

Emerging initiatives on Darfur and their impact on the Doha Forum: Khartoum's strategy and the Tripoli initiative

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A new round of talks in the Doha Forum began earlier this year, sponsored by Qatar and with international and Arab support, to attempt to deal with the Darfur crisis. The Forum appealed to the parties involved in the conflict to address the crisis, and it tried to mediate between the Sudanese government on the one hand, and the Darfuri rebels and militias on the other. The second round of the Doha talks began after the violent conflict reached new heights, the peak of violence being marked by the attack of the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM) on the Sudanese capital Khartoum on 10 May 2008.

The first round of the Doha Forum, held in February 2009, resulted in the signing of the first goodwill accord between the Sudanese government and the JEM. It was this first accord which paved the way for the signing of the Framework Agreement to Resolve the Conflict in Darfur in February 2010. This accord included twelve articles that dealt comprehensively with the different issues of armed conflict in the volatile Darfur region. Great focus was placed on negotiations with the JEM as a means to reach a comprehensive peace agreement before 15 March 2010.

JEM, however, walked away from the negotiation table in protest at the opening of a parallel negotiating track with the Liberation and Justice Movement (LJM), a coalition of approximately eighteen smaller Darfuri factions which claim that JEM does not have the type of on-the-ground presence necessary to legitimate its authority to negotiate on behalf of all of Darfur. The LJM then became the main party representing the rebels in the Doha negotiations with the official Sudanese delegation. This resulted in LJM signing a framework agreement with the Sudanese government in March 2010, which was followed by a three month ceasefire – subject to renewal.

The Doha Forum continued in its efforts, but was unable to announce any achievement in this round of negotiations between LJM and the Sudanese government. A disagreement on the issue of recognizing Darfur as an autonomous region still clouds the talks. The Sudanese government demands a referendum to settle the crisis first, while LJM demands a declaration of independence first, with a referendum to follow at a later stage.

Whereas the government wants reconciliation to take place without a tribunal, with reparations for collective damages rather than on the basis of individual cases, the rebels continue to demand trials and individual reparations. There was agreement between the parties on the principle of a proportional sharing of power, according to population size, with the recognition that Darfuris comprise twenty percent of Sudan's total population. The parties differed, however, on the issue of so-called 'positive discrimination' (or 'affirmative action') that the Darfuri movements are demanding. This would require the Sudanese government to pay eight percent of the national government's revenues as reparations.

The Sudanese government has, however, expressed its intention to allow for the possibility of compensating Darfuris, but without a commitment to specific figures. The rebels also called on the government to take into account the historical precedents in relevant international cases of division of power and representation of marginalised or disadvantaged groups. The rebels demanded the creation of a national fund for the revenue of the country as a whole, with Darfur receiving ten percent of the funds annually. That would be in addition to an initial lump sum of four billion US dollars, two billion of which should be paid in the first year, followed by two consecutive annual payments of one billion dollars each.

Another matter which has proven divisive in the Doha Forum is the difference of opinion between the Sudanese government and the Darfuri opposition on the time which ought to elapse between the signing of a final accord and the complete integration of armed militias into the official army and police forces of Darfur. While the government demands immediate post-accord incorporation of these armed militias into the army and police, the rebels seek to maintain separate forces for a seven year period, with a view to ensuring the proper implementation of the accord's terms prior to integrating the local militias into Sudanese power structures.

Notwithstanding these problems, the most significant accomplishment of the negotiations was the agreement on a cease-fire, and the resultant decline in violence. The Doha Forum still has tremendous challenges to confront as it strives towards completion of the negotiations and the realisation of its designated objectives. This is an especially daunting task in the light of a new set of relevant developments, most notably the emergence of a new official strategy by the Sudanese government to resolve the Darfur crisis, accompanied by new Libyan initiative. A Libyan-led conference last month was designed to bring all parties with a stake in the conflict and its resolution to the negotiating table in order to agree on a unified strategy to resolve the crisis.

It is worth mentioning that there are expectations that the Qatari peace broker will, in the near future, produce a new peace proposal that will serve as the draft for a permanent peace agreement.

