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Empty Seats Add to Worry on Eve of Darfur Talks

By [JEFFREY GETTLEMAN](#)

SIRTE, Libya, Oct. 26 — On the eve of the much anticipated peace talks for [Darfur](#), [United Nations](#) and [African Union](#) officials on Friday expressed disappointment that several rebel leaders had not showed up, but they said the talks had to begin anyway.

“Time is on nobody’s side,” said Jan Eliasson, the United Nations’ envoy for Darfur, at a news conference in Sirte, where the talks were to begin Saturday. “We have seen a deterioration on the ground. We have seen frustration and anger in the camps, which is now exploding. We have seen the growing tensions within the government and rebel groups, and now we have to end this vicious circle.”

About 15 men representing half a dozen of Darfur’s rebel factions arrived in Sirte by Friday evening and began to circulate among the meeting halls. Their first order of business, they said, was agreeing to a cease-fire, something United Nations officials said was crucial for these peace talks to work and something the Sudanese government had implied it was willing to consider.

But major rebel figures, including Abdel Wahid el-Nur, a founding father of the rebellion, and Khalil Ibrahim, the commander of one of the strongest rebel armies, had indicated that they would not be coming — at least for now — because they did not trust the Sudanese government. That could mean that any deal reached here in Libya might not translate into meaningful change in Darfur, because thousands of rebel fighters would not feel bound by it.

The United Nations and African Union have billed this peace conference as a make-or-break moment for Darfur, the desiccated region of western Sudan that has been consumed by bloodshed and turmoil since 2003. United Nations officials estimate that at least 200,000 people have died and more than two million driven from their homes.

But the talks to end the violence seemed to be stumbling before they began, not just because of the lackluster rebel showing. The Sudanese government has recently stepped up attacks in Darfur, and former rebels in southern Sudan accuse Sudan’s leaders of torpedoing a major peace deal signed in 2005, which is supposedly a model for Darfur.

Another issue is the Qaddafi factor. Libya’s leader, Col. [Muammar el-Qaddafi](#), is playing host to the talks, hoping to build himself a role as a peacemaker in Africa. But some Darfurian rebels do not like him because they say he has a long history of siding with nomadic tribes in Darfur, and most of Darfur’s rebels are not nomads. Last week, Colonel Qaddafi made a cryptic comment in a video conference to students, likening the conflict to a dispute over a camel.

The combined effect has cast such an air of pessimism that conference organizers felt it necessary to downgrade

expectations immediately.

“We are not naïve to believe that once this process has begun it will be rosy,” said Salim Ahmed Salim, the chief African Union negotiator, at the news conference on Friday. But, he added, “We have to do everything humanly possible to facilitate this process.”

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