

NO TIME TO TAKE THE PRESSURE OFF: A PROPOSED UN FORCE FOR DARFUR

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()The passing of a United Nations resolution on Tuesday July 31st to deploy up to 26,000 troops and police in Darfur is a welcome breakthrough in trying to end the conflict there. The UN, led on the Security Council by America, Britain and France, has been pushing an extremely reluctant Sudanese government into accepting such a force for over a year, so it is a victory for relentless and concerted diplomatic pressure.

It is the Chinese, however, who have really made this possible. As the buyer of most of Sudans oil, China has always been the key to imposing real pressure on the murdering government in Khartoum. For years it did nothing, reasoning that the best way to protect its commercial interests was to indulge the wishes of the regime in Khartoum at almost every turn. But in the past few months the message from Beijing has changed. The Chinese seem increasingly to have accepted some of the moral and political responsibilities that come with their new economic clout. And, with threats of boycotts over Darfur ringing in their ears, they might also have had the 2008 Beijing Olympics in mind when they voted for the resolution.

This Chinese about-turn is extremely welcome. However, a paper resolution passed in New York will not on it own bring a solution to Darfurs problems any nearer. In many ways, the really difficult work starts now. For a start, the UN needs to find the troops and police for the mission, which when it gets up to full strength will be the biggest of its kind in the world.

Sudan insists that most of them should be African, but the impoverished African Union (AU) is finding it hard at the moment to raise just 8,000 troops for a peacekeeping mission in Somalia.

() If this force is to become a reality, therefore, there will have to be a step-change in African attitudes towards policing its own continent, backed by quite a lot more money from the West as well. Eventually, the Sudanese will also probably have to allow in troops from Asia and other parts of the world too.

Vigilance will also be needed as the Sudanese government is sure to try and pick away at the detail of the resolution to hinder an effective deployment as much as it can.

()The outside world needs to prevent that, and also ensure that any build-up in Darfur does not diminish the separate mission in the south, where an uneasy peace agreement is still holding. Keeping calm in the south, which emerged from decades of war with Khartoum only in 2005, is just as important a humanitarian imperative as pacifying Darfur.

Then there is the business of brokering a peace deal in Darfur itself. Since the latest attempt failed last year, the rebel groups have splintered into ever more rancorous and undisciplined factions, making the job even harder. In Tanzania on August 3rd diplomats are set to try again. Here too, pressure must be brought from foreign governments, particularly the West, to form more coherent negotiating blocks if any agreement with the Sudanese government is to stick. Only then will the wretched survivors of the worlds worst humanitarian disaster be able to contemplate an end to their nightmare.

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