

U.S. Must Revive Focus on Sudan If Peace Is To Be Salvaged

Las Cruces Sun-News, April 20, 2007

By Bishop Ricardo Ramirez and Michael Cromartie

Two years ago, the United States helped broker a peace agreement in Sudan that ended two decades of North-South civil war with solemn promises of respect for the rights of all Sudanese and set a road map for normal life to return to that war-shattered nation.

Today, that peace is in jeopardy. The small clique that came to power in Khartoum through a coup in 1989 has not lived up to its commitment to share real power with the former Southern rebels and is either violating or foot-dragging on key elements in the January 2005 peace deal: demarcation of disputed boundaries, revenue-sharing of Sudan's oil wealth, the establishment of local governments that are truly representative of local populations, institutional protections for human rights, and crucial preparations for elections at all levels to establish the principle of democratic accountability.

Also, despite the presence of southerners in the Government of National Unity, Khartoum's military forces and the Khartoum-sponsored "Janjaweed" militia have employed in Darfur the same genocidal tactics first used in the South against Christians, followers of traditional African religions, and Muslims who opposed Khartoum's attempts to impose Islamic law on them. Moreover, despite international condemnation and patient diplomacy, Khartoum has been slow to accept a more robust international peacekeeping presence in Darfur with the mandate and means necessary to protect civilians. China, which has major investments in Sudan, has long served as Khartoum's biggest defender. Now, however, under intense pressure from both diplomats and ordinary citizens incensed that the Beijing Olympics may be remembered as "the Genocide Olympics," even China has joined in pushing Sudan to accept a strong United Nations force to work with the understaffed and under-equipped African Union peacekeepers.

For President Omar Hasan al-Bashir's government, it's business as usual: abusing human rights, stalling on implementation of even the most basic requirements of the peace agreement, and continuing to promote genocide in Darfur. Why should it act otherwise? The country has a projected 13 percent economic growth rate this year as foreign companies stream in to ride the oil boom. The high-level attention of the Bush administration and Congress was pivotal to bringing about the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement. Our government has strongly and uniquely pressed for U.N. Security Council action on Darfur and supported political and

economic development in Southern Sudan, which we saw firsthand when we visited the country last year. U.S. leadership is urgently needed again, particularly when we see the palpable lack of progress in implementing the peace agreement's mechanisms and the genocide in Darfur.

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, an independent federal agency, recently wrote a letter to U.S. President George W. Bush, urging his personal engagement in re-energizing peace efforts in Sudan.

Among other recommendations, we called for ensuring that the special envoy on Sudan, Andrew Natsios, has the personnel and other support needed to fulfill his mandate of facilitating the implementation of the CPA and of pursuing peace in Darfur.

We also called for building a coalition with the European Union, Sudan's neighbors and nations such as China and India that have major economic investments in Sudan to press Khartoum to end its delaying tactics on implementation of the peace agreement and United Nations protection efforts in Darfur.

The U.S. should consider new sanctions such as asset freezes and travel bans against individuals and institutions, including the ruling National Congress Party, identified as responsible for serious human rights abuses or for impeding implementation of the 2005 agreement.

Both the northern and southern leadership should be held to the current schedule for elections in 2009 and a referendum in 2011 on the south's political future, ensuring that these are true expressions of popular will and that their results are accepted and implemented.

Finally, the U.S. should continue to support and strengthen the government of Southern Sudan, assist in the development of institutions and infrastructure necessary to protect human rights, deter a resumption of civil war and support the return of refugees and internally displaced persons.

Intense U.S. involvement in these efforts to return peace to Sudan would be a fitting

affirmation of our nation's commitment to advancing human rights including religious freedom throughout the world.

Most Reverend Ricardo Ramirez, bishop of the Las Cruces diocese, and Michael Cromartie, vice president of the Ethics and Public Policy Center in Washington, are members of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom.