeps fuelling the conflict. We find it hard to believe that some among those trying to pressure Khartoum are not behind the arms pipeline to the rebels. Again, that has to stop. Negotiations to end the conflict have not reached anywhere.

Obviously, Khartoum believes that granting autonomous powers to Darfur - similar to the deal with the southern rebels - would be another nail in the coffin of what it sees as the Arab Muslim domination of power in the country. Well, that is the crux of the problem. However, the Khartoum government needs to do some hard thinking which would - and should - lead to the logical conclusion that sharing power with all groups is inevitable if the country were to remain a cohesive entity. Denial of people's legitimate rights would only prolong the conflict and pose continued threat to the country as a whole. That does not mean blindly entering any agreement for the sake of agreement. Khartoum has its priorities and concerns and they need to be addressed.

Again, that is where the international community and mediators have failed. The reasons for the failure are also clear: Khartoum fears that those arguing in favour of the

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ernment and its militias as well as the rebel groups".

From the American and European point of view, the Darfur crisis could be solved through a deal similar to the one Khartoum has made with the southern rebels. However, it might not be as easy as that. If anything, the focused efforts of the US and Europe, as well as the Arabs, have not really achieved a breakthrough despite many meetings at various levels and grouping many parties.

The immediate problem is the humanitarian crisis that has unfolded in Darfur. People are without food and water and living in perpetual fear of armed attacks. There is limited flow of aid to Darfur and those living in refugee camps, far from meeting the needs. Action must be taken on an emergency basis by the international community, with determination and resolve, to address the human crisis while moves are also launched, on a parallel track, to address the roots of the problem.

The world faces a major challenge here. On the one hand, the Khartoum government argues that it is being targeted for ouster in the world effort to address the problem. It

agendas that could lead to the eventual dismemberment of the country - the Christians and others in the south setting up their entity, followed by the tribes in Darfur in the west and then the Nubians in the east. Therefore, any international move to address the Darfur conflict should integrate iron-clad and enforceable guarantees to the Khartoum government that the hidden external players in Darfur and elsewhere in the country would stop their meddling in Sudanese affairs and respect the country's sovereignty and territorial integrity. That needs to be done in public with no ambiguity whatsoever. Only then there would be any real hope for progress to resolve the Darfur crisis and concerns about the plans of the Nubians in the east.

The people of Sudan are among those who have suffered worst and continuing to suffer because of internal strife. They face an uncertain life characterised by starvation and threat to their life with nowhere to turn to. They definitely deserve better and it is high time that the international community got together with a realistic and transparent approach to try to find an end to their suffering.