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SUDAN, 31 December 2007 (IRIN) - The transformation at the start of 2008 of the African Unions peacekeeping force in Darfur into one jointly commanded by the UN will not significantly increase the number of troops on the ground and, say aid workers, do little to immediately improve the delivery of humanitarian assistance.

Under Security Council resolution 1769, passed 31 July 2007, the joint African Union/United Nations Hybrid Operation in Darfur (UNAMID), is supposed to consist of up to 19,555 military personnel, 3,772 police officers and 5,105 civilians, making it one of the largest peacekeeping operations in the world.

The beleaguered and under-resourced AU force comprises around 7,000 troops and 1,200 police.

Although UNAMID comes into being on January 1, it will initially be made up almost entirely of the AU personnel already on the ground, with major additional deployments not expected for several months.

UNAMID's commander, Gen Martin Luther Agwai, publicised this shortfall in early December, when he lamented that just a third of UNAMID's full contingent would be in place at its inception.

"How do you expect this force to do the job of 20,000 just because we are re-hatting on December 31?" he said in Khartoum, referring to the date of a handover ceremony in the North Darfur state capital, El Fasher.

The job in question is laid out in UNAMID's mandate, the key elements of which are to contribute to the restoration of necessary security conditions for the safe provision of humanitarian assistance and to facilitate full humanitarian access throughout Darfur and to contribute to the protection of civilian populations under imminent threat of physical violence and prevent attacks against civilians, within its capability and areas of deployment, without prejudice to the responsibility of the Government of the Sudan.

() *Enormous needs*

Gen Agwai is far from alone in fearing it will take some time for this assistance to improve in the near future.

() For Auriol Miller, director of Oxfams operations in Sudan, if the international community has the will to make it succeed, UNAMID could have a positive impact on saving lives in Darfur but we fear it is in danger of making the same mistakes as the AU troops, who did not receive the support they needed.

MIS (the AU mission in Darfur) is now demoralised, rejected by most Darfuris and unable to protect itself, let alone civilians, she said, recalling that in October 2007 an attack on an AU

base outside of Haskanita by an unidentified armed group resulted in the death of 10 peacekeepers.

NAMID must not be allowed to suffer the same fate. It must be able to show civilians it is different to what has come before, Miller told IRIN.

It must be able to respond rapidly to attacks and ceasefire violations. It must accompany women when they collect firewood and go to market to reduce the risk of being attacked, she said.

If it fails to distinguish itself quickly, its credibility on the ground will rapidly diminish and this could lead to a further deterioration of security in Darfur, Miller warned.

She thinks Darfur is a test case, she added. NAMID's failure could have far-reaching consequences affecting other peacekeeping operations and dealing a solemn blow to the international community's commitment to realise its **responsibility to protect**.

But it would be a mistake to place the onus for Darfur's fate exclusively on the new force. Cessation of hostilities between the many different parties to the conflict must be agreed, implemented and effectively monitored. Peacekeepers are unlikely to succeed unless there is some sort of peace to keep, said the Oxfam official.

() Whos to blame?

Like many governments, UN officials and others following the Darfur crisis, the Coalition placed most of the blame for UNAMID's initial shortcomings on Sudan's government, accusing Khartoum of "imposing conditions that would render the mission likely to fail". The report said the government had delayed deployment by creating obstacles such as imposing curfews, refusing night flights and not allocating land for bases.

The NGOs also said Sudan had stalled on the Status of Forces agreement, which outlines the terms of engagement and is necessary for proper deployment.

Khartoum, which has long demanded that UNAMID ground troops all come from African states, also stands accused of stalling over requests that promised personnel from Thailand, Nepal and an engineering unit from Norway be included.

On 13 December, UN Assistant Secretary-General for Peacekeeping Edmond Mulet told reporters: "We've been requesting from [the government of Sudan] official answers on these pending, outstanding questions and we do hope that they will come to us as soon as possible because this is delaying putting in place the other assets in the mission."

Lack of helicopters

Another problem confronting the mission is the lack of critical assets, notably 24 helicopters that have yet to be provided by member states.

UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon recently said: "In the past weeks and months, I have

contacted, personally, every possible contributor of helicopters - in the Americas, in Europe, in Asia. And yet, not one helicopter has been made available yet."

He attributed the reason to a "lack of political will" by member states, but diplomats say countries were reluctant to contribute valuable assets in such a poor security environment where there have been past attacks on helicopters.

() In addition to these setbacks, other delays plague the mission. While 140 Chinese engineers have reached Darfur, their equipment which is being sent by sea, could take more than a month to arrive. UN officials say transport times within Sudan are proving to be longer than anticipated.

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