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HIGHLIGHTS:

AMIS-UN transition

Secretary-General's report criticises slow pace of talks in Abuja

(*AlRai AlAam* – 21st Mar. **New York**) The Security Council convenes today a special closed door session to discuss the situation in Darfur.

AU Chief Mediator to Abuja Dr. Salim Ahmed Salim is expected to brief the Security Council later today in an open session that will be held before the closed doors session.

Sources say it is hard to tell what decision the Security Council will take on the Darfur issue but pointed out that the report Secretary-General Kofi Annan will present on Darfur underlines the need to gain the support of the Sudan government to each step the UN or the Security Council decides to take on Darfur.

The report, the sources continue, also talks of the deterioration in the security situation in Darfur and criticises the parties for the slow pace of the Abuja talks.

Bush hopes to see NATO "take the lead" in Darfur

(*ST* – 20th Mar. **Washington**) US President George W. Bush told NATO's Secretary General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer that he hoped the alliance would "take the lead" in ending violence in Sudan's troubled Darfur region.

But Scheffer, who met with Bush and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, made it clear he saw the 26-member alliance as playing more of a support role without troops on the ground in the African trouble spot.

Bush, who had previously referred only to NATO "stewardship, planning, facilitating, organizing" said he and Scheffer had discussed "a strategy that would enable NATO to take the lead in Darfur".

This would require the African Union, which heads the current 7,000-strong peacekeeping mission in Darfur, to formally ask the United Nations to take over control of the force, Bush said as he met with Scheffer in the Oval Office.

"At which point, if that's done, the NATO can move in with United States help inside of NATO to make it clear to the Sudanese government that we're intent upon providing security for the people there and intent upon helping work toward a lasting peace agreement," Bush told reporters.

Scheffer sketched out a more-limited role for NATO in Darfur, where up to 300,000 people have died over three years of fighting between government-backed militias and rebels that Washington has labelled genocide.

In a brief interview with AFP after his talks with Rice, Scheffer specified that NATO could provide logistical support, transport and training for an eventual UN peacekeeping force.

Asked about the possibility of dispatching NATO troops to Darfur, Scheffer said, "No I don't think so. I think NATO should have, as I have said many times before, the enabling role."

Scheffer appeared cool to the suggestion that NATO take the lead in Darfur. "NATO is of course very important as an enhancer, as an enabler, but not with forces on the ground," he said.

UN

UN accuses government of restricting the movement of its staff in eastern Sudan

(*AlRai AlAam* – 21st Mar. **Khartoum**) The UN says the Sudan government is to blame for the deterioration in the humanitarian situation in eastern Sudan and accused the government of obstructing the movement of UN staff there.

Manuel da Silva, the UN Humanitarian Coordinator in Sudan, said in a press conference yesterday that these obstructions have caused a large number of UN staff to leave Kassala for Khartoum and has paralysed relief work and caused much suffering. He said the UN intends to hold talks next week with the relevant parties in the government to end these difficulties.

He further pointed out that among the many difficulties facing the UN in eastern Sudan is the security situation that has caused them to cut down on their development projects in the area.

On Darfur, the Humanitarian Coordinator said that the UN could not continue to operate in Darfur because of the continued security violations. He said that the international community is tired of these violations that have made the humanitarian situation very fragile especially with the return of many refugees returning from Chad.

Da Silva expects the humanitarian situation in Darfur to worsen should the parties to the conflict not reach an agreement soon

He further pointed out that the Security Council is currently discussing how to punish the perpetrators of crimes in Darfur who have made the security situation worsen.

Da Silva also warned that the continued attacks on the UN in southern Sudan will have adverse results on returns. He blamed the LRA for the recent attacks in Yambio.

Two UN peacekeepers injured in South Sudan

(*United Nations News Service* – 21st Mar.) In the second attack on a United Nations post in southern Sudan in less than a week, two peacekeepers from Bangladesh were wounded yesterday when 100 armed men tried to confine the blue helmets to their base in order to loot other compounds in Yambio near the border with the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC).

The two wounded men, part of a UN force supporting a peace agreement that ended a two-decade-long civil war, were hit by ricocheting bullets rather than any fired at them, and initial indications are that the attackers were seeking communications equipment, the UN Mission in Sudan (UNMIS) reported today.

Three of the gunmen were killed in the attack, which occurred just past midnight on Saturday and ended soon after local Sudanese troops reached the scene. UNMIS said security will be upgraded at the base.

Last Wednesday, a local guard was killed and a staff member and a second local guard seriously wounded when two gunmen attacked a UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) compound in Yei, forcing the suspension of the planned repatriation of some of the hundreds of thousands of Sudanese who fled the civil war.

UNMIS, which is authorized to field up to 10,000 military personnel to support implementation of last year's Comprehensive Peace Agreement between the Government and southern rebels, currently has 6,300 uniformed personnel on the ground. A separate conflict in Sudan's western Darfur region was not covered by the agreement.

