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A timid response: The Human Rights Council finally takes steps towards sustained attention to the human rights violations in Darfur

In a resolution characterized by glaring understatement of the severity of the human rights situation in Darfur, the Human Rights Council has finally shown signs of parting company with the shameless lies and half-truths of the government of Sudan. The resolution adopted today at the Fourth Special Session of the Council amounts to a long overdue rejection of Sudanese efforts to politicize the Council's consideration of the appalling human rights violations in Darfur.

The Council has created a high-level mission comprising five highly qualified persons, to be appointed by the President of the Council, to assess the human rights situation and report to the Council at its fourth regular session from 12 March to 6 April 2007. Amnesty International welcomes the creation of this mission, but regrets that it will not report to the Council sooner as required by the urgency of the situation in Darfur. In selecting the highly qualified persons, the President should ensure the inclusion of appropriately qualified human rights expertise, including the Special Procedures of the Council. The mission must be able to travel freely and have unfettered access to persons and documentation without restrictions imposed by the government or other parties to the conflict.

There is already clear and compelling evidence of close and active links between the Sudanese armed forces and the *Janjawid* militia in the murder, rape and pillage that have traumatized Darfur's civilian population since 2003. The organization counts on the mission to draw on this wealth of evidence in developing recommendations for measures to ensure the effective protection of the civilian population in Darfur. Amnesty International believes that the mission holds promise to provide the Human Rights Council with a sound basis to denounce the refusal of the government of Sudan to fulfil its responsibility to protect against civilians in Darfur.

The adoption of this brief text is a critical step by the Council, although belated and timid, towards giving the major human rights crisis in Darfur the sustained attention that it requires. It will provide the Human Rights Council with the basis to hold the government of Sudan accountable for the crimes committed against civilians in Darfur.

Background

The government of Sudan has asserted that the human rights situation in Darfur is improving. It is not. As recalled in Amnesty International's statement to the Special Session, the human rights situation in Darfur has not improved since the signing of the Darfur Peace Agreement (DPA) despite assertions by the government of Sudan to the contrary. Human rights and humanitarian workers in Darfur have reported more cases of torture and rape and other violations, most of them committed by the *Janjawid*, but often with the support of the Sudanese armed forces. Civilians are still being killed by the government and the *Janjawid* and tens of thousands have been displaced since the signing of the DPA. Women and girls risk being beaten, tortured or raped when they go out to fetch water and firewood and the rapists don't care whether their victims are age 8 or 80. More than two million Darfurians have lost their homes and their lands since the beginning of the conflict, and even when they have sought safety and security in camps for the internally displaced they are still not safe. Many others have fled further into refugee camps in Chad, where there are more than 230,000 refugees.

Protection is what the people of Darfur need most. There has been an abject failure by the government of Sudan to protect the civilian population of Darfur. The African Union Mission in Sudan (AMIS) has not been able to protect them. A more effective peacekeeping presence is urgently required in Darfur.

The Sudanese government has denied its complicity in human rights abuses despite clear and compelling evidence of close and active links between its armed forces and the *Janjawid*. The International Commission of Inquiry on Darfur, established by the UN Security Council, reported already in January 2005 that there were undisputable links between the government and the *Janjawid*, and similar findings continue to be reported by the High Commissioner for Human Rights, the Special Rapporteur on human rights in Sudan, Amnesty International and others.

(Amnesty International has summarized some of these findings in its document, *UN Human Rights Council: Fourth Special Session Beyond any doubt: Sudan uses and supports the Janjawid in Darfur*, AI Index: IOR 41/028/2006, 8 December 2006)

The worsening situation in Darfur is now also spilling into neighbouring Chad and the Central African Republic. In Chad hundreds have been killed, scores of women raped, and at least 90,000 have fled their villages because of cross-border attacks by *Janjawid* and their allies,. Failure to deal with these continuing attacks threatens to engulf the whole region in conflict.