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SUDAN: Unarmed Darfur groups demand role at peace talks



Photo: Tim McKulka/UNMIS
UN envoy Jan Eliasson and the AU's Salim Ahmed Salim are mediating the talks in Sirte, Libya

SIRTE, 29 October 2007 (IRIN) - Civil society representatives from Darfur have called for a greater role in ongoing peace efforts and uniting the parties to the conflict in the western Sudanese region as talks continued on 29 October in the Libyan town of Sirte.

"We are happy to be here as representatives of civil society although our status is still uncertain," Safaa Al-Aagib Adam, the secretary-general and gender advisor of the Community Development Association, told IRIN. "We need a more conducive environment."

"The [rebel] movements need to realise that re-unification is important and that we have a role to play in this," Adam added. "For those who are boycotting the talks, the civil society can play a big role in getting them to come aboard. If the mediators want us to play this role, we are ready and willing."

The UN, represented by Jan Eliasson, the special envoy of the UN Secretary-General for Darfur, and the African Union, through its special envoy for Darfur, Salim Ahmed Salim, have been mediating talks aimed at ending a four-and-a-half year conflict in which an estimated 200,000 people have died and another two million have been displaced.

They were optimistic that after two days of plenary discussions, they were now at "the beginning of a credible political process" as they entered the "consultative phase" of the talks.

"We were encouraged not only by the tone of the [plenary] discussions but by the level of attendance by the government delegation, the representatives of the Darfur movements and the peace process's regional and international partners," Eliasson told a news conference.

No fixed timeline

Salim said he was disappointed at the absence of some rebel groups, but that the mediation team had received communication from certain parties, expressing their willingness to join the process.

"They are saying they need time to consult and we are willing to grant them that time," he said. "We have not put a timeline for the consultations but this is not a process of unlimited duration; we just do not want to have artificial deadlines."

Only seven of an estimated 16 rebel factions in Darfur were present when the talks opened on 27 October.

The Justice and Equality Movement (JEM), led by Khalil Ibrahim, and the Sudan Liberation Army/Movement (SLA/M), led by Abdel Wahed, are some of the key rebel factions that have not attended.

Hassan Imam Hassan, a civil society activist representing the Darfur Peace Block at the talks, said the grassroots level of representation at the talks had been neglected.

"One can see that the international level, that of the UN and the AU and other international organisations is well represented. The regional level is also highly represented here and the national level – both the government and the rebel movements – is also well represented. What about the grassroots level, the tribal leaders, the women, the displaced, the refugees and civil society?" Hassan asked.

"Our voice is being sought but on a superficial level; the civil society must have a structural role to play in these talks - we must be on the negotiating table," he added.

Lack of unity

He described the Sirte talks as problematic in two ways: "The negotiation parties [government and the movements] are so far not well integrated and consistent in themselves.

"It is impossible to call for negotiations with 16 armed groups when only seven of them turn up. The government side is also not united. We have a government of national unity yet only one side is here, where is the SPLM [Sudan People's Liberation Movement]?"

The SPLM recently announced it had suspended participation in the government of national unity.



Another issue that frequently came up during the plenary sessions on 28 October was the lack of women's representation in delegations of both the government and the rebel movements.

"This is a message to both delegations; we need to see women in their midst as this is



Photo: IRIN
The talks are part of ongoing efforts to resolve a conflict that has displaced two million people from their homes

an opportunity for peace and dialogue that should involve especially women who suffer the most in conflict," Adam said in an address to the delegates.

Proper representation

Salim said the question of women's participation in the Sirte talks should not be taken lightly. "Let us face it, women are the worst victims of this conflict," he said. "I appeal to our brothers in the government and in the movements to please ensure that there is adequate representation of women in these talks."

He said the mediation team would put in place mechanisms to ensure the civil society and vulnerable Darfur groups were properly involved in the peace process.

The Sudanese government announced a unilateral ceasefire at the start of the talks, while the AU and the UN said the door was still open to the factions that were absent.

According to Eliasson, the consultation phase of the talks would be followed by "substantive negotiations", which the mediators hoped would incorporate more of the movements. He declined to give an exact date for the start of these negotiations, saying this would depend on the achievements of the consultation phase.

The "substantive issues" include power sharing, security, compensation and other concerns, such as marginalisation and land.

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