

The African Union agreed Thursday to more than triple the size of its peacekeeping force in Sudan's western Darfur region, where U.N. officials say two-years of fighting has created one of the world's world's worst humanitarian crises.

The AU's Peace and Security Council approved boosting the force from 2,200 to more than 7,700, including nearly 5,500 troops, 1,600 civilian police and some 700 military observers, AU spokesman Assane Ba said.

AU Peace and Security Commissioner Said Djinnit told journalists after the meeting that the enhanced force would be in place by the end of September. Kenya, Nigeria and Rwanda have pledged to contribute troops, he said

"We are concerned over the continuing crisis in Darfur and condemn the continued attacks against defenseless civilians," Djinnit said. "These extra troops will further promote a more secure environment and help build confidence as well as protecting civilians."

The council did not discuss newly announced talks with NATO on possible logistical support, he said.

Djinnit also said the council did not discuss changing the force's mandate to make it more robust, something the AU spokesman had earlier said was on the agenda

Even as the AU was preparing to send in a larger force, the U.N.'s special envoy to Sudan, Jan Pronk, said a 12,000-strong peacekeeping force was needed in Darfur by early next year. He said that getting such a force in place depended on the Sudanese government and rebels signing a peace deal.

An internal assessment of the AU mission said it needs 5,887, troops on the ground in addition to 1,560 civilian police by August. It added that it may need to quadruple the force to 12,300 to restore order in Darfur, as Pronk suggested Thursday.

<http://www.signonsandiego.com/news/world/20050428-1544-sudan-darfur.html>