

Catholic leaders cheer U.N. decision on peacekeeping force

WASHINGTON - The United Nations' decision July 31 to send a peacekeeping force to the Darfur region of Sudan drew cheers from Caritas Internationalis, the Vatican-based confederation of Catholic relief, development and social service organizations. The U.N. resolution, which authorized up to 26,000 peacekeepers in the long-troubled region, was hailed as a "welcome breakthrough" by Caritas in an Aug. 1 statement.

"It is too early to tell if the U.N. resolution for peacekeepers in Darfur means an end to the suffering of the people there, but it sends a strong signal to all the warring parties to stop fighting and to enter into meaningful negotiations," said Caritas Internationalis Secretary General Lesley-Anne Knight.

"The force should go a long way in providing protection for civilians and access and security for humanitarian operations. If the peacekeepers can achieve these goals, then there is good reason for hope," she said.

Caritas has been in Darfur since the fighting first broke out in 2003, working with ACT International - a Caritas-like federation of Orthodox and Protestant aid agencies - through a network of faith-based and Sudanese aid agencies. It has provided shelter, clean water and sanitation, and built health clinics and schools for people living in the camps. Insecurity has hampered relief efforts. An ACT-Caritas staff member was killed in June. (ACT stands for Action by Churches Together.)

According to Caritas, about 4.5 million people in Darfur have been affected by the fighting, which pits the Sudanese government and the Janjaweed, indigenous government-backed fighters, against Darfur's people. Caritas estimates at least 200,000 have died in the fighting over the past four years, and another 2.5 million have been forced from their homes.

On July 25, less than a week before the U.N. resolution, the U.N. World Food Program condemned the rising number of attacks on food convoys in Darfur, counting 18 attacks in 2007 - nine of them in the previous two weeks.

"These abhorrent attacks, which target the delivery people who are trying to help the most vulnerable in Darfur, must be brought under control," said a statement from Kenro Oshidari, the World Food Program's Sudan representative.

An estimated 170,000 people in Darfur could not be reached by food convoys in June; this was up sharply from the previous high of 60,000 in March. Convoy attacks resulted in one road between Kass, Sudan, and Nyala, the south Darfur state capital, being ruled a “no-go” area for U.N. staff.

In a 418-1 vote July 31, the U.S. House passed the Darfur Accountability and Divestment Act, which offers protection for state and local governments who divest holdings in companies that do business with the Sudanese government.

According to the Genocide Information Network, 18 states have adopted Sudanese divestment policies and another 18 states have started divestment campaigns, while nine cities and 54 universities have adopted divestment policies.

The United States is one of eight countries that have started divestment campaigns, and five companies - most notably Rolls Royce and Siemens - have either ceased operations in Sudan or publicized a plan to do so.

Bishops John H. Ricard of Pensacola-Tallahassee, Fla., and Patrick R. Cooney of Gaylord, Mich., were in Sudan in late July to meet with representatives of the Sudan Catholic Bishops’ Conference as well as staff of Catholic Relief Services, the U.S. bishops’ overseas relief and development agency.

Each bishop has written one posting on a CRS Web log, or blog.

Writing from Khartoum, Sudan, July 24, Bishop Ricard noted the Sudanese bishops have now reunited into a single conference, no longer having separate groups of bishops for the North and South.

On the eve of their trip to Darfur, Bishop Ricard said: “Our briefings to date have noted a relative decrease in terms of violence and insecurity and an improvement in the ability to reach more people than before; nonetheless, most access is by helicopter because roads remain dangerous.

“We should bear in mind that this conflict is far from solved, and 2 million people are still not able to return safely to their homes,” he said.

Bishop Cooney, writing July 25 from the west Darfur city of El Geneina, said: “The mood here is also hopeful, but peace is a long way away. ... The Sudanese could reap many benefits in the years and decades to come” if the world pitches in to aid Darfur.

“Perhaps this is also the time in Sudan’s history when everything can turn to the better. It won’t happen today or tomorrow, but I think it can happen,” he said.