

African Union extends Darfur peace push

ADDIS ABABA, Ethiopia (AP) - The African Union decided Friday to extend its peacekeeping mission in Sudan's Darfur region for six months to give itself time to negotiate a peace agreement, but it promised to transfer control to the United Nations once that is accomplished.

The compromise will disappoint Western leaders who wanted the U.N. to take over and reinforce the beleaguered African Union force as soon as possible.

However Sudanese officials also lost their bid to keep the U.N. from ever assuming control of the mission.

At least 180,000 people have died — some estimates are far higher — and some 2

million have been displaced since the start of a 2003 revolt by rebels from Darfur's ethnic African population.

The Arab-dominated Sudanese government is alleged to have responded to the revolt by unleashing Arab militias, who carried out sweeping atrocities against ethnic African villagers.

Speaking on behalf of the AU's Peace and Security Council, Ethiopian Minister of Foreign Affairs Seyoum Mesfin called on all sides in the Darfur conflict to reach a peace agreement by April 30. The AU is mediating peace talks in Abuja, Nigeria, which have stalled in recent months because of a power struggle within the Darfur rebel movement.

The 7,000-member AU force has faced severe funding and logistical problems, and its mandate was to have expired at the end of March. Mesfin said the bloc could hand over the peacekeeping mission to the United Nations after the next mandate expires on Sept. 30.

Details will be worked out at the next Peace and Security Council meeting, Mesfin said, but the AU will continue to play "a vital and important role in the peace process in Darfur."

The AU also will continue to work on bringing greater security to Darfur and address the current dispute between Sudan and Chad, which borders the Darfur region.

U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan said he was pleased with the AU decision and said he hoped that the peacekeeping force there

would be strengthened before the United Nations takes over.

"It is urgent that we find ways if possible of strengthening them as we build up to an expanded force and a transition to the United Nations," Annan said.

Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, speaking to reporters on her plane while in San Juan, said she had discussed the issue with U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan.

"We have to recognize it's going to take a little while to get a U.N. mission together, but we're going to continue to press for a U.N. mission because the AU mission, I think, is not sustainable over the long run," she said.

Tens of thousands of Sudanese marched through Khartoum on Wednesday to protest the proposed U.N. takeover, and Sudan's gov-

ernment maintains that Africans should handle the problem without outside intervention.

Sudanese Foreign Ministry spokesman Jamal Mohamed Ibrahim told state television that the agreement to extend the AU force's mandate was a success for the government's position.

"We have achieved a great success by preserving the status of the African role in Darfur, and that the solution to the question will come within the African context," he said.

Ibrahim said the government was committed to efforts to reach a peace deal within the new timeframe. "We really hope and want to see a peace deal before the end of April, God willing," he said.

Sudanese Minister for Foreign Affairs Lam Akol said his government would

support the transition to the United Nations after a peace deal has been reached with all the Darfur rebel groups.

But in earlier prepared remarks to the council, he argued against any handover, saying Africans should solve their own problems.

"Sending any foreign and non-African forces to Darfur would encourage the rebel movements to adopt more intransigent positions in the Abuja peace talks," he added. Other Sudanese officials, who have been lobbying African governments hard, have argued the violence would only escalate if U.N. peacekeepers move in.

Taye Zerihon, the deputy U.N. representative to the AU, said the United Nations may need up to nine months to prepare a mission to Darfur, and he will advise Annan to begin contingency planning.

Zimbabwe inflation hits all-time record

HARARE, Zimbabwe (AP) - Yearly inflation soared to an all-time high of 782 percent in Zimbabwe, the former breadbasket of southern Africa whose economy collapsed from years of drought and the government-backed seizure of thousands of White-owned commercial farms.

Prices rose 27.5 percent during the month of February alone, and the average family of five needed about \$90 just to meet basic food needs, far above average earnings, state radio said Saturday.

Trade unions say those still formally employed — about 20 percent of the work force — earn about \$55 a month. Workers on formerly White-owned commercial farms, by contrast, earn as little as \$3 a month from their employers, many of them beneficiaries of President Robert Mugabe's "fast track" land redistribution. The value of the Zimbabwean dollar has been in a freefall since February 2000, when Mugabe ordered the seizure of 5,000 White-owned farms.

In 2001, \$1 was equal to 55 Zimbabwean dollars. In 2003, \$1 equaled 700 Zimbabwean dollars, and in 2005 \$1 equaled 15,000.

Today, \$1 is equal to 99,000 Zimbabwean dollars.

