

U.N. official says Darfur crisis may continue

ZALINGEI, Sudan - The already perilous situation in Darfur will continue to worsen if stalled peace talks fully collapse, said a top U.N. official for the western region of Sudan.

U.N. envoy Jan Eliasson, in a radio interview with the British Broadcasting Corp., expressed optimism Nov. 5 that peace talks might eventually succeed.

However, he warned that a successful political process is needed to help check a shifting and increasingly deteriorating situation in Darfur, the site of a grave humanitarian crisis for more than four years.

"I have seen myself the desperation, the anger, the frustration in the camps. I have seen also the beginning of tribal battles, fighting over land," Eliasson told the BBC. "And all these factors lead me to the conclusion that we have to now really take advantage of the beginning of a political process."

Talks between the Sudanese government and several rebel groups stalled almost immediately when they began Oct. 27 in Sirte, Libya. Several prominent rebel groups, including the Sudan Liberation Army, boycotted the talks.

Abdel Wahid Nur, the SLA leader, is something of a hero within the numerous camps for the displaced in Darfur and has declared that he will not be attending peace negotiations until a joint 26,000-member U.N. and African Union peacekeeping force has been deployed in Darfur.

The status of the talks remained in question Nov. 5, with conflicting reports over whether they would continue or be postponed until December.

However, the U.N. and African Union announced that the joint peacekeeping force - which will strengthen and complement a besieged 7,000-member African Union force currently on the ground in Darfur - will be deployed early in 2008.

In recent interviews, humanitarian officials warned that the situation in Darfur is becoming increasingly chaotic, with increased levels of violence and banditry that, they believe, are being perpetrated by out-of-control and competing rebel factions, rather than by Sudanese government forces and allied Janjaweed militias.

The officials said a political settlement was an imperative to curb violence that was causing new levels of displacement within Darfur.

“The problem will remain serious and get even more complicated if there is no political solution,” one official said in an interview.

The rebels have said the violence in Darfur is due to actions of the Sudanese government and that their insurgency is based on a need to fight a government they said has long ignored and neglected the Darfur region. The Sudanese government, which declared a unilateral cease fire at the start of the peace talks in Libya, has said it is within its right to fight an insurgency that has threatened Sudan’s national security.

The U.N. estimates that roughly a third of Darfur’s 6.4 million people has been displaced since 2003, and that some 200,000 have died in direct violence or because of poor humanitarian conditions caused by the violence.