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Sudanese civil society say there is no shortcut to national dialogue

We welcome calls for a national dialogue in Sudan, but we are deeply concerned as active civil society organisations that current plans for dialogue fall short of the minimum required. A common approach to addressing grievances across our country is desperately needed. A de facto one party system has confiscated democratic freedoms and sought to silence dissenting voices even from within its own ranks. Piecemeal approaches to peace have failed, with the Darfur conflict now in its eleventh year and fighting in South Kordofan and Blue Nile continuing unabated.

Full enjoyment of fundamental rights such as freedom of expression, association and assembly, along with a cessation of hostilities and humanitarian access are required before any meaningful dialogue can start.

The situation in Darfur is as bad as it has ever been. Over the last few weeks, government supported militias, widespread inter-Arab tribal clashes, and rebel attacks on villages and towns including government garrison towns have spiralled out of control. Over 215,000 civilians have been forced to flee their homes and join another 350,000 civilians who have been displaced by fighting over the past year in the already overcrowded IDP camps in Darfur’s five states. Bombing of civilian areas has also resumed in Jebel Marra. Only last month, the most recent manifestation of government controlled militias, the Rapid Support Forces, was responsible for burning down at least 35 villages in South Darfur, forcing the flight of some 30,000 civilians. In North Darfur, fighters loyal to Musa Hilal, a prominent government-aligned militia leader, forced the entire 55,000 population of Saraf Omra to seek protection in the UNAMID compound.

In South Kordofan and Blue Nile states, aerial bombardment of civilians is a daily reality. February 2014 witnessed the highest number of casualties since the start of the conflict. The majority of the population are suffering as a result of sustained denial or heavily restricted access to humanitarian assistance. Humanitarian needs are not confined to SPLM-N controlled areas, but also exist in areas controlled by the government. Many civilians are now trapped following the onset of the South Sudan crisis, afraid to escape south but fearful of fleeing north where they may face severe consequences.

Security of civilians across the country should be a prerequisite for the establishment of a national political dialogue. Achieving a cessation of hostilities must be prioritized, and the deadline of 30 April set by the AU Peace and Security Council in its meeting on 10 March 2014 must be met. However, providing access for humanitarian assistance should not be dependent on any political process.

The Government must give take concrete steps to create a fully conducive environment. A conducive environment will be essential if the dialogue is to be effective. The lifting of the state of emergency is a necessary first step. The repeal of restrictive laws is essential, including sections of the 1991 Criminal Law, 1998 Public Order Act, 2006 Voluntary Work Act, 2010 National Security Act, 2009 Press and Publications Act. In addition, the release of political prisoners and detainees is required, as well as the halting of all forms of censorship of independent media. Finally, and these steps are the minimum, there must be a cessation of all forms of torture, arbitrary detention and other grave human rights violations.
The dialogue must be inclusive of all stakeholders and not restricted to political parties and alliances within them. The process must not be elitist, limited to like-minded political parties and lack the participation of and accountability to society at large. This will require public access to credible and independent information on the dialogue and the space to debate and reach consensus. The ultimate failure of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement was its lack of ownership by the Sudanese people. This time around, representatives of victims of Sudan’s many wars, civil society, youth, women’s groups, trades unions and intellectuals must be included, as well as political parties, and society at large. The National Congress Party (NCP), National Consensus Forces (NCF), opposition groups, and Sudan Revolutionary Front must all participate.

We believe there is no shortcut to meaningful national dialogue. Conditions and commitments need to be in place for it to be effective. It should be designed to address root causes of conflict and governance of the state – it should not be established just to prepare the ground for the limited elections in 2015.

Signed:
Africa Centre for Justice and Peace (ACJPS)
Arab Coalition for Sudan (ACS)
Blue Nile Centre for Peace and Human Rights
Darfur Bar Association
Darfur Relief and Documentation Centre
Governance Bureau, Sudan
Human Rights and Development Organisation (HUDO)
Justice Africa Sudan
Khatim Adlan Centre for Enlightenment and Human Development (KACE)
Nuba Relief and Rehabilitation Organisation (NRRDO)
Sudanese Association for the Defense of Opinion and Conscience (SADFOC)
Sudan Centre for Conflict Resolution and Development (SCCRD)
Sudan Consortium
Sudan Democracy First Group (SDFG)
Sudan Human Rights Monitor (SHRM)
Sudan Social Development Organisation UK (SUDO UK)
Sudan Solidarity Network
Zarga Rural Development Organisation (ZORD)

Interviews with a highly articulate range of spokespersons from Sudanese civil society can be arranged. Interviewees will provide perspectives to the national dialogue from the national level, and/or from the conflict areas of South Kordofan and Blue Nile and Darfur, and/or from the point of view of specific interest groups especially women.

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