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THE STORY UNDERNEATH

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ADDIS ABABA, Feb 2 (IPS) - Pressure the Sudanese government to resolve the Darfur conflict and monitor United Nations troops for sexual offences, a delegation of Sudanese women told leaders at the African Union (AU) Summit here.

The steering committee of the African Women's Consultation on Darfur said they had travelled to the summit to "meet leaders who have influence on our government".

The "pain of the Darfur woman is the pain of every Sudanese woman," said Betty Achan, agriculture minister in the Government of South Sudan's (GoSS) parliament and member of the women's delegation.

In addition to Achan, the delegation was comprised of three women from Darfur and a fifth member who represented northern Sudan.

"We are all very tired of the conflict," said Mona Elshareif, from Geneina in west Darfur. "Everybody knows that women and children suffer in Darfur. People on the ground don't see the politics. They just see the trauma."

"We need to think about the children," Elshareif said, stressing that, "Our forum will work with all women's groups in Sudan."

The Khartoum-based government in the north has been accused of carrying out development at the expense of other parts of the country -- this has allegedly led to widespread conflict in the country.

In 2007 alone over a 250,000 people were forced from their homes, driving the number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) to well over two million.

Violence has increased in recent weeks, with intensified clashes between rebel groups and government forces in West Darfur.

Meanwhile, deployment of the new U.N.-AU Mission in Darfur (UNAMID) is being hampered by both the failure of the international community to provide crucial equipment like helicopters and obstruction from Khartoum.

The GoSS operates semi-autonomously from the national government in the north -- following a 21-year civil war.

Last year the GoSS launched its Darfur Task Force to "unite rebels and have one agenda," Achan said.

Nawal Hassan called on Darfur's rebel groups to "unite and have one agenda". "That way they can put more pressure on our government," she explained. "Now we have 26 rebel groups on the ground and that's creating divisions," said Hassan.

Hassan -- an activist from Nyala in south Darfur -- said the delegation wants to ensure that "women are represented at the decision-making level for peace in Sudan".

"We are fed up of war. We want to be involved in bringing peace to Darfur," Hassan said. "We have suffered the consequences of this war and we want to talk to our brothers who are fighting each other. We want a future for our children. We want peace and prosperous development. But we are also expecting opposition in Sudan from parties who are benefiting from our suffering."

Achan warned that U.N. troops in Darfur should be watched as there have been rape allegations against those based in south Sudan. "U.N. troops raped boys, girls and women in south Sudan. When they don't have money for sex they abuse young children," said Achan.

Our organisation has "means of monitoring the U.N. troops in Darfur and we will take them on if they commit sexual offences," said Dismas Nkunda, chairperson of the Darfur Consortium, an international group of 60 civil society groups.

U.N. Secretary General Ban Ki Moon addressed the Darfur issue in his speech at the opening ceremony of AU Summit on Jan. 31. Ban said the "challenges ahead of Darfur are tremendous" and urged peacekeeping troop contributing countries to arrive as soon as possible.

"The people of Darfur depend on your help. The AU and U.N. are working closely to end the Darfur crisis," Ban assured the gathered heads of state.

Ban held a press briefing and was joined by his special envoy to Darfur, Jan Eliasson.

There is no timeline to securing peace in Darfur, because all efforts were dependent on "halting violence before talks can begin," Eliasson said.

Previous attempts to gather representatives from the Sudanese government and Darfur rebel groups have failed, he said.

"We have five main groups that we are attempting to unify. We also plan to get civil society involved [in the peace process]," said Eliasson.

The Darfur women's delegation met with foreign ministers from various countries -- including China and South Africa. The latter's foreign affairs minister, Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma, chaired a meeting of African ministers on post-conflict reconstruction in Sudan.

Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir attended the AU Summit but did not comment on the Darfur crisis. Sudan's permanent representative to the U.N. said that the Darfur women's delegation trip was "not a difficulty for the Sudanese government because it is a democracy".

Femme Africa Solidarity (FAS), a non-governmental organization headquartered in New York and Senegal, assisted the Sudanese women's delegation to attend the summit. Marema Toure, of FAS, said their aim was to create "dialogue and solidarity among African women".

We are "optimistic and this is our starting point," said Elshareif.

(END/2008)