

UN: Situation in Sudan's Darfur region is 'radically' better

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UNITED NATIONS (AP) - The U.N. peacekeeping chief said Monday the situation in Sudan's troubled Darfur region "has changed radically for the better" and the United Nations and the African Union are recommending new sharp cuts in their joint security force.

Jean-Pierre Lacroix told the Security Council the joint mission is finalizing a yearlong process that saw 11 joint sites close and a shift toward peacekeeping in the mountainous Jebel Marra area where intermittent clashes continue while focusing on peacebuilding in the rest of Darfur.

The Darfur conflict began in 2003 when ethnic Africans in the vast western region rebelled, accusing the Arab-dominated Sudanese government of discrimination. The government in Khartoum was accused of retaliating by arming local nomadic Arab tribes and unleashing them on civilian populations - a charge it denies. The U.N.-AU force was established in 2007 with a mandate to help protect civilians in Darfur.

In recent years, as the result of a successful government military campaign, the rebellion has been reduced to rebel Sudan Liberation Army forces loyal to founder Abdul Wahid Elnur in western Jebel Marra.

Sudan's government, stressing the reduction in fighting, has called for the Darfur peacekeeping mission, known as UNAMID, to be wrapped up. The United States has also been pushing for major cuts to U.N. peacekeeping operations.

Lacroix said a strategic review by the U.N. and the AU envisions that over the coming two years peacekeeping would focus on the most precarious areas, now Jebel Marra.

Only a year ago, UNAMID had a ceiling of 15,845 military personnel and 3,403 police. It was reduced significantly at the end of January. The strategic review recommends a further sharp reduction from the current 8,735 to 4,050 military personnel and from 2,500 to 1,870 police officers, Lacroix said.

At the same time, he said, peacebuilding efforts would focus on early recovery projects and development.

"The U.N. system should leverage the capabilities of the agencies, funds and programs best suited to tackling the problems that remain there," Lacroix said.

He said four areas have been identified to enable the Sudanese government, the U.N. country team, civil society and the international community "to carefully and responsibly prepare for the mission's envisaged exit." He said they are improving rule of law including the police; ensuring livelihoods and finding lasting solutions for hundreds of thousands of displaced Darfuris and host communities; ensuring immediate delivery of services to the displaced; and ensuring human rights.

"The situation in Darfur has changed radically for the better since the height of the conflict, and the needs of the people have changed with it," he said.

The strategic report's focus on peacekeeping in Jebel Marra and peacebuilding elsewhere provide a road map "to long-term peace and stability in Darfur," he said. But Lacroix stressed that for this to be achieved "it is essential that longer-term funding arrangements are in place."

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