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US must regain the lead in Darfur

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An Open Letter to the US President, George W. Bush:

US must regain the lead in Darfur

Dear Mr. President

Expressing US policies regarding the current Lebanese-Israeli crisis, you indicated your desire to work for "sustainable peace in the region, not fake peace that can only delay fighting". The statement struck a cord with us and your Excellency could not have been more apt. But that is precisely what went missing in the US Darfur peace initiative. The US engineered peace for Darfur, commonly known as Darfur Peace Agreement (DPA) is both "fake and unsustainable". Its prime engineer Mr Robert Zoelick and his arch Experts produced a document that turns out to be a mockery of international diplomacy. As Professor Reeves said, the DPA was borne dead right from day one. In addition to the government of Sudan, the only other signatory of the DPA was Minni Minnawi and his SLM fraction, erroneously and persistently promoted to be the biggest Darfur "rebel" group. Subsequent attempts to create a force out of Minnawi by the international community, the AU and the Government of Sudan came to naught. The US too was involved in this fiasco, culminating in Minnawi's visit to the White House. The visit was by means ill-advised.

That the DPA is dead if not borne so is beyond doubt. Mr. Pronk, the UN Special Representative to Darfur described it as "severely paralysed, does not resonate with Darfur people and requires major rewriting". Lashing Minnawi to sign the agreement, Mr Zoelick warned him: "I could be a very good friend but could also be a nasty enemy". Well Mr, Minnawi chose "a very good friend". Mr President, I trust you concur with us that any agreement that is an outcome of bullying cannot guarantee "lasting and sustainable peace".

Mr. Minnawi has so far failed to sell the DPA to Darfur people. Both of his public rallies in Alfashir and Khartoum had to be cancelled. But he is not the only one who failed to recommend the DPA in a public venue to Darfur People. Mr. Egeland, the Head of UN Humanitarian Operations had a tragic experience. His attempt to recommend the DPA to Darfur IDPs ended up with his interpreter lynched in front of him. If the IDPs do not think that the DPA is good for them, who else does? The DPA has driven a huge wedge between Darfur people and the US State Department. This is clearly at odd with the impressive image the US has in Darfur and which withstood the anti-American propaganda of Khartoum Government. At every venue, Darfur people are quick to acknowledge with great gratitude and admiration the assistance rendered to Darfur People by both the American government as well as the American Public throughout the crisis. It will be a shame if the image of the USA as a leading force for justice in Darfur is ambushed through the process.

The US mediators can certainly be credited for having acted in good faith. Their cardinal mistake was that they missed the obvious. In addressing a full house at Abuja Peace Talks, Mr. Hume, the US Charge de Affairs in Khartoum declared that US government had no interest in the political and wealth components of the peace negotiations and that the US interest was confined to the security aspects of the deal. Mr Hume's revelation was unfortunate. It does not conform with the image of the US as a world champion for democracy, freedom and justice, none of which can be delivered or reduced to tampering with security arrangements. Moreover, the Abuja venue itself rested on the premise that Darfur problem is essentially political and cannot be sorted out by military means. And it was on that premise that Darfur Movements accepted a ceasefire and joined the Abuja Peace Talks. In an era of post Zoelick, let us hope Ms J. Frazer, the Assistant Secretary for Foreign Affairs and who declared that she "will fix the DPA" take note of these words in her coming intervention.

Rather than bringing peace to Darfur, the DPA has led to escalation of violence in the embittered region. To insist that the DPA can be made to work is a self-deception that is both morally reprehensible and wrong. There is now a new reality in Darfur. Minnawi's forces have melted down leaving a region that is totally dominated by the National Redemption Front, the non-signatories of the DPA. The search for peace must continue and the NRF is ready to play its part, constructively and responsibly; "genuine and sustainable peace", not "fake Peace" and exactly as President Bush wanted for Lebanon and Israel. Here is the NRF's plan for that peace.