New developments and the attitudes of affected parties

The Darfur crisis has witnessed significant recent developments, chief among which is a new strategy by the Sudanese government that details Khartoum's commitment to dealing with the human dimension of the crisis, its agreement to abide by the outcomes of the April 2010 elections in Darfur, and the incorporation of all pertinent factors into a comprehensive initiative that aims to establish what the government has dubbed a 'settlement of resolution'. This takes place as a new Libyan initiative comes to the fore. Libya last month hosted a conference designed to unite the rebel movements of Darfur under one umbrella in an attempt better to handle the new strategy advanced by the Sudanese government. A third development is the entrance of Uganda into the conflict, a development which could conceivably lead to armed intervention.

First development: new strategy of the Sudanese government

The Sudanese government has independently put forward a comprehensive strategy to resolve the Darfur crisis, without regard for the fact that it is simultaneously participating in the Doha Forum. Khartoum has been keen to present its new initiative within an international framework. To this end, some of the members of its official delegation to the Doha Forum met with US Special Envoy to Sudan, Scott Gration; Joint United Nations-African Union Special Representative for Darfur, Ibrahim Gambari; and the Chairperson of the African Union High Level Implementation Panel on Sudan, Thabo Mbeki. According to media reports, the participants of that meeting discussed the possibility of mobilising support for the strategy at international and regional levels.

This Sudanese government strategy, called 'Towards a new strategy for achieving comprehensive peace, security and development in Darfur', is the most prominent development relevant to the Darfur crisis. The strategy, announced by Dr Ghazi Salahuddin Atabani, an adviser to the president of the Republic of Sudan and the government's chief representative dealing with the Darfur dossier, consists of a number of points, the most noteworthy of which are:

1. The search for a comprehensive resolution to the Darfur crisis by opening the door to a political process which would entail ‘the mobilization of representatives of all social and political forces within Darfur itself and encouraging them to take the lead in the search for a peaceful resolution to the conflict’.
2. The enhancement of security on the ground by the application of concrete measures, in cooperation with UNAMID, to eradicate all sources of insecurity.
3. The acceleration of the voluntary return of all internally displaced persons in a way that ensures that the requisite support is provided to them.
4. The implementation, by the government, of developmental and political projects on the ground. In this regard, the Sudanese government has announced the establishment of development projects in Darfur with a 1.9 billion dollar budget.
5. The close coordination of work between UNAMID, the Joint Mediator, and the African Union High Level Implementation Panel on Sudan (AUHIP) in order to facilitate and regulate the process of consultation among the various sectors of Darfuri society, and to explore their views on some of the controversial issues that transcend political differences among the different parties. The objective is to enable all sides, without regard to where they fall on the spectrum of public opinion, to express their concerns and positively to participate in addressing the roots of the Darfur crisis.
6. The implementation of justice for all through various national mechanisms, including securing compensation and restitution for victims in the spirit of fairness and reconciliation.
7. Restructuring and reorienting humanitarian operations in such a manner as to shift their focus from relief to long-term developmental projects.
8. The cooperation of all parties in the pursuit of a global political agreement that is both final and comprehensive, which is founded on consultation with the Darfur community, and at the same time takes into account previous negotiations and agreements.

The Darfur rebel groups voiced their objections to the government strategy, each according to its respective position and strategy in relation to the Sudanese government. The most important general objections that they raised were:

1. The rebels’ fear that the government’s plan to disarm the refugee camps might cause a wave of violence and clashes which might fan the fires of conflict rather than resolve the volatile situation. Also, as some observers noted, while keeping the refugees in camps is among the most inhumane elements of the continuing crisis, it is nonetheless deemed by the rebels to be an important bargaining chip to be used when negotiating with the government.
2. The fact that the government is particularly concerned with the issue of disarmament in Darfur, as was stated in the strategy, is of concern. The rebel groups see this as being specifically targeted at them and feel that, were they to agree to it, they would be forgoing the terms of previous agreements upon which the ceasefire itself was predicated.

3. In general, the rebels read the strategy as an attempt by the government to skirt around the negotiations and to eliminate foreign intervention from the management of the Darfur crisis in all cases wherein the interests of the Sudanese government appear not to be served.

In terms of the individual views of the rebel groups, the LJM, which is now the most prominent group engaged in the Doha Forum, rejected the government's new strategy because its scope falls outside the framework of the Doha Forum. It warned that this might ultimately lead to the creation of a parallel track of negotiations, and possibly even multiple tracks. It views the strategy as a pre-emptive attempt to empty the refugee camps and to provide the Sudanese government with an opportunity better to prepare for the referendum on the fate of the south of Sudan.

