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## In war-torn Sudan, women wage peace

**Recent conferences highlight growing efforts to include women in the struggle to end brutal conflicts.**

**By Rob Crilly** | Correspondent of The Christian Science Monitor

### **KHARTOUM, SUDAN**

When the farming tribes of Darfur took up arms more than two years ago against what they saw as a neglectful Arab-dominated government, Samia Ahmed Nihar's brothers, uncles, and male cousins joined the struggle.

But as a lecturer in development studies at Khartoum University in Sudan's capital, Ms. Nihar, a mother of two, took on a different role.

With the government's media machine and its compliant local charities refusing to acknowledge the horrors of Darfur, Ms. Nihar became a secret conduit to ensure that the real story made its way to international journalists and charities in Khartoum. A member of the Sudan Liberation Army (SLA) rebel group, she risked imprisonment or worse to make sure that the truth of the Arab *janjaweed* militia and government attacks on civilian villages became known.

"We as women were involved in trying to liaise with NGOs here in Khartoum, keeping them in touch with what was going on there and reflecting the bad situation of women in Darfur," says Nihar, who was in good company at a recent four-day workshop in Khartoum organized by the US-based Initiative for Inclusive Security, a program to involve women in peace processes around the world.

The conference was designed to include women's voices in bringing peace to Darfur, and in efforts to rebuild Southern Sudan - itself the scene of a separate civil war that ended last year.

The challenges the women face are huge, and the Nov. 9-12 conference is something of a milestone in a country dominated by Islamists where few women hold positions of real power. Conference organizers say women are too often excluded from peace and reconstruction talks in favor of men with guns. When peace negotiations focus on the combatants, the real victims often find themselves voiceless and disenfranchised.

"Our rationale for working around the world - and our rationale for working with Sudanese women - is that we believe peace will be more durable if women are included," says Carla Koppell, director of the Initiative for Inclusive Security. "Often you see peace processes that only bring together those that bore arms. It seems to us illogical and not efficacious to not bring in the stakeholders for peace, which very often are women."

### **Risky business**

But it has been very difficult - and dangerous - for Sudanese women to take a stand for peace. "We were frightened all the time. We were scared that we could be arrested or even our families would have problems, because of what we were doing," Nihar says of her surreptitious efforts to raise awareness of the atrocities in Darfur.

Sudanese soldiers and allied *janjaweed* militiamen have recently stepped up attacks against rebels - and civilians - in Darfur despite a cease-fire, say international observers. The 7,000-strong African Union peacekeeping force in Darfur this weekend called these attacks a "flagrant violation" of the peace agreement, signed in May by the government and the SLA. "The government is arming Arab militias more than ever before," said Jan Egeland, the UN's top humanitarian official, Saturday. Sudan continues to deny this charge.

But, Nihar says, there is never a question of giving in. "People were giving their lives in the struggle, so it seems a small sacrifice [for me to risk being] arrested," she says.

Nihar's secret life ended in May when her comrades in the SLA signed a peace deal with the government. At this month's conference, she represented the political wing of the pro-treaty rebel group. Ministers, academics, and grass-roots community leaders were among the 50 or so women who attended.

### **Focus on Sudan's other war**

For all of the recent global attention on Darfur, the conference also focused on the recently ended civil war in Southern Sudan in which 1.5 million people died during two decades of fighting.

Respite finally arrived last year with a peace deal that allows the south a referendum on independence in 2011. But after 21 years of war, the region's infrastructure was left shattered.

The conference ended with publication of an agenda for women's groups in Sudan. It urges them to advocate that 30 percent of positions in all levels of government are filled by women, with an eventual target of 50 percent. The agenda also includes scrutinizing legislation of its impact on women and pushing for a fair share of donor and government money.

Conferences like this one in Khartoum - and another smaller one in Darfur last week - offer a chance for Sudanese women to overcome some of the problems unique to their country, added Maha Muna, Sudan coordinator for the United Nations Population Fund.

"With sanctions and the long war in the south, it means that women's organizations have been cut off from other organizations around the world, but this work brings their voices together with the international women's movement in a way that is really powerful," she says.

Whatever the challenges, Nihar says that Sudanese women will not shrink from the task.

"In Darfur, we work in the fields, we look after the families, and we even build the houses, so we are very strong."

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