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## SUDAN: Nobel Laureates Demand Women Be Part of Peace Talks

Marina Litvinsky

WASHINGTON, Apr 14 (IPS) - The international community must act immediately to resolve the political and humanitarian crises facing Sudan, said a panel of leading Sudan experts at a briefing here Tuesday, and ensure that any peace process formally include women's input.

"We were heartened by the Qatar process, and the efforts of Arab leaders to advance progress on peace talks between the government of Sudan and the main rebel group," said Jody Williams, chair of the Nobel Women's Initiative. "However, these peace talks are now disintegrating, and (President) Bashir is not being held accountable for the further suffering of the Sudanese people."

"What Sudan needs now are real brokers for peace, instead of support for leadership that is wreaking yet more havoc in the region," she said.

Last month, the International Criminal Court (ICC) issued an indictment of Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir on charges of war crimes and crimes against humanity in the war-torn Darfur region. The U.N. estimates the Darfur conflict has cost 300,000 lives, while over 2.7 million people have been displaced over the last six years.

Bashir rejected the decision, calling it a Western ploy to gain access to Sudan's resources. In retaliation for the ICC's arrest warrant, he forced 13 major humanitarian organisations out of Darfur, citing the need to protect the sovereignty and security of the country.

According to the United Nations, 1.1 million people will go without food, 1.5 will go without healthcare and over 1 million will go without water as a result of the expulsions.

In late March, Bashir was welcomed at the Doha talks by members of the Arab League, who called the indictment a double standard in dealing with Arabs, pointing to the lack of similar action against Israeli crimes in Gaza.

"It is not acceptable that Bashir is not only travelling in defiance of his arrest warrant, but more gravely, has expelled humanitarian agencies from the area around Darfur," said Dr. Wangari Muta Maathai, a former Sudanese parliamentarian and Nobel Peace laureate. "Sudan must allow these groups back in, or we are looking at more lives lost due to starvation and lack of basic services."

The African Union has called for a postponement of the ICC warrant, saying it puts a damper on already shaky peace talks and attempts to implement the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA).

"The move by the ICC distracts [from] the peace process. We are glad that the African Union Commission reflected the united stand of Africa against the court," Moliieldin Salim, Sudanese ambassador to Ethiopia, told IPS in Addis Ababa in January.

Maathai pointed to the African Union's "embracing" of Bashir as a



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reflection of their fear that any head of state who is "unable or unwilling to protect his citizens (may be charged) with crimes against humanity." She called on the leadership in Africa to stop violating the rights of its own citizens.

"Other nations will not respect us if we cannot protect the rights of our own people," she said.

The panel, hosted by Williams and Maathai, included Karen Hirschfeld, Sudan coordinator for the non-profit group Physicians for Human Rights (PHR), which released new data on the rape of Darfuri refugees.

After interviewing nearly 90 women at the Farchana Refugee Camp in eastern Chad, PHR found that 19 percent of respondents had been raped in Darfur, 17 percent had been raped in Chad, and that most rapes occurred outside of the refugee camp when they left to collect firewood. Experts on the panel noted that the current humanitarian aid crisis will likely lead to an increase in sexual crimes against women.

PHR's Hirschfeld pointed to several issues which need to be considered when finding ways to help the current refugees in camps, as well as the "influx of refugees (expected) as the situation goes from bad to intolerable," including the physical and mental states of women, especially those who have been raped; the tension over scarce resources, like firewood, in the areas of the camps in Chad; the lack of a judicial system and investigations into reported rape in eastern Chad; and the "pervasive fear that haunts women each day."

The panel participants underlined the importance of including women in current and future peace talks.

"It is vital that any and all peace talks include the women of Sudan, who are already building a path to peace through their efforts to create dialogue and a consultation process," said Maathai. "When women are not part of the peace process, their access to justice, reparations and the full range of their rights is jeopardised."

Carla Koppell, director of the Institute for Inclusive Security, and the Washington office of Hunt Alternatives Fund called on peace proceedings to "convene other players, not the same armed actors, to shift incentives in negotiations to offer more seats for women, and ask for women's groups' input in a formal way."

The panel called on the international community to put pressure on the African Union to stop being manipulated by Bashir and see the situation in Sudan as an international issue.

"It is critically important that U.S. Senator (John) Kerry, who is in Khartoum this week, take the opportunity to push hard for the restoration of humanitarian services in the area around Darfur," noted Williams. "It is not acceptable that the government of Sudan be allowed to use his people's suffering to make a political point."

Following a visit this month by the U.S.'s special envoy to Sudan, Scott Gration, Bashir, speaking at the opening of the eighth session of parliament on Monday, said, "We, our brothers and sisters, are seekers of peace and stability and we do not want our country to live under the shadows of swords and tension."

"Our hands remain held out to those who call for peace and justice in accordance with the standards of fairness and dignity," he added, echoing a phrase used by U.S. President Barack Obama in his inauguration address.

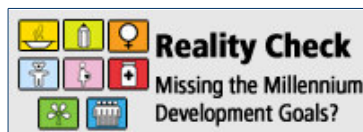
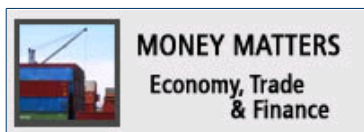
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