

# Sudan envoy hopeful about peace talks

WASHINGTON - The U.S. special envoy to Sudan said that although a recent period of relative calm in Sudan has been replaced by more chaos - and conditions could rapidly deteriorate even more - he's hopeful about peace talks on Darfur scheduled for Oct. 27 in Libya.

Andrew Natsios told an audience at The Catholic University of America's Columbus School of Law Oct. 15 that the situation in Sudan is so fluid that it's impossible to predict which of the many factions involved in fighting will even attend the peace conference.

A first hurdle is keeping track of how many factions there are, he said, estimating that there are between 17 and 30 different groups with a stake in how the conflict in Darfur, a region in western Sudan, is resolved.

"Almost all the factions have said they'll attend the talks," Natsios said, but there are still "serious disagreements over leadership. The tribal divisions are severe."

To illustrate, he told of a Georgetown University student working in Sudan who was briefly kidnapped last summer. The student, whom Natsios did not identify, and a truck were captured by a group of six people driving two trucks. The student asked kidnappers who they represented. They said their faction was just the six of them and their two trucks - now three trucks with the one the student had been driving.

Natsios, who previously headed the U.S. Agency for International Development, cited numerous recent events in Sudan that he described as disheartening and said the only lasting solution for Sudan's multilayered problems is for an inclusive political agreement to come out of the Libyan peace talks.

"It's important to find a political solution, not a military solution," said Natsios, who also is on the faculty of Georgetown's School of Foreign Service.

As many as 400,000 people have been killed in Darfur since 2003, when the

government responded to a growing insurgency in the region by arming Arab militias to attack African farming villages that supported the rebels. At least 2.2 million people in the region have been forced from their homes or otherwise had their lives disrupted.

In an Oct. 6 press conference in Khartoum, the Sudanese capital, after a 10-day visit to the country, Natsios described the current political atmosphere between the ruling National Congress Party and the Sudan People's Liberation Movement as "poisonous," the fault of both sides.

"Important deadlines have been missed and key issue ... have not been resolved, trust is slowly being lost and tensions - especially along the border areas where armed units ... confront each other - are rising," Natsios said. "This, we believe, is very dangerous."

He said a war of words between the two has to give way to an environment of mutual respect. The bickering highlights other problems in preserving the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement that ended a brutal 21-year civil war between the North and South, he said.

An estimated 2 million people died during the North-South civil war, splitting the country roughly along religious and ethnic lines between the Muslim-Arab North and the African South with its population of Christians and animists. The fighting also centered on oil-rich areas in the South; human rights groups accused the Sudanese government of forcibly removing Southerners from oil-producing regions to make the area more secure for foreign oil companies.

At the Catholic University program, Natsios said that at the time of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement it was hoped that the two sides would work together to rebuild the country and seek peace. While they are no longer actively fighting, they are now political opponents and election rivals, Natsios said.

Elections scheduled for March 2009 are a crucial component in the transition to peace, he said. Also important are the return of refugees and displaced people to their own lands; adequate protection for people from marauders; quicker work at rebuilding ravaged parts of the country; and a broader approach to distributing

wealth from Sudan's burgeoning oil industry, he added.

Natsios said although they are rare there are some signs of progress in complying with the Comprehensive Peace Agreement.

Catholic officials - at the Vatican and in the United States - have been outspoken in calling for international support for peace in Sudan.

At the opening of the 62nd U.N. General Assembly Oct. 1, Archbishop Dominique Mamberti, the Vatican's foreign affairs minister, called for fully operational peacekeeping efforts in Darfur.

In September, Pope Benedict XVI met at the Vatican with Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir. In a statement following the pope's Sept. 14 meeting with al-Bashir, the Vatican said expectations were high that upcoming peace talks would guarantee that humanitarian assistance would get to those in need and would lead to the start of rebuilding and development in the region.

Although he highlighted U.S. and international efforts at peacekeeping and providing aid to the Sudanese people, Natsios acknowledged that progress toward peace in Sudan is delicate.

"There is a risk of a World War I-style incident that blows this whole thing up," he said.

That war in tension-filled Europe was set off by a series of events that quickly followed the June 28, 1914, assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand, heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne, by a Bosnian Serb student.