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Washington Lookout**Conflict-Zone Lobby for Places at Peace Table***Run Date: 01/22/07**By Allison Stevens  
Washington Bureau Chief*

*Women from military and political hot spots--including Sudan and Uganda--were in Washington last week. They are part of a growing push to increase the numbers of female candidates in upcoming elections and put more women in peace talks.*

WASHINGTON (WOMENSENEWS)--Mariam Alsadig Almahdi is an ex-combatant in Sudan, a medical doctor, a mother of six and a current high-ranking official in Sudanese party politics.

Now she can add one more line to her lengthy resume: U.S. lobbyist.

Almahdi, the general secretary assistant for communications in Sudan's Umma National Party, and several other prominent Sudanese female leaders were in Washington, D.C., last week to meet with government representatives, international financial institutions and nongovernmental organizations. The delegation members were asking them to support their efforts to increase gender parity in the Sudanese government and in their country's peace process.



**Mariam Almahdi**

Credit: The Initiative for  
Inclusive Security.

Achieving those goals, Almahdi and her peers say, is key to ending hostilities in Darfur, a region devastated by a conflict between armed gunmen from the nomadic Janjaweed tribes and settled farmers. Some estimate the conflict has claimed more than 450,000 lives.

"Unless there are women in politics, things are not OK," Almahdi told an audience of about 500 officials from the U.S. government, international financial institutions, regional security organizations and nongovernmental organizations during a Jan. 16 luncheon in Washington. "With one eye you can see, but you cannot have binary vision."

Almahdi's argument that women are crucial to conflict resolutions is part of a growing push to get more women involved international peace and security efforts around the world.

Next week, for instance, African activists will gather in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, to discuss ways to promote gender and women's rights, including in national security. The meeting will precede the annual summit of the African Union, which promotes unity among African nations.

### **Two Week Program**

Almahdi was joined last week by about 30 other high-ranking women from violence-torn countries who attended a two-week program sponsored by the Initiative for Inclusive Security. The organization held strategy-setting sessions in Boston and organized lobbying efforts in Washington, D.C.

Chitralekha Yadav, deputy speaker of the House of Representatives of Nepal and the highest-ranking woman in Nepali politics, was another participant, as were female political leaders--lawmakers, agency heads, activists and party officeholders--from Uganda, Liberia, Colombia and Nepal. U.S.-based women from Iran and Iraq also participated in some of the events, including speaking at a Harvard course on inclusive security.

The program was run by the Hunt Alternatives Fund, a private foundation in Cambridge, Mass., run by Swanee Hunt, a former ambassador and now a professor at Harvard University, where she directs the Women and Public Policy Program.

Donald Steinberg, vice president for international affairs at the International Crisis Group, a nonprofit organization based in Brussels that works to prevent and end conflict, agrees that women's leadership and participation can help end regional conflicts around the world.

"Even in the United Nations system, women are highly underrepresented, and I would say that is also true among governments," he said.

Steinberg said that in Darfur, women were excluded from peace negotiations for the six rounds of talks in 2004 and 2005. In December 2005, women were allowed to participate in the seventh round of talks in Abuja, Nigeria, which led to an agreement last May between the Sudanese Liberation Movement, a rebel group, and the Sudanese government.

"In general, what you see are the perpetrators of the violence sitting at the table and rarely the victims," added Sarah Martin, a senior advocate at Refugees International, a nonprofit group in Washington, D.C., that aids displaced people around the world.

The absence of women at conflict resolution meetings is partly due to women's underrepresentation in global politics, advocates say. Worldwide, women make up only 15 percent of ministers, members of parliament and heads of state, according to Hunt's Initiative for Inclusive Security.

The Hunt Alternatives Fund launched the Initiative for Inclusive Security in 1999 to pursue research and programs that demonstrate how women's leadership helps stabilize countries.

Studies have indicated that women tend to be more collaborative than men

and more inclined to consensus and compromise, according to the Initiative for Inclusive Security. And when husbands and sons are killed or taken as combatants or prisoners of war, women are often left with the primary family responsibilities, giving them extra incentive to find peace.

Moreover, women often serve as informal and formal leaders of their communities and tend to be in closer contact with their neighbors, according to the Hunt's group. They can therefore frequently provide better grassroots-level information about events leading up to and during armed conflicts. They also tend to be better able to mobilize locals to reconcile and rebuild after the conclusion of hostilities and often drive "on-the-ground" implementation of peace agreements.

Recognizing women's potential to resolve conflict, the United Nations Security Council unanimously passed in 2000 Resolution 1325, urging member states to fully include women in peace and security processes. Other organizations-- such as the European Parliament; the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, a regional security organization; and the G8 (or Group of Eight) foreign ministers representing the world's eight wealthiest nations-- have made similar calls.

While in the United States, the delegation of women assembled in country-specific groups to set an agenda for increasing women's participation in politics and peace processes. Their recommendations included setting quotas for female candidates in upcoming elections and for female participants in formal peace negotiations.

They also pledged to return to their home countries and hold press conferences, mentor aspiring female politicians, hold training sessions for potential female political candidates, establish legislative caucuses for female lawmakers, give money to female political candidates, cultivate male allies and recognize accomplished female leaders.

In their meetings in Washington the women asked members of Congress, representatives from aid banks, the Department of State, think tanks and other governmental and nongovernmental organizations for whatever help they could provide.

"The U.S. is a major donor to most of these countries," said Refugees International's Martin. "And it has a role to play in most of these conflict settings."

During one meeting the Planning and Development Collaborative International, an international development consulting firm in Washington, asked Betty Achan Ogwaro, a parliamentarian from Sudan, to submit a proposal detailing her plan to create an inter-country meeting between northern Ugandans and southern Sudanese.

The question for the United States is how it can help, said Jessica Schafer, a spokeswoman for Rep. Sam Farr, a California Democrat who hosted a Jan. 17 briefing with the women from Colombia about how to increase women's political participation in that country.

"The idea here is to put more ideas out there," she said.

*Allison Stevens is Washington bureau chief at Women's eNews.*

Women's eNews welcomes your comments. E-mail us at [editors@womensenews.org](mailto:editors@womensenews.org).

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#### **For more information:**

The Initiative for Inclusive Security:  
<http://www.inclusivesecurity.org>

"U.N. Confers on Protecting Women from War's Toll":  
<http://www.womensenews.org/article.cfm/dyn/aid/1745/>

"Female Peacemakers Strategize How to Assert Power":  
<http://www.womensenews.org/article.cfm/dyn/aid/1606/>

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