The seizure of the farms for redistribution to Black Zimbabweans, combined with years of drought, have crippled Zimbabwe's agriculture-based economy.

United Nations agencies say 25 percent of Zimbabwe's 12 million people are now dependent on international food relief, even though the country was for years a major food exporter to the region.

The nation is suffering its worst economic crisis since independence from Britain in 1980 — when \$1 equaled two Zimbabwean dollars — with acute shortages of food, gasoline, medicines and other essential imports.

The U.S. ambassador to Zimbabwe said in November that gross government mismanagement and corruption have reversed a half-century of progress in six years.

The Central Statistical Office said inflation was 782 percent for the 12 months that ended in February. Moffat Nyoni, acting director of the government-run Statistical Office, said prices of food and nonalcoholic beverages rose 824 percent during that time.

Your Horoscope Says... March 16-22

ARIES

Charm is the word of the week as you are practically oozing with the stuff!

My gracious, make sure you really want people swooning at your feet before you flash your eyes and smile at them. Focus that formidable talent of yours on winning a negotiation with a partner over a lucrative project.

Soul Affirmation: Each week is a gift of spirit.

Lucky Numbers: 6, 15, 17

TAURUS

Peace is available to you at a price in a domestic matter. This is no time to be anything less than your usual generous self. All someone really wants is your undivided attention for a little while. The price is not too high to be obliging.

Soul Affirmation: I let go and let the spirit run my life this week.

Lucky Numbers: 21, 30, 50

GEMINI

Domestic issues take center stage this week. It's a good week for fall gardening or for a trip to the local garden center to think about next spring's flower display. As you beautify your surroundings, you beautify your spirit. Write a letter to a distant friend that you haven't heard from in a while. Soul Affirmation: I let others toot my horn this week.

Lucky Numbers: 12, 51, 52

CANCER

Your energy may be low, but don't let a slow start keep you from being productive.

Kick your energy level into overdrive by making a phone call to someone who can jumpstart your battery.

Soul Affirmation: Moving slowly is often the fastest way to get there.

Lucky Numbers: 33, 43, 53

LEO

You've got all the right moves in a romantic situation. You love to love, so let your honey be the recipient of your admiration. There's a lot to be said for accepting people for who they are, rather than who you might like them to be. Appreciate the divine in everyone you meet this week. Soul Affirmation: This week is the week the Lord has made. I rejoice in it.

Lucky Numbers: 17, 25, 34

VIRGO

Things may seem a little slow, and results may look a little bit less than grand, but you are definitely on the right track. Press on in your steady, sturdy fashion. You are headed toward a dream, and it's coming true one week at a time.

Soul Affirmation: I let the outer world and inner world change places this week.

Lucky Numbers: 12, 24, 37

LIBRA

Guard against a tendency toward feeling "blah" this week. If you need to make corrections in your diet or exercise program, don't be dramatic about it. Think of it as rewarding yourself with perfect health! If your emotions seem out of kilter, then take a little time out and meditate.

Soul Affirmation: The deed is done. I must wait for the results to unfold.

Lucky Numbers: 44, 45, 51

SCORPIO

Your rich inner life is speaking volumes to you under current trends. Let that sweet interior music accompany you through this week as you reach for your highest, best self in a completely natural way.

Soul Affirmation: I search for ways to improve the way I see life.

Lucky Numbers: 8, 31, 32

SAGITTARIUS

Lots of wild ideas may occur to you this week, and you may want to act the mental daredevil. Be patient with those who are just learning or who want to do things the way they've always done them. Lead by example.

Soul Affirmation: I will be cool in the face of intense pressure.

Lucky Numbers: 8, 17, 51

CAPRICORN

A practical solution is at hand to one of your inventions. Give yourself some space to allow the answer to come to you. Any repetitive task, such as weeding the garden or washing the dishes or car, will be conducive to your receiving the solution.

Soul Affirmation: The deed is done. I must wait for the results to unfold.

Lucky Numbers: 11, 15, 32

AQUARIUS

You may feel an internal pressure towards responsibility this week. Go with the flow on this and the week will be like a gift. Let your words assist others in becoming more self-responsible. You are a good teacher of right actions.

Soul Affirmation: I love pressure as a test of how much I can master.

Lucky Numbers: 1, 23, 54

PISCES

Money may come to you from an unlikely source this week. Keep your eyes open for opportunity. Let your words paint the images of better ways of being in the world for yourself and for those under your care.

Soul Affirmation: I let the good that is for me come into my life.

Lucky Numbers: 13, 29, 38.

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