Some LJM members believe that what the Sudanese government might have conceded to them through negotiations in Doha will now be granted, instead, to members of the pro-government National Congress Party. Others fear that the strategy may lead to the departure of much needed mediation efforts from the scene. Furthermore, instead of mediation carrying out the function of facilitating communications between the opposition and the government, things may be shifted in such a way that the newly elected representatives (from the April poll) and civil society, on the one hand, and the Sudanese government, on the other, become the main players. This seems particularly likely since, at the moment, there are already consultations taking place between these parties in Khartoum with the aim of working together to find a solution to the Darfur crisis under the slogan of 'settlement for resolution'.

JEM (the most prominent rebel group, which is led by Khalil Ibrahim, and which walked out of the Doha Forum) views the new strategy as a ready-made recipe for a military resolution to the Darfur conflict. JEM even believes that the new strategy contains an implicit declaration of an all-out war, particularly because it aims to disarm Darfur in a bid to achieve security, but before having reached a secure resolution of the crisis. JEM states that its position has nothing to do with its current military capacity, even though it has recently been weakened after it lost its refuge in Chad. JEM's followers are comprised mostly of members of the Zaghawa tribe, which, despite its small size, is rather influential.

The Sudan Liberation Movement (SLM), led by Abdel Wahed Mohamed el-Nur, is moving in the same direction as the other rebel groups. Initially, the SLM refused to participate in the Doha Forum due to some reservations, the most important being the issue of securing the refugees by calling for the disarmament of the Janjaweed armed groups. The SLM is the most popular of the armed rebel groups in Darfur's refugee camps because its followers are primarily from the Fur, Darfur's most populous tribe.

This is an overview of how the positions of the major rebel groups in the Darfur crisis converge in their rejection of the government's strategy. Ultimately, the government envisions the resolution of the crisis as being in the ignoring of such groups. The negotiations and dialogue contained in the strategy are a disguised attempt by the government to conduct negotiations with itself through a body made up of its own recently elected supporters.

There is an exceptional case among the rebel groups that must be noted. This exception is found in the SLM faction headed by Mini Arkoi Minawi. This faction offered some criticisms of the government's strategy that may be regarded as positive when compared to the criticisms by the other rebel groups. The Minawi faction also entered into the Abuja Peace Agreement of May 2006 with the Sudanese government. That agreement

resulted in the accession of the faction's leader to the office of Secretary General of the government of Sudan. The main objection of this faction to the strategy is that it is not based on the Abuja agreement, and that the elected representatives it calls for will be drawn not only from Darfur but from among non-Darfuris as well. This is in addition to its rejection of various details which are also rejected by other rebel groups. It is worth mentioning in this context that the Mini Arkoi Minawi faction did not participate in the recent election. It neither turned itself into a political party nor did it timeously meet the requirements for electoral participation.

Second development: The Libyan initiative

Libya, at the end of last month, hosted a conference which aimed to unify the various Darfur rebel groups into a single broad front which could then claim to represent all Darfuris. The October conference was to be the first round of talks that was to bring the united rebel front and the Sudanese government together in an effort 'to examine the government's strategy for Darfur, and to develop a successful resolution to the crisis in the region'. Held in Sirte, the meeting played host to African Union and United Nations representatives who hoped it might be the beginning of a process leading to a resolution of the Darfur crisis.

According to pre-conference documents, the conference would form an alliance that would be 'an umbrella of all the rebel forces in the marginalized areas of Sudan'. Its duties would be to:

1. Reach a comprehensive and just resolution through negotiations.
2. Strengthen the organisational and political structures of the alliance with the objective of rallying together and becoming a national political party after reaching a peaceful settlement.
3. To create executive, legislative and judicial references, detailed by-laws, and regulations that meticulously outline the different specialisations of each member of the alliance in every relevant domain. Such laws should 'also identify means to prevent groups or factions from breaking from the alliance to monopolise the process of decision-making in relation to issuing opinions, stating their own positions, forming relationships or reaching resolutions with other parties.'

The process, however, did not go according to plan. A number of rebel groups decided, in the weeks before the conference opened, to boycott it. And, on the eve of the conference, JEM also pulled out, claiming the Sudanese government was bombing rebel positions and was not serious about negotiations. Finally, the three main rebel groups – JEM, JLM and SLM – stayed away, and as few as twenty rebels (representing minor groups) pitched.

Concerns

Before the conference, some participants in the Doha Forum were concerned that JEM might effectively exercise a greater influence on the formulation of the Libyan initiative than the other groups. Other observers voiced concerns that the Libyan initiative might result in the establishment of a new and separate track of negotiations detrimental to collective agreements already achieved at the Doha Forum. This was a concern especially because the unification of rebel groups was seen as a development that could interfere with at least a portion of the ongoing negotiations in Doha.

There were also concerns about Libya's keenness to be involved in the Darfur issue. The reasons for such Libyan attentiveness towards the situation in Darfur have to do with Darfur's geographical adjacency to Libya and the overlapping and intermingling of the two populations. As Tripoli perceives the situation, Libyan national security is tied to stability in Darfur. Libya absolutely does not want to be excluded from any solution to this crisis. Furthermore, Libya has invested considerable political capital in Darfur through its numerous previous attempts to bring the positions of Sudan and Chad closer, as evidenced by its hosting of many attempts at reconciliation between the leaders of the two countries. Cases in point include the Sirte Summit of October 2004, the Tripoli Summit of May 2006, the second Sirte Summit of April 2007, as well as countless minor meetings and conferences. Of relevance is the fact that Tripoli has become largely convinced – especially in the wake of its dispute with Chad regarding the Aouzou Strip – of the importance of strengthening its role in the region and not allowing the position of leadership to be taken up by other regional players.

It must be emphasised that the 'principles and objectives' that had been suggested as those around which the different Darfuri factions would meet at the Tripoli conference did not substantially deviate from those established under agreements and negotiations reached in Doha. They touch upon the territorial integrity of Darfur and the sharing of power and wealth. They also raise such issues as privation, marginalisation, and the resettlement of refugees, as well as development and the achievement of justice and reconciliation.

Third development: The possibility of southern secession and the Ugandan role

Some news reports from Sudan revealed that in August 2009, at a mediation conducted by the Sudanese Peoples' Liberation Movement (SPLM), a delegation succeeded in holding a meeting between JEM and Ugandan president Yoweri Museveni in Kampala. The delegation asked Museveni to permit the establishment of a JEM military base in Uganda, and to provide arms and training as well as reliable political and logistical support. The reports asserted that Museveni agreed to these requests.

JEM, however, has denied the existence of any such agreement. Nevertheless, there is an apparent recognition by all concerned parties that Uganda's role is bound further to expand due to its regional efforts to exert power, including but not limited to Kampala's aspirations in southern Sudan. Such matters inevitably lead Uganda increasingly to intervene in Darfur as it is transformed into one of the main actors in this crisis.

Uganda is the only major regional actor openly to announce its support for the secession of southern Sudan. The territories in question share a border with Uganda, and the possibility of an independent southern Sudan represents a strategic opportunity for Kampala. The total area of Uganda is two hundred and forty one thousand square kilometres, which is roughly equal to one-third of the proposed independent southern Sudan (which, according to some projections, will be seven hundred thousand square kilometres). The number of inhabitants of the proposed southern Sudan is about eight million, equal to nearly a quarter of Uganda's population of thirty two and half million. Southern Sudan is the main importer of Ugandan exports as well as a major destination of Ugandan expatriates.

From a strategic perspective, Uganda wants southern Sudan to serve as a buffer zone between it and Sudan. Uganda is also concerned that the Sudanese government might again support the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA). This is amid reports that the LRA has

relocated to Darfur, that it enjoys the support of the Sudanese government, and that the LRA is even involved in military action against the Darfur rebels.

Path of the Doha Forum: re-reading the priorities

The Doha Forum is still of interest to the government of Sudan, the rebels, and the regional and international powers which have a stake in Darfur's future. They are all in need of what it offers. This despite the fact that Qatar is not party to the crisis, is geographically outside the region of conflict, has no political ambitions in the conflict, and is working under the Arab League. Additionally, Qatar will bear a substantial financial burden to cover the greater part of the costs incurred as a result of any resolutions in the event that an agreement is reached. Thus far, Doha has proven to be the most promising and most effective forum for resolving the Darfur crisis, in spite of the numerous and ongoing developments, and the opposition of certain parties.

Despite all the efforts being made in Doha, the Libyan initiative and the new strategy of the Sudanese government seem to be increasing the possibility of a hostile separation of southern Sudan from the north. There are, additionally, fears relating to the increasing role of Uganda and its support for the separatist movement, as well as the complications that might arise due to the presence of the LRA in Sudan. Such challenges require a reappraisal by the Doha Forum of the regional political scene, and they require an extraordinary diplomatic effort in order to align the priorities of the Sudanese and Libyan initiatives to the new inputs brought about by the ongoing developments. Another important priority is to prevent the Ugandan role from escalating the crisis.

