

African churches want UN troops in Darfur: All Africa Conference of Churches statement

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Following the signing in Nigeria of a peace agreement between Sudan's government and Darfur's biggest rebel group, Africa's largest grouping of churches urged that UN peacekeepers step in for duties now carried out by African Union (AU) troops.

"It is our fervent prayer that efforts will continue to get the remaining rebel groups on board with the peace plans to ensure a lasting peace to the three-year conflict," the All Africa Conference of Churches (AACC) said in a May 8 statement after the Sudan Liberation Movement/Army and the government signed the agreement.

The Nairobi-based church grouping said it remained concerned that two smaller rebel groups rejected the accord signed May 5 for the troubled western region of Africa's biggest country in one of this century's most debilitating conflicts. The Darfur conflict has seen mainly black Africans from Darfur becoming refugees after conflicts involving mainly northern Arabs.

Following the accord, the AACC urged Sudan to allow UN peacekeepers to take over from the AU troops—about 7,000—saying a much more robust mediating presence is required for the Darfur region, which is about the size of France.

A separate demand for UN troops turned violent when the international body's humanitarian chief, Jan Egeland, aid workers and journalists were forced to flee a refugee camp in Darfur on May 8 after a demonstration in which an aid worker was attacked. The incident occurred when refugees demanded that troops protect them.

The conflict in recent weeks spilled over to neighboring Chad, worsening a separate conflict in that country. More than 200,000 people from Darfur have sought refuge in eastern Chad following attacks by the Janjaweed, an Arab militia backed by the Sudanese government.

“We are convinced that as much as the Darfur crisis fuels the conflicts in Chad, the Chadian situation in turn fuels the Darfur crisis,” the African church leaders said. – *Ecumenical News International*