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“Seizing the final opportunity”: Leading members of Sudanese civil society call for national conference

(KHARTOUM, 4 FEBRUARY 2009) Representatives of independent Sudanese civil society organizations, media and rights activists called on Sudanese government, political actors and civil society members to urgently convene a conference to discuss the crisis brought on by the Sudanese government’s reaction to the charges brought by the Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court against the President of Sudan.

In a statement presented at a press conference in the Sudanese capital Khartoum, civil society, media and rights activists said reactions within Sudan to the possible indictment of President Bashir by the International Criminal Court (ICC) had “generated confusion and uncertainty” forcing the Government into confrontation with both its own people and the international community. There was an urgent need as a result for all political forces within Sudan to come together to discuss the situation “holistically” with the support of those “regional and international stakeholders directly contributing to peace, justice and democracy.”

According to the statement, the proposed conference is a response to several concerns about the direction Sudan is heading at this critical crossroads, just two years before the CPA interim period will expire. The statement calls explicitly for the beginning of “a comprehensive process for reconciliation and healing throughout Sudan,” noting in particular that there had “yet to be a genuine peace process for Darfur that addresses the rights of Darfurians and brings them justice.”

The statement describes the core objective of the conference as “a broad consensus within Sudan on a course of action that will lead Sudan out of its current crisis” rooted within the framework of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA). This is expected to include agreement on a practical strategy to “consolidate peace processes and democratic transition; ensure a just and comprehensive solution to the Darfur crisis; respond to the demands of the marginalized regions in a genuine federal system; and address chronic social problems such as poverty, poor living conditions for displaced persons, unemployment, corruption, gender and racial discrimination.”

Today’s call for the conference comes at a time of increasing crackdown by Sudanese authorities on those perceived to support the ICC. In November, three human rights activist were arrested and two of them seriously tortured by government security agents. In December, security agents arrested and questioned a prominent member of an opposition party.

Participants in the press conference emphasized that the civil society initiative has the support of the silent majority of Sudanese, including political parties, who are terrified by the NCP’s reactions to the ICC. The initiative representatives at the press conference expressed the hope that both the proposal itself, and the courage required to launch the initiative, would contribute to a new momentum and challenge the current stalemate. They called on “all democratic voices” at home and abroad, to lend their support to the initiative. Speakers at the conference concluded, “We know the only way forward is to openly discuss these issues and transform challenges into a window of hope.”

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