

Misgivings about Sudan peace accord: Celebrations premature

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When the government of Sudan and the Sudan People's Liberation Army signed a peace accord and power-sharing arrangement on New Year's Eve at Lake Naivasha, Kenya, South African President Thabo Mbeki, who witnessed the signing, declared, "Africa begins the year 2005 on a very good footing."

"Let's party!" the South African head of state added, according to the *New York Times*. A peace ceremony sealing the final accords was to be held on January 9 in Nairobi.

But Mbeki's call for celebration at the end of the decades-old conflict in southern Sudan, a conflict that has pitted the Muslim-dominated government in Khartoum against the largely Christian and animist people of the south, could be premature.

While the causes of the north-south conflict are complex, the key element in the explosion of civil war in 1983 was Khartoum's effort to impose a strict version of Islamic law on the non-Muslim south. In Europe and America, the oil-rich south's cause has won the support of an unusual alliance of mainline and liberal churches working with evangelicals.

Under the terms of the various protocols agreed to over the two years of negotiations that led up to the comprehensive peace agreement signed December 31, the people of southern Sudan will have the right to vote for secession at the end of a six-year interim period.

During that period, Islamic Shari'a law will apply to the north but not the south. Additionally, 50 percent of net oil revenue derived from producing wells in southern Sudan will be allocated to the government of southern Sudan and 50 percent will go to the national government. John Garang, leader of the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM), will become first vice president in the national government.

But still looming over peace in Sudan is the conflict in the Darfur region of western Sudan—a separate and in many ways unrelated conflict that could, unless resolved, unravel the accords that have settled the southern civil war.

Indeed, as the settlement between the government and the southern rebels has proceeded toward its final stages, prodded by the United Nations' Security Council and outgoing U.S. Ambassador to the UN John Danforth, the situation in Darfur has seemed to spiral even more out of control.

Just two days before the agreement ending the war in the south was signed, the UN World Food Program announced that it was suspending relief convoys for some 260,000 people in the strife-torn Darfur region because of clashes between government troops and rebels. The causes of the conflict in Darfur are less clear than the causes of the north-south rebellion but are rooted in economic and ethnic tensions generated by drought and the expansion of the desert.

In Darfur, both warring parties are Muslim. The rebels are based among ethnic African tribes and settled farmers, who are pitted against nomadic Arabs and their militias, the Janjaweed. The national government, for its part, has enlisted and armed—and at times worked side by side—with the Janjaweed to put down the rebellion.

An estimated 70,000 people have been killed in the fighting in Darfur since fighting broke out in February 2003 and another 1.8 million displaced. Some experts on Sudanese politics fear that the ongoing crisis in Darfur will make it difficult for Garang and other southern rebels to take part in the government, since the SPLM has been sympathetic to the rebellion.

Others argue that the government cannot be trusted, and believe the settlement in the south was agreed to by Khartoum to relieve the international pressure on the country.

But diplomats hope the new accord will ease what has been a catastrophic situation. The United States has labeled it “genocide,” and the UN, until the year-end tsunami disaster in southeastern Asia, called it the world's worst humanitarian disaster.

“We have to be realistic that the problem of Darfur is still there, and there is no positive conclusion to the peace process unless Darfur is solved,” Danforth was quoted as saying. “It must be accomplished on an urgent basis.” *-David E. Anderson, Religion News Service*