Without foreign chancelleries and Hollywood's finest, can Darfur peace deal succeed?

Julie Flint - 9th May 2006

It took four years to negotiate an end to Mozambique's civil war. That peace, signed in 1992, has lasted until today. The Darfur Peace Agreement, which it was hoped would end the first genocide of the 21st century, was forced through in little more than a year. If it fails to end the conflict in western Sudan, it will be because of its process rather than its provisions. The process has been flawed from the beginning, and could be fatal at the last. The DPA may well be the best the people of Darfur can get in their present, miserable circumstances. But international pressure for a quick fix threatens to cripple it - and in so doing to condemn Darfurians to further suffering.

Defenders of the peace process that began in the Ethiopian capital, Addis Ababa, in mid-2004 before shifting to the Nigerian capital, Abuja, will argue that it lasted almost two years. On paper, yes. In truth, no. The first four rounds of the seven-round talks were dominated by the Sudan government's egregious violations of ceasefire agreements and the international community's failure to take a single meaningful step to stop them. When serious negotiation was finally engaged, the African Union mediation was almost as problematic as the rebel negotiators themselves. The mediation improved towards the end of 2005, but popular pressure from outside Darfur for armed intervention was by then encouraging a series of deadlines that culminated with a 30 April date set by the AU Peace and Security Council. The best of the AU's experts in Abuja believed April was unrealistic, off by a couple of months at least.

On 25 April, the AU presented its draft agreement. Previous deadlines had come and gone. But this one, astonishingly, was enforced (more or less). Officially, the parties had five days to take the agreement - or leave it. Five days, that is, for those able to read and understand English. Those who were dependent on the Arabic text, completed on 28 April, had only 48 hours. The people of Darfur, who will live or die by the agreement, know very little about it. They have not been party to the talks. No-one has explained the agreement to them. (Least of all the state-controlled media, which would not be permitted to mention the state's many concessions.) They do not know what it offers and what it doesn't- and, most importantly, why it doesn't. There is no individual compensation, they tell me. But there is. No timetable for the disarmament of the Janjaweed militias. But there is. No guarantees for implementation. But there are - inasmuch as there can be in the face of a government that will see implementation as defeat and will fight it every inch of the way.

This was never a people's peace, a peace that grew from within and had strong, deep roots. Today it is an imposed and partial peace- between the Sudan government and the faction of the Sudan Liberation Army that is led by Minni Minawi, whose tribe represents 8% at most of the population of Darfur. It is already faltering: Darfurians are demonstrating against it in towns and displaced camps, recognizing in the signatories two narrowly-based parties who believe in domination through force and preferring continued

struggle to what they believe is surrender. SLA Chairman Abdul Wahid Mohamed al Nur, until now the single most important rebel leader in terms of popular support as opposed to firepower, is insisting he will not sign, refusing sack-fulls of dollars intended to change his mind.

There are many in the Khartoum government who believe they can crush the movements by force and who, given half a chance, will try. Rushing an agreement that some factions still oppose could, in a worst-case scenario, give them that chance.

Interpretation of the DPA varies enormously. My own is that it is a pretty good deal. Not the best, perhaps, but not bad. The rebel movements have from the beginning suffered from delusions of grandeur. Unlike the southern rebels of the SPLA, they have not fought for 20 years. Their region is of little or no strategic importance: it has no water and it has no oil. The rebels themselves are divided, without a leader who can hold a candle to the SPLA's John Garang. Most importantly: they did not win the war. Their only asset was the support of the international community, and their comportment in Abuja- and in Darfur itself- has damaged that.

Even those who have rejected the agreement acknowledge that its security provisions are surprisingly good. The Sudan government must withdraw its forces from many areas it currently occupies, and must disarm the Janjaweed within five months- before the rebels even begin to lay down their guns. Guarantees include an independent advisory team that both Canada and Norway, outspoken critics of the Khartoum government, are keen to head up. The government must downsize the paramilitary Popular Defence Force and Border Guards in which Janjaweed have been hidden. The hated PDF must be abolished in three or four years. Thousands of rebels will be integrated into the Sudanese Armed Forces. Some will even be given command posts.

The agreement's weakest point, from Darfur's viewpoint, is its provisions for power-sharing. At the federal level, the rebel movements have won few concessions and have been refused the third place in the national hierarchy. But they have the fourth -in itself a gigantic step up. The government has won the battle to keep Darfur divided into three states, until a referendum on a single region, and controls 50% of state legislatures to the rebels' 30%, with 20% going to independents -a division that could, in reality, produce an anti-government majority. Critically, however, the movements will control the Transitional Darfur Regional Authority and annual income of hundreds of millions of dollars. It is the TDRA which will be the real power until elections. It will implement the peace agreement, supervise reconstruction and economic development, and help the return and resettlement of the refugees. All the TDRA's commission heads will be the movements' nominees.

The real, abiding concern is implementation. Because of the timetable, the implementing force will be the AU, which has been hopelessly under-resourced so far. UN troops may be accepted by Khartoum now the strongest rebel faction has signed the agreement, but they cannot arrive much before year-end. The threat of UN sanctions frightens no-one. What is most disturbing is the degree of eagle-eyed, unrelenting international pressure

that will be needed to force Khartoum to do all the things it is refusing to do in South Sudan. Not just now, when the world's eyes are on Darfur, but in a few years time, when foreign chancelleries and Hollywood's finest may have shifted their attention to another crisis and another photo opportunity.

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