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Darfur negotiations

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By Carla Koppell - Negotiations around Darfur get underway this week. To succeed mediators must build on past successes and learn from past mistakes. Otherwise, Sudan will risk a return to broader conflict. A few key lessons should guide the way that the United Nations and African Union handle the talks.

Invite the right players. Those who negotiated the Darfur Peace Agreement (DPA) in 2006 in Abuja had questionable legitimacy back home. The groups that participated in those talks have continued to splinter, revealing their limited strength. Widespread rejection of the agreement on the ground has underlined the fragile connection to the citizenry. Preparations for talks already seem to be sending some wrong signals; access to decision-making is limited for those not bearing arms. Pre-negotiations have been plagued by further fragmentation of movements. Some attribute recent attacks on African Union peacekeeping troops to rebels aspiring to a place at the negotiating table.

The Libya negotiations must recognize those with a true constituency and a commitment to peace and reconstruction; otherwise they will lose credibility as they begin.

Ensure accountability and transparency. To succeed on the ground, negotiations must be locally owned; that can only be achieved by ensuring those at the talks are held accountable to Darfurian society. Mediators should allow civil society to observe and provide input to the talks. Doing so will ensure that parties remember to reflect the concerns and priorities of the citizenry.

The benefits of an open process are manifold; it will strengthen the negotiating process as well as any agreement; it may also help speed resolution of the conflict. In Liberia, the peace negotiations only concluded when women in civil society forced negotiators to forge on; until then, grandstanding and delaying tactics were a mainstay of discussions. In Guatemala, deadlocked negotiations revived and concluded successfully after robust civil-society participation was organized.

Giving civil society a real role also will increase the likelihood that an accord is broadly accepted. The Abuja negotiations didn't enable Darfurian citizens to hold the parties accountable. They also didn't bring the population along; there was little reporting back during the process and there was insufficient immediate-term outreach following signature.

A reporting mechanism is needed to excite Darfurians about progress, make certain negotiators are answerable to the population and to guarantee an agreement with popular support.

Use the negotiations to enable and support local movements for peace. There are many more peace builders than warriors in Darfur. We must harness their calls for an end to the conflict

and to put pressure on the negotiating parties. The Darfur-Darfur Dialogue and Consultation process has done important work consulting with constituencies. Now it is time to give stakeholders a voice and allow them influence.

Giving civil society a voice in the negotiations will elevate and increase the legitimacy of peace builders. It also will facilitate reconstruction. Once a settlement is signed, the hard work of rebuilding communities and reconstructing society will begin; much of that will be done by nongovernmental organizations and others who had nothing to do with the conflict. Bringing them into the planning will help consolidate peace and guarantee that rebuilding proceeds smoothly and effectively.

Finally, build on and nurture the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA). The CPA was signed in 2005 with much fanfare, as it ended more than 20 years of civil war between northern and southern Sudan. It is a strong agreement that must form the backbone for enduring national peace. But today the CPA is imperiled. The Southern People's Liberation Movement has suspended participation in the national government; implementation of key provisions of the agreement is bogged down by disagreement and severe delays. The international focus on Darfur has shifted attention away from national peace-building process, hindering progress.

We must not lose site of the broader struggle for peace in Sudan as we grapple with the challenge of Darfur. The international community must buttress efforts to revitalize the CPA as mediators work to end the bloodshed in Darfur. Any efforts to drive forward talks must be careful not to jeopardize broader national stability. We must all remain keenly aware that any agreement must remain grounded in the broader national reality.

Peace-building in Sudan is complicated, not impossible. To succeed it will require creative forethought and a deliberate process. By bringing all the people of Sudan into the process, we are more likely to negotiate a peace that will endure.

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