

Devolved Government in Post-Naivasha Sudan : A Key to Sustainable Peace in Darfur

Lucy Cavendish College, Cambridge, UK, 12-16 December 2004

This four-day meeting, organised by Concordis International, brought together 22 prominent members of Sudanese civil and political society mostly from Darfur, together with international experts. Participants represented the full range of Darfur's political and geographical constituencies. Nine presentations were given on the factors that have contributed to the political, economic and cultural marginalisation of Darfur, suggesting ways in which devolved government in the Sudan might address these issues. Each presentation was followed by group discussion that was vigorous, frank and informed.

Participants highlighted that the marginalisation of Darfur is not a new phenomenon and identified it as a colonial legacy. This marginalisation continued after independence in spite of the national goodwill for building an independent, united Sudan, and the participants noted that from the first military regime onwards, successive Sudanese governments have been unable to write a constitution recognising the religious and ethnic diversity of the Sudan. In addition, they acknowledged that Darfur is locked in a vicious cycle of environmental degradation and economic destitution, which also factors into the conflict. They highlighted the economic downturn caused by drought as a proximate cause of conflict.

Decentralisation of power was identified by participants as vital to achieving sustainable peace in Sudan. Although the participants viewed the Naivasha Protocols as a promising step towards sharing power, they also raised some of the agreements' failings. They felt that the agreements have not dealt with the issue of national identity or with political and religious tension. Of particular importance is the fact that the whole exercise has been between GoS and the SPLM, who do not represent the whole of the North or the whole of the South. Absent groups are expected to keep silent and bordering countries are expected to support the process. Participants agreed that a settlement needs to recognise the sovereignty of all Sudanese people if they are not to resort to armed struggle. They also noted that the Naivasha talks would need to address questions of self-determination, water supply, human rights, the role of women, culture and even a national flag. Participants also argued that as the international community has much influence in Sudan, the Security Council's endorsement of Naivasha, without addressing the numerous neglected issues, sent the wrong message.

Participants discussed the various possibilities regarding decentralising power. They discussed the recent Sudanese experience of decentralisation, and noted that it has been based on a federalism that has retained top-down devolution of responsibility, but without sufficiently devolving powers and resources. They agreed that federalism must be designed in such a way that it does not bring further fragmentation and marginalisation but rather sets out clearly devolved powers for regions on which central government cannot encroach, with a clear budget under which resources are not wasted. State governments must have powers under a constitution which is observed by the centre, and should not be subject to budgetary and financial control by the centre. They highlighted that federalism and devolution must therefore be backed up by democracy and accountability, security and the rule of law. They stressed that for genuine decentralisation democracy is necessary, and therefore claimed that the most important element is the holding of elections; there should be a genuine way in which parties can express themselves politically and not just through arms. However, they noted that unless the decentralised units are economically viable, their political and administrative rights will remain theoretical. On the matter of oil, they argued that federalism needs to function properly at a fiscal level and not just at a governance level, and so taxation revenues must be raised and distributed in a fair and wealth-sharing manner.

Overall, the participants agreed that in order to resolve the conflict in Darfur and address the long-running trend of marginalisation, good governance, transparency, participation, accountability and genuine decentralisation of power must be established, not only in Darfur but also in other regions of the Sudan.

