

Rebel groups stall Sudan peace talks on Darfur security

The U.N. calls the conflict, which has claimed 70,000 lives since March, a 'humanitarian crisis'

BY DANIEL BALINT-KURTI
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

ABUJA, Nigeria — A new round of peace talks on the crisis in Sudan's Darfur region stalled Tuesday when rebels refused face-to-face talks with the government until African Union mediators meet separately with both sides to draft an agenda.

The latest African Union-brokered talks between the government and two main rebel groups began Monday with each side accusing the other of violating a cease-fire repeatedly over the last several days. The second day of talks in Nigeria's capital, Abuja ended early and would resume Wednesday, delegates said.

Sudan Liberation Army spokesman Mahgoub Hussain said his rebel group would only hold face-to-face discussions with the government if they could agree on an agenda first and he insisted the African Union meet separately with each side.

"It's the same problem ... we need to know the agenda," Hussain said.

On Monday, planned talks on key security issues, including disarmament of rebels and pro-government militias, stalled for similar reasons.

Rebels are demanding an agreement on security issues before signing an already drafted humanitarian accord aimed at giving aid workers broader access to hundreds of thousands of refugees.

A key sticking point in reaching a deal on security is a government demand that the insurgents disarm. The two rebel groups at the talks, the Sudan Liberation Army and the smaller Justice and Equality Movement, insist the pro-government militias known as Janjaweed must first be reined in and disarmed.

Before talks ended Tuesday, Sudanese government spokesman Ibrahim Mohammed Ibrahim said the government would propose giving different areas in Darfur more autonomy under a federal system that could include a parliament for

every region there.

"We see the solution to the political issue as lying in ... the federal solution in Darfur," he said.

The previous round of peace talks in Nigeria ended in a deadlock in September over the same security and aid issues.

The U.N. Security Council has warned it would consider sanctions if the Sudanese government fails to disarm all militia and restore peace. The Security Council is to meet in Nairobi, Kenya, Nov. 18-20 to discuss the crisis, Jan Pronk, the top U.N. envoy for Sudan, said Monday.

The United Nations has called Darfur the world's worst humanitarian crisis and said it has claimed 70,000 lives since March, while 1.5 million have fled their homes since February 2003.

The crisis in Sudan's western region began when African rebels rose up against the Arab-dominated government, claiming discrimination in the distribution of scarce resources in the large, arid region. Major bloodshed erupted when the Janjaweed reacted by unleashing attacks on Darfur villages.

The U.N. World Food Program said Tuesday that almost 25 percent of children under five years of age in Darfur are malnourished and more help will be needed because the harvest is expected to fail.

The Justice and Equality Movement has accused the government of violating an April cease-fire by bombing towns and villages around the eastern Darfur town of Allaiat, a key base of the group. The bombings displaced about 7,000 people and cast doubt over the likely success of the talks, the rebel group said. It could give no details on casualties.

Sudanese officials said government forces were simply defending their own positions from rebel attack — not targeting civilians or insurgents.

The attack started last week and ended on Monday, after an AU cease-fire commission visited the area, the two sides said.

400 tons of high explosives missing from Iraq military base

The U.N.'s report to the Security Council questions America's security efforts after the 2003 Baghdad invasion

BY KIMBERLY HEFLING
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

The first U.S. military unit to reach the Al-Qaqaa military installation after the fall of Baghdad did not have orders to search for the nearly 400 tons of explosives that are missing from the site, the unit spokesman said Tuesday.

When troops from the 101st Airborne Division's 2nd Brigade arrived at the Al-Qaqaa base a day or so after coalition troops seized Baghdad on April 9, 2003, there were already looters throughout the facility, Lt. Col. Fred Wellman, deputy public affairs officer for the unit, told The Associated Press.

The soldiers "secured the area they were in and looked in a limited amount of bunkers to ensure chemical weapons were not present in their area," Wellman wrote in an e-mail message. "Bombs were found but not chemical weapons in that immediate area."

"Orders were not given from higher to search or to secure the facility or to search for HE type munitions, as they (high-explosive weapons) were everywhere in Iraq," he wrote.

His remarks appeared to confirm the observations of an NBC reporter embedded with the army unit who said Tuesday that she saw no signs that the Americans searched for the powerful explosives during their 24 hours at the facility en route to Baghdad, 30 miles to the north.

Their comments came two weeks after Iraq's Ministry of Science and Technology told the International Atomic Energy Agency that the explosives had vanished from the former military installation as a result of "theft and looting ... due to lack of security." The letter said the explosives were stolen sometime after coalition forces took control of Baghdad on April 9, 2003.

The disappearance, which the U.N. nuclear agency reported to the Security Council on Monday, has raised questions about why the United States didn't do more to secure the facility and failed to allow full international inspections to resume after the March 2003 invasion.

Kerry campaign sees 'tragic series of blunders'

On Tuesday, Russia, citing the disappearance of the explosives, called

on the U.N. Security Council to discuss the return of U.N. weapons inspectors to Iraq. But the United States said American inspectors were investigating the loss and that there was no need for U.N. experts to return.

The missing explosives have become a major issue in the final week of the presidential campaign, with Vice President Dick Cheney questioning on Tuesday whether the explosives were still at the facility when U.S. troops arrived, and the Kerry campaign calling the disappearance the latest in a "tragic series of blunders" by the Bush administration.

As the missing explosives became a heated campaign issue, NBC News quoted Army officials on condition of anonymity Tuesday night that troops from the Army's 3rd Infantry Division arrived at Al-Qaqaa on April 4, finding "looters everywhere" carrying what they could on their backs. The troops searched bunkers and found conventional weapons but no high explosives, NBC quoted the officials as saying.

The network said that with more than 1,000 buildings, the complex was so large that it was not clear the troops even saw the bunkers that might have held the explosives.

Earlier Tuesday, NBC News reporter Lai Ling Jew, who accompanied the 101st Airborne, said the unit seized Al-Qaqaa on April 10 — a day after Baghdad fell — and remained there for 24 hours before joining the 3rd Infantry Division in the capital.

"We still had Iraqi troops in Baghdad we were trying to combat," said Wellman, the 101st Airborne spokesman. "Our mission was securing Baghdad at that point."

The NBC correspondent told MSNBC that "there wasn't a search."

"The mission that the brigade had was to get to Baghdad," she said. "As far as we could tell, there was no move to secure the weapons, nothing to keep looters away."

She said there was no talk among the 101st of securing the area after they left. The roads were cut off "so it would have been very difficult, I believe, for the looters to get there," she said.

Pentagon searched but found no weapons

Pentagon spokesman Bryan

Whitman said Monday that coalition forces were present in the vicinity of the site both during and after major combat operations, which ended on May 1, 2003. He said they searched the facility but found none of the explosives in question.

"The forces searched 32 bunkers and 87 other buildings at the facility," Whitman said.

It was unclear whether the search to which Whitman was referring was conducted by a military unit other than the 101st Airborne Division's 2nd Brigade.

Wellman, the army unit's spokesman, said the facility was in the 101st's sector at that time but that he does not know if any troops were left at the grounds of the facility once the combat troops from the 2nd Brigade left.

Lt. Gen. William Boykin, the Pentagon's deputy undersecretary of defense for intelligence, said that on May 27, 2003, a U.S. military team specifically looking for weapons went to the site but did not find anything with IAEA stickers on it.

The Pentagon would not say whether it had informed the IAEA that the conventional explosives were not where they were supposed to be. Boykin said that the Pentagon was investigating whether the information was handed on to anyone else at the time.

The explosives had been housed in storage bunkers at the facility. U.N. nuclear inspectors placed fresh seals over the bunker doors in January 2003. The inspectors visited Al-Qaqaa for the last time on March 15, 2003 and reported that the seals were not broken; therefore, the weapons were still there at the time. The team then pulled out of the country in advance of the invasion later that month.

The Al-Qaqaa explosives included HMX and RDX, key components in plastic explosives, which insurgents in Iraq have used in repeated bomb attacks on U.S.-led multinational forces and Iraqi police and national guardsmen. But HMX is also a "dual use" substance powerful enough to ignite the fissile material in an atomic bomb and set off a nuclear chain reaction.

Both HMX and RDX are key components in plastic explosives such as C-4 and Semtex, which are so powerful that Libyan terrorists needed just a pound to blow up Pan Am Flight 103 over Lockerbie, Scotland, in 1988, killing 270 people.

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