

## Women parliamentarians push for peace in Sudan

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Sudanese women hold up signs during the arrival of U.N. Secretary General Ban Ki-moon in the north Darfur capital of El Fasher, September 2007. REUTERS/Zohra Bensemra

This month, the U.N. Security Council will extend the stay of peacekeepers for Sudan's north and south, and debate the ongoing crisis in Darfur. It will be a sad, concrete recognition that signature of the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) - which officially ended the conflict in southern Sudan - and several rounds of negotiation on Darfur have not translated into stability and prosperity on the ground.

Peace will only be achieved if we start doing things differently. We must make more effective use of the constructive forces that do exist in Sudan, particularly within civil society and among women.

Until the CPA was signed, Sudan was wracked by 20 years of civil war between north and south. Since then, there has been some progress. The Government of Sudan and the Sudanese People's Liberation Movement created a Government of National Unity (GNU), and outside Darfur, violence is far less pervasive.

Infrastructure and services are slowly improving in southern Sudan. But the CPA-mandated disarmament process is incomplete and skirmishes are worsening in some parts of the country. Decisions about revenue-sharing, boundaries, a national census, and distribution of oil revenues are woefully delayed. Meanwhile, the conflict in Darfur continues unabated.

Yet there is hope. I have been collaborating with Sudanese women since before the CPA was signed, and have watched the hunger and hope for stability and democracy grow.

### **WOMEN IN PARLIAMENT**

The 87 women parliamentarians within the GNU have formed a cross-party caucus - the sole caucus involving all parties in the national assembly - that is developing a legislative agenda and beginning to prepare for elections. In March 2008, they hosted a national conference of elected women leaders to identify priorities and needs. These women are providing the pragmatism and multi-party collaboration Sudan desperately needs.

In civil society too, women are demonstrating their drive to consolidate peace and promote the democratic governance promised in the CPA.

A national coalition of women from outside and inside government is advocating around issues of peace-building. Included are members of parliament, employees in ministries, and representatives of non-governmental organisations in the fields of education, health, women's rights and democracy promotion.

The coalition has already ensured that women are represented in the upcoming legislature; the draft election law currently guarantees women a minimum 25 percent of seats in the national assembly.

Women and civil society are similarly leading the way in Darfur. When I was in Khartoum last December, these two groups were both lauded for the insight, expertise and productive spirit they brought to failed negotiations in Sirte, Libya, earlier that fall. One U.N. official described women and civil society as "a silver lining" in an otherwise unsuccessful attempt to restart talks.

None of this is surprising. When given the space to influence negotiations, women and civil society often play critical roles paving the path to peace.

In Guatemala, an extensive Civil Society Assembly helped revitalise stalled negotiations that resulted in an agreement in 1996.

Liberian negotiations only concluded successfully when women literally stormed talks in 2003 and locked delegates in the conference room until they emerged with an accord.

In Naga, India, a long-standing ceasefire between the Government of India and the National Socialist Council of Nagalim has held partly because civil society monitors compliance, and women mediate tension when it arises in communities.

### INTERNATIONAL SUPPORT

In Sudan, the international community appears finally to be taking notice of the dividends paid by investments in women and civil society. Canada and the Initiative for Inclusive Security, which I direct, are among those assisting the parliamentary women's caucus. Norway is underwriting technical support for the civil society women's coalition.

Donors, including the United States, UNIFEM and Femmes Africa Solidarite, are supporting capacity building and consultations to enable women and civil society to participate more fully in the Darfur peace-building process, and to help the international community make better use of their potentially constructive influence.

These are positive steps; but a more concerted effort is needed to broadly involve these groups in formal negotiations and decision making. Negotiations around Darfur must be structured to ensure that civil society and women are meaningfully involved throughout.

Donors and the U.N. Mission in Sudan, which oversees CPA implementation, must mandate women's participation in all decision-making structures and highlight and support the parliamentary women's caucus as a model. There needs to be a greater focus on cultivating civil society movements for peace.

Civil society and women stand ready to promote good governance and implement the CPA. They also are prepared to help bring armed actors back to the Darfur talks and ensure negotiators are accountable back home.

Cultivating and building on local efforts to push for peace and democracy will increase the likelihood of success. Women and civil society have demonstrated that they are allies for those who want stability and prosperity. Involving them will pay dividends.

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