All such ambitions demand attention to a number of tasks.

1. Of primary importance is the establishment of a close channel of communication between the Doha Forum and the Libyan government in order to ensure that the Sirte conference and the process that might emerge from it do not thwart the interests of the negotiation objectives of the Doha Forum, and integrates smoothly with Doha's efforts. Focus should also be given to unifying the rebel front, and ensuring that it does not splinter into a separate track from the Doha Forum. From the beginning, the coordinators of the Doha talks, the Darfuris, and all other involved parties (including the armed rebels) have agreed on the primacy of the following objectives: the unification of the Darfur armed rebels as a single front with shared demands, and the creation of unified mechanisms to represent the rebels' negotiating body in talks with the negotiating team of the Sudanese government. The achievement of these objectives requires, on the one hand, readjusting the Libyan role in a manner that reassures the Sudanese government, and, on the other hand, providing Libya with an opportunity to participate in the process of creating a solution in Darfur to an extent that offers Tripoli the reassurance it needs. This process should take account of the fact that there is a direct relationship between instability in Darfur and the possible destabilisation of Libya's national security.

Libya is thus qualified to play a mediating role in the Doha Forum – because the talks serve to further Libya's self interest, and to communicate with the Darfuri rebels, encouraging all parties to join the platform presented in Doha, particularly since an agreement with some rebel groups to the exclusion of others would discourage the Sudanese government from signing a comprehensive agreement. The emergence of an alliance to negotiate anew may result in distractions from serious efforts, including the forging of agreements on a comprehensive solution and its possible implementation, and the movements may fail to agree on a single platform without the consent of their host countries.

2. Second, as the sponsor of the Doha Forum, Qatar should urge the Sudanese government to affirm its seriousness of purpose as it attempts to fulfil its obligations under the Doha Forum, and to emphasise that its new strategy converges with the Doha negotiations and is not an attempt to create a parallel negotiation track. Doha should urge Khartoum not to take any unilateral actions, and not to implement any matters which are on the negotiation table without first reaching an agreement with the rebels. If this approach is not followed, it could be detrimental to the peace negotiations and might result in their termination.

The Sudanese government should put its new strategy forward to the Darfur rebel groups, for they are as relevant to the Darfur crisis as any other party, and possibly even more so. This is especially the case due to the ongoing nature of the negotiations and the fact that there is a signed framework accord between the affected parties, and since, inevitably, all the points in the strategy that they may object to are likely to find their way onto the negotiation table anyway. As for such points as go beyond what has been discussed in Doha, the Sudanese government can surely do whatever it deems appropriate to achieve development and reconciliation in Darfur.

3. Third, Uganda's fears regarding the presence of the LRA in Darfur must be allayed through Sudanese diplomatic efforts. Many parties could be involved in these talks, particularly the Qatari peace broker, considering its pre-existing involvement in the attempt to reach a resolution of the crisis. If Uganda's fears are not ameliorated in some way, one cannot dismiss the possibility that it will intervene actively in the crisis. Were this to happen, the number of parties involved in the crisis will increase by the addition of a regional power – Uganda – as well as the possible involvement of the LRA (if rumours of its presence in Darfur are true). Another possibility is Sudan's use of the LRA in a cold war against Kampala. That could happen were the two countries to experience escalating mutual aggravation. This scenario will likely be played out if the separatist movement in southern Sudan takes on a hostile form. In this case, southern Sudan will likely serve as a host to the Darfuri armed militias, thus providing Uganda with the opportunity directly to sponsor Darfuri armed rebels, and potentially turn Darfur into a more fierce battlefield.
4. Lastly, the leadership of the Doha Forum should embark on new diplomatic efforts to reinvigorate the Darfur peace negotiations, especially since the time factor and the approaching due dates for financial obligations are working against that leadership. Another unhelpful factor here is the latest announcement by the Sudanese government that the deadline for reaching an agreement with the rebels will be the end of this year. Sudanese representation in the Doha talks has been continually decreasing. Furthermore, world attention seems to be drifting away from the Darfur crisis due to the attention given to the Sudanese referendum which will decide the fate of southern Sudan.