



from the October 22, 2007 edition - <http://www.csmonitor.com/2007/1022/p09s01-coop.html>

## Who belongs at Darfur talks?

**Don't just invite armed groups to the table. Get the real peacemakers.**

**By Carla Koppell**

**Washington**

Last month, an unknown group killed 10 African Union peacekeepers in Darfur. Some think whoever did it was trying to get an upper hand at the peace talks scheduled to begin this week.

The attack calls into question the approach often used to resolve conflict. As long as mediators give seats at the negotiating table only to those who bear arms, power seekers will continue turning to guns to gain influence.

We need to stop rewarding violence and, instead, give the much larger population of unarmed stakeholders a say in how to restore peace.

As the African Union warned in response to the attack, "no group should expect that, by violating the cease-fire and committing other military acts ... [it] would have an advantage at the renegotiating table."

But actions speak louder than words. In structuring the Darfur talks, the United Nations and African Union have included those who might otherwise resort to violence. There have been efforts to consult the unarmed, but there is no sign that these stakeholders will have a real voice in the negotiations.

Sadly, this is not unusual. From Sri Lanka to Uganda to Colombia, armed actors have been the only ones invited to negotiate directly.

This approach undermines the peace process, not least because it gives groups an incentive to take up arms. Restoring stability and prosperity to war-torn regions depends upon the participation of all stakeholders, not just warriors; to succeed, peace agreements need broad legitimacy in society.

In the best cases, parallel efforts have been set up alongside formal negotiations to allow others in society – unarmed political groups, women, civil society, indigenous people, and refugees, among others – to provide input into the discussions between combatants. For example, in Guatemala in the 1990s, 11 subgroups were created under an umbrella assembly that funneled recommendations to the main negotiating teams, the government and the National Guatemalan Revolutionary Union. While the "outsiders" didn't have a direct voice in the dialogue, they did have some say.

The Initiative for Inclusive Security, which I direct, advocates for more broadly inclusive peace processes. We focus on promoting women's inclusion, but women are representative of a much larger class of people who have not taken up arms. They are often the victims with the largest stake in conflict resolution. They have unique perspectives, experiences, ideas, and values vital to building peace. Negotiators marginalize these groups to the detriment of a stable post-conflict society.

Several weeks ago I was in Khartoum, Sudan, working with women from each of the three states in Darfur, from different ethnic groups and political parties and with different backgrounds and areas of expertise. They sat together and identified priorities for peace. They also committed to continue collaborating across the ethnic, religious, geographic, and political lines that separate them. They worked well together and had valuable ideas – yet most of them will never see the negotiating table.

There are many ways we could bring peacemakers – not just combatants – to the table. We could require that armed hostilities end and soldiers disarm as a precondition to broader, more inclusive negotiations on sharing power and wealth and rebuilding society. We could reserve seats at the table for those who have not borne arms but have a stake in peace. Most radically, mediators could invite nonbelligerents to the table first and have

them set the agenda for talks. This would completely shift the incentive structure so that those who haven't picked up weapons get to choose the priorities.

It's time to make our actions speak loudly for peace. As we shape the negotiations for Darfur and elsewhere, we must think of ways to alter the balance of power. We need to allow local voices for peace to be heard. We need to ensure that peacemakers outnumber fighters in negotiations.

*Carla Koppell is the director of the Initiative for Inclusive Security in Washington.*

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