GoNU

Police storms into sultan court in Jebel Auliya

(*AlAyaam* – 21st Mar. **Khartoum**) Police in Jebel Auliya municipality stormed into a sultan's court and arrested two people who are to face charges of running the illegal court.

Four people detained in the cells were released following the police raid.

A source in the police said that the police will continue to carry out the crackdown on illegal courts around the capital.

It is worth mentioning that these courts have been cited as one of the causes of insecurity in the peripheries and the Chief Justice has ordered them cleared.

CPA

SPLM may boycott discussions over constitution of the capital

(*AlAyaam* – 21st Mar. **Khartoum**) The head of the SPLM parliamentary bloc at the Khartoum Legislative Assembly says the SPLM has reached the conviction that the draft Constitution for Khartoum State presented by the head of the legislature is not an appropriate basis for discussions over the said constitution.

Following a second meeting reviewing the constitution, Paul Deng said that the draft constitution carries clauses copied letter for letter from the Sudan Constitution of 1998.

He said the draft should be based on the 2005 Interim Constitution and the Constitution of the GoSS on the grounds that Khartoum is the national capital and should reflect the cultural, ethnic and religious diversity.

He pointed out that the draft presented carries some religious undertones and infringe on the fundamental freedom of the resident of Khartoum.

He said the SPLM bloc will decide tomorrow whether or not to continue participating in these sessions.

Sources reveal that the draft constitution in question was drafted last year by a committee led by Governor el-Muta'afi of Khartoum State but met much criticism on the grounds that a new partner had come into the political arena and had to be consulted on the issue.

SPLM denies allegations of having executed 4 PDF soldiers in Upper Nile – denial corroborated by the PDF

(*AlAyaam* – 21st Mar. **Khartoum**) SPLA Spokesperson Mjr. Gen. Bior Ajiang said yesterday that the SPLA has not executed four PDF soldiers as reported in the press recently.

He pointed out that executions happen after a trial and no PDF soldier has been tried by the SPLA as the SPLA has no jurisdiction to do that.

In answer to a question on disarmament of the Popular Defence Forces, the SPLA spokesperson said the SPLA can not disarm the PDF which is an inseparable part of the SAF and does not fall under SPLA control or command.

The SPLA spokesperson said there may be something else behind these rumours.

On the other hand, the Coordinator-General of the Popular Defence Forces says no PDF soldier has been executed at the hands of the SPLA for refusing to hand over arms. He said that there also have been no clashes between the SPLA and the PDF in Upper Nile.

The PDF Coordinator-General confirmed commitments to the disarmament process within the framework of the mechanisms set forth by the CPA.

The Northern Sudan DDR Commission had recently issued a statement accusing the SPLA of executing PDF soldiers in Aweil and northern Bahr-el-Ghazal.

Returnees to southern Sudan crowd up in Kosti

(*AlSahafa* – 21st Mar. **Khartoum**) Returnees to southern Sudan are facing harsh humanitarian conditions in Kosti as they wait for the river barge back home.

The increasing number of returnees and the harsh conditions at the port in Kosti has caused authorities to suspend barge transport upstream until appropriate measures are found to address the humanitarian conditions.

Sources say authorities in White Nile State held a heated discussion yesterday with the director for river transport and the meeting culminated in agreement that the terminal point be shifted to Renk, across the Nile from Kosti, to ease the congestion in Kosti.

On the other hand, UN Humanitarian Coordinator da Silva said in a press conference yesterday that the UN finds it difficult to assist these voluntary returns as they are not informed of such returns.

Darfur/ Abuja talks/Chad

Sudan pledges peace in Darfur, renews opposition to UN force

(*AFP/ST* – 20th Mar. **Nairobi**) Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir on Monday said he was determined to clinch lasting peace in Darfur and renewed his rejection of foreign intervention in the war-torn western region.

A day after UN Secretary General Kofi Annan urged Khartoum to cooperate in the handover of peacekeeping duties as security deteriorates in Darfur region, Bashir said African forces were well placed to restore stability there.

"We reiterate our determination and keenness to achieve a lasting and comprehensive peace in Darfur through direct negotiations with the rebels to stop the bloodshed and killing of women, children and elderly people," Bashir told a summit of the east African, seven-nation Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD).

Bashir said Khartoum was ready to assist African Union forces operating in Darfur, where clashes between government-backed militia and rebels from minority tribes has claimed some hundreds of thousands of lives and displaced millions others.

Early this month, the AU agreed in principle to hand over its cash-strapped peacekeeping mission in Darfur to the United Nations, despite spirited resistance from Khartoum, which argued that the deployment would worsen the situation.

"The success of an African Union mission is a success for Africa and testimony of their ability to achieve peace and stability in the region without foreign intervention.

"It is out of this conviction that the Sudan has declared its commitment to support the AU forces and its clear rejection to any form of foreign intervention in the country. We have witnessed and experienced what happened in Iraq and Afghanistan and lessons learnt that shouldn't be repeated in the African continent," he said.

