

Mission Not Accomplished

The war in Darfur is far from 'over.'

By **Rebecca Hamilton** | Newsweek Web Exclusive

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Two weeks ago at El Fasher airport in Darfur, I watched Sudanese soldiers load up an Antonov bomber, in full view of the U.N. plane I was seated inside. The recent headline-making comments of the outgoing U.N.-African Union force commander, Gen. Martin Luther Agwai, that the war in Darfur is "over," therefore strike me as overly optimistic. They bring to mind George W. Bush's similarly premature message of "mission accomplished" in Iraq, which was displayed on a banner aboard the USS *Abraham Lincoln* in 2003 behind the president's podium. As with Iraq, there is a long way to go before anyone involved in Darfur should be congratulating themselves.

Deaths from direct violence in Darfur have decreased significantly from what they were at the height of the conflict in 2003 and 2004, and most aid workers on the ground describe the fighting as having stagnated. But the comments of General Agwai are still misleading. There is no compelling reason to believe that the present situation constitutes a permanent cessation of the war, as opposed to a temporary lull in fighting.

In general, a war is declared over when one side has defeated the other, or if warring parties agree to a peace. Neither scenario exists in Darfur. Although the rebel groups are fractured to the point that almost none of them are likely to threaten the government in the short term (the Justice and Equality Movement being the exception), they have not given up. And the so-called Darfur Peace Agreement, signed by the government and just one of the rebel groups back in 2006, has still not been implemented.

The current "calm but tense" situation may be the byproduct of factors that are fluid, rather than a reflection of any fundamental shift in the situation. Right now it is the rainy season, which makes it difficult for any group to attack by land because Darfur's dirt roads turn to mud. The Sudanese government is also trying to put on its best face while it waits for the outcome of the Obama administration's policy review, which is expected in a few weeks, in the hope that the dovish approach of the U.S. envoy, Scott Gration, will win the day. As these and other factors change, we may still see the resumption of hostilities.

Put these considerations together and the foundations of General Agwai's claim look precarious at best. Moreover, even if the passage of time shows the commander's assessment to be correct, his comments are small comfort to the 2.7 million Darfuris who remain stranded in displaced-persons camps because it is too dangerous for them to return home. Imagine if, after Hurricane Katrina, U.S. officials issued press statements saying, "The hurricane is over." They would have been correct, but they would have missed the point. In the wake of Katrina, New Orleans' communities were destroyed, the social fabric was ruptured, the city faced a collapse of medical services, and there was breakdown of law and order. In addition, everyone inside the city knew that unless the levees were rebuilt, a new hurricane could wreck the exact same havoc. So too in the case of Darfur.

Many critical humanitarian services that Darfuri civilians relied on have been cut back or halted since the Sudanese government expelled key aid agencies after the president was indicted by the International Criminal Court in March this year. For women and girls, the situation is particularly dire. The organizations expelled were the ones that provided medical care, and psychosocial and legal services to women and girls who had been raped—something that happens with depressing regularity whenever they try to leave the outskirts of the camps.

The men in refugee camps who have visited their villages report that not only does the situation remain insecure, but oftentimes their lands have been occupied by Arab groups from Mali, Niger, and Chad. In short, even when the war ends, much remains to be done before there is peace and security in Darfur

The U.N.-AU force was not deployed to stop a war. However, a large part of its mandate is to protect civilians. With the collapse of law and order, and pervasive insecurity from armed militias throughout Sudan's western region, those civilians are stuck in camps, bereft of the dignity their self-sufficiency once brought them. They live daily with the knowledge that should those with guns and bombers decide to resume hostilities again, there is very little to stop them. Mission accomplished? Not yet.

Hamilton is the author of the forthcoming book [The Promise of Engagement, an investigation into the impact of citizen advocacy on Darfur policy and the situation on the ground in Sudan](#). She is an Open Society fellow and a visiting fellow at the National Security Archive..