

Goodwill agreement brings new hope for Darfur peace process

09:19, February 20, 2009

The Sudanese government and the country's key rebel group, the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM), signed an agreement of goodwill and confidence-building Tuesday, with a view to settle the conflict in Darfur.

The agreement, signed in Doha, Qatar, brings new hope for the stalled Darfur peace process and will also help the Sudanese government bring political and social stability to the country.

AN AGREEMENT THAT DID NOT COME BY EASILY

The hard-earned agreement was reached after eight straight days of tense negotiations, which were full of twists and turns.

At first, JEM objected to the holding of the talks in Doha, arguing that Qatar, as an Arab country, was unlikely to act as an unbiased mediator.

After finally agreeing to attend the talks in Doha, JEM leader Khalil Ibrahim then refused to fly in from Chad on a Qatari private jet that had to cross Sudanese airspace, fearing arrest if the plane had to make an emergency landing.

As a result, he arrived in Doha on Feb. 11, one day behind schedule, and missed the opening session, which he was expected to attend.

Qatar, as the host of the talks, hoped the two sides would reach a ceasefire first, but it soon dropped the plan as a ceasefire agreement involves many thorny issues such as the places of deployment and sphere of activity of the armed forces of either side.

During the negotiations, Ibrahim accused Sudanese government forces of assembling in the main areas of activity in Darfur and attempting to mount attacks on JEM. The charge was vehemently denied by the Sudanese government.

After several rounds of negotiations, the two sides finally reached a framework agreement, under which they were to release prisoners of war, strive to achieve a ceasefire and facilitate the return home for refugees and the transportation of relief supplies.

In addition, both sides showed a sincere will to achieve peace and made commitments to

continue negotiations in Doha. They also pledged to reach a peace agreement within three months of the launch of the next round of negotiations.

ONE DEAL, SEVERAL SIGNIFICANCES

Analysts said the goodwill agreement signed by the Sudanese government and JEM is "a stone that kills several birds."

First of all, the deal serves as a breakthrough in the Darfur peace process, and draws a roadmap for future negotiations.

A peace pact between the government and one of the major Sudanese rebel factions in May 2006 in Nigeria's capital Abuja failed to achieve anything -- other rebel forces declined to resume talks with the government, let alone accept the deal. The deal signed Tuesday somehow broke the deadlock.

Secondly, the deal will be helpful to bring stability back to Darfur. The JEM, the most active rebel group in the troubled Darfur region of Sudan, shocked the whole country by launching an attack on the Sudanese capital city of Khartoum in May 2008. Now that the deal has been signed, the JEM is expected to be less active.

Thirdly, under the new deal, it will be easier for the Sudanese government and international aid organizations to offer assistance to local refugees. The Darfur refugee problem is the most urgent one in the region. Military activities by the rebel forces, as well as mobbish robbery, pose great difficulties for aid work in the troubled area. Western countries also pressured the Sudanese government on the grounds of a humanitarian crisis. Therefore, it is obvious that the easing of tension in the area will be welcome news for the large number of refugees there.

Fourthly, the deal will be beneficial for the Sudanese government with regard to the case against President Omar Hassan Ahmad al-Bashir pending at the International Criminal Court (ICC). Reports said the ICC could soon issue an arrest warrant for Al-Bashir on war crime charges, in a case which has sown the seeds of turmoil in the country. According to analysts, the signing of the agreement and the planned next round of talks between the Sudanese government and the JEM will make the ICC judges think twice before issuing the warrant.

UNPREDICTABLE FUTURE

The international community has hailed the agreement signed by the Sudanese government and JEM. UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon on Tuesday called the agreement a "constructive step in the ongoing efforts to negotiate a peaceful conclusion to this long-running conflict."

Jean Ping, Chairperson of the Africa Union (AU) Commission, commended both sides Wednesday for the commitment they have shown in the search for a lasting solution to the crisis in Darfur.

The secretariat of the League of Arab States (LAS) also said that the Sudanese government and JEM have both adopted a peaceful road and positively responded to the proposal of the LAS and the AU. Countries like China, the United States and Britain also hailed the newly signed pact.

However, some factors still cast a shadow over the future of the Doha talks. Other rebel forces in the Darfur region, such as the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM), boycotted and decried the talks. Some of Sudan's neighboring countries also express discontent as the talks made them feel marginalized.

Moreover, other rebel forces in Darfur, in the absence of any persuasion from western countries influential in the region, neither joined the peace negotiations nor made any contribution to them.

Peace in Darfur cannot be realized in one day, especially considering the complexity of the conflict there. Anything achieved by the talks should be cherished. The international community, bearing in mind that the Darfur problem can be solved only through peace talks, should try hard to maintain the favorable impetus of the peace process.

"Source:Xinhua"