The IDPs constitute the most powerless victims of Darfur crisis. As humanity of any society depends on how it treats its weakest, we must strive not to sacrifice them in the process. Having lost their homes and properties, the IDPs cannot go home penniless. The US\$1000 proposed per each family – not individual-, once and for all is a minimum amount that can enable them to kick-start their lives. Such an amount is surely less than the weakly cost of IPDs in their present camps. It is also within the means of the country given that senior government negotiators were paid US\$500 per diem for the entire period of Abuja Peace Talks.

The issue of compensation for those who have lost their basic means of survival is a sticky issue across Darfur. In Darfurian culture, compensation, fully or partial, is indivisible of any reconciliation and a precondition for peaceful coexistence. Seed Compensation Fund of \$30 million is conceded in the DPA. While that establishes the principle, the amount given is, plainly speaking, a joke. Due to importance of this for the future of peace in Darfur, we suggest giving it its due weight.

The Darfur crisis started in the first place due to lack of control of Darfur people over their destiny. Had the Darfurians been managing their own affairs, what the US correctly termed genocide would not have happened. Hence, it is legitimate for Darfur to be a self-governing region within the framework of a united Sudan. The NRF has no qualms with sharing power in Darfur with Albashir's party as long as its nominees hold some form of a majority in the region. Otherwise, one risks preserving the current status quo. As for other sectors in Darfur who are not affiliates of the NRF or the ruling party, they can easily be accommodated in the new structure. Using democratic channels, Darfur status as a region can be reassessed in the future, preferably within a restructuring of the entire country.

Reconstruction of Darfur is of a paramount importance for sustainable peace agreement in Darfur. As all experts concur, deprivation and lack of development in Darfur have been the prime reason behind the insurgence. Moreover, development remains the most fundamental function of any decent government. The DPA must be amended to secure meaningful developmental budget for the region and in a way that delivers broad consensus on the agreement.. Two factors help here. Firstly one assumes that development is an ongoing process that no government will halt within three years as the DPA might imply. Secondly, further funds will be released by increases in petrol remunerations, reduction of defence/security expenditure, peace dividends and improvements in governance.

The current Constitution of the country guarantees equal opportunity for all Sudanese to fully participate in the running of their country. Let us be true to that spirit and translate it into Darfur agreement. We want Darfurians to be represented in the national government structure (the Presidency, the Parliament, the Council of Ministers, and the Judiciary) in a way that tallies with their weight in Sudan's population and as determined by government statistics. Darfurians equally call for a fair representation, at the middle and upper levels of federal civil service of the Sudan including defence and security apparatus. It is imperative that this process may take more than one year to effect but a workable time plan can be negotiated.

Given the depth of the crisis, the rift between us and the government is uncomfortably huge. Sharing post-agreement power with Albashir will be marred with lack of trust, at least for some time. That calls for some form of a guarantee mechanism that is lacking in the DPA. Reliance on the good will of the government does not make a sustainable peace agreement. A workable guarantee allows space for building trust among partners and is no less important for generating a broad consensus on the peace deal. Such a guarantee can be formed of a combination of an international component backed by retention of NRF forces during the interim period.

The National Security Act which gives the security forces unlimited powers to detain and torture opponents of the regime is a real obstacle to the implementation of any peace agreement reached in the Sudan including the CPA (North-South Agreement). Abolition of this Act is a precondition for any sustainable peace in the Sudan.

Mr. President,

Resolution 1706 has brought Darfur again in the international agenda. Regretfully, the Resolution does not address the root cause of the problem and hence cannot form a base for "sustainable peace" in Darfur. Moreover, the Resolution is constructed around implementation of the PDA, the same failed agreement that is rejected by the absolute majority of Darfur people. As such, UN forces will ultimately find themselves against opponents of the DPA; plainly speaking, the majority of Darfur people. But this situation can be rectified. A thorough review of the DPA, making it acceptable to Darfur people, will do the job.

As we alluded to before, time is ripe for the bringing the Darfur crisis to a close. The people of Darfur cannot afford to wait any longer. This suggested blueprint is by all means not conclusive. Nonetheless, if we can agree on the fundamentals, the rest will certainly be easy to manage.

Sincerely;

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