Minnawi seeks audience with el-Mirghani, el-Mahdi, el-Turabi and Nugud

(*AlRai AlAam* – 21st Mar. **Khartoum, Abuja**) The SLM has embarked in preparations for a rare meeting between Minnawi and the leaders of the key opposition parties – the Umma, the Popular Congress, the Communist Party of the Sudan and the DUP.

According to Minnawi, this is in a bid to launch a broad-based national political bloc against the National Congress party.

Minnawi did not elaborate but said the effort is a follow up on an earlier effort for such coordination which was welcomed in principle by those parties. No date or venue has been set for the discussions.

Tribal reconciliation conference kicks off in Sheiriya

(*AlSahafa* – 21st Mar. **Khartoum**) Efforts by the Government of South Darfur state at a tribal reconciliation in thee Sheiriya area hit a snag yesterday when the Zaghawa failed to participate and the Birgid and Misseriya demanded that the government first honour its pledges made in earlier reconciliation conference.

The Birgid also demanded that the rebels should first get out of the Sheiriya municipality as a precondition for them to sit in talks with the Zaghawa.

On its part, the UN envoy in South Darfur, Theresa Denis, underlined the need for government to meet those pledges.

Chad says 100 military coup plot suspects arrested

(Reuters/ST – 20th Mar. N'Djamena) Chad's government has arrested 100 military officers and soldiers implicated in a failed assassination plot against President Idriss Deby last week, the security minister said on Monday.

Routouang Yoma Golom also ruled out peace negotiations with Chadian rebels and army deserters who are threatening to launch an offensive from the east of the landlocked oil producer to try to topple Deby as he prepares for a May 3 presidential election.

The Chadian leader, whose 16-year rule has been weakened by a spate of high-level military desertions in recent months, rushed home from an African summit a week ago to foil what officials said was a plot to shoot down his plane.

"There are around 100 members of the military implicated in this coup who have been arrested. They will be brought to trial," Golom told reporters, without identifying the suspects or explaining their involvement in the plot.

He added a military court would sentence them over the next one or two months.

Deby, himself a former army commander who seized power in a 1990 revolt he led from eastern Chad, reshuffled his military top brass and replaced his personal guard late last year as security fears increased.

He has repeatedly accused neighbour Sudan of backing efforts to overthrow him, a charge denied by Khartoum. Conflict in Sudan's western Darfur region has also spilled over into Chad.

Golom said that since the government announced the failed coup plot last week, Deby had been visiting military barracks to ensure the loyalty of his troops.

"The situation is totally under control and calm has returned. The head of state has personally gone several times to military camps to restore order," the minister said.

Since last September, several waves of Chadian military officers have deserted with soldiers and equipment to join anti-Deby rebels in the east. At least one rebel group has given the president a public ultimatum to either start negotiations on democratic change or face overthrow.

"Negotiating with coup plotters is out of the question," Golom said.

"If there's someone who you've forgiven two, three times already and he wants to kill you, you're not going to carry on forgiving him. I don't see any opportunity for negotiations."

Last week's announcement of a coup plot came weeks before a presidential election which is widely expected to extend the rule of 53-year-old Deby.

Golom insisted there had been a plan to kill Deby, rejecting charges by one rebel leader that this had just been an invention by the government to cover up another embarrassing wave of high-level military desertions.

The minister said the arrested plotters "had coordinated with those who are rebelling (against Deby) from inside Sudan to allow them into Chadian territory".

"The plan was to strike in N'Djamena and when N'Djamena falls, the way is open and there'll be less resistance for them to penetrate into Chad and reach N'Djamena," he added.

Analysts fear the threat posed to Deby by the rebels, who appear to be able to operate from Darfur, risked increasing the conflict already spilling over from that Sudanese territory, where ethnic and political violence has killed thousands.

Those deserting Deby have included members of his own Zaghawa ethnic group, some of whom blame him for not doing enough to help fellow Zaghawa kinsmen in Darfur who have been attacked by Sudanese government-backed Arab militias.

Southern Sudan/GoSS

GoSS in talks with the Congolese government over the LRA

(*AlRai AlAam* – 21st Mar. **Khartoum**) The SPLA has recommended that the GoSS enter into talks with the government of the Democratic Republic of the Congo to cooperate in addressing the LRA issue.

SPLA spokesperson Bior Ajiang said that the SPLA has recommended that the GoSS request the Congo government to allow the SPLA to pursue the LRA into the border regions in DRC territory.

Eastern Sudan

SPLA to remain in Hamesh Khoreib until logistics are availed for redeployment

(*AlSahafa* – 21st Mar. **Khartoum**) Sources corroborate that the SPLA and the SAF are in perfect agreement that the SPLA remain in Hamesh Khoreib until the necessary logistics and facilities required to move their equipment from there are availed.

The SPLA redeployment was yesterday postponed for the third time.

Meanwhile inside Hamesh Khoreib, sheikh Ibrahim Bitai reports that the situation is stable and that all SPLA forces are still in their positions inside the town while the SAF remains outside the town.