

**Sudanese Foreign Minister on Situation in Darfur, Ties With US, Arab Summit Interview with Sudanese Foreign Minister Lam Akol by Muhammad al-Hasan Ahmad in Khartoum; date not given: "Akol Tells Al-Sharq al-Awsat: Washington Cannot Establish Diplomatic Relations With Southern Sudan Except Through Khartoum"**

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(Ahmad) You welcomed the decision issued by the African Peace and Security Council and you expressed this on more than one occasion. A ministerial committee was then set up under your chairmanship to study what was described as ambiguity. During a National Congress Party meeting, President Al-Bashir criticized that decision. How do you explain this?

(Akol) I would like to stress that there is one position on this issue. Some might have selected the parts that suit them. I would like to say that the decision has positive as well as negative aspects. We have found positive points in several areas. First, the African forces' mandate in Darfur was extended for another six months. We believe that the withdrawal of these forces or the transfer of the mission from the African Union (to the United Nations) will mean the failure of the continent in its first peace-keeping experience. The second positive point is that the deployment of the UN troops will be discussed with the Sudanese Government. Moreover, there is another positive point which is concentration on the need to expedite the peace process. This is agreed even by the parties which seek international intervention like the United States, the EU, and the African Union. They agree with us that peace is the top priority.

As for the negative aspects, these are represented by the fact that Sudan's opinion about the need to close the door for foreign interference was either ignored or left undecided. The decision said that in principle it is possible to shift the task from the African Union to the United Nations without understanding that this period is a period of preparation for transfer to the United Nations.

The second negative point is the criticism leveled at Sudan like talk about the demonstrations which harm the international community and the United Nations and what they call the harm done to the African Union. Another negative point is the reference to the International Criminal Court, which has nothing to do with the African Union. As for the ambiguity referred to, I would like to say that the Council of Ministers said the decision has some positive aspects but there is ambiguity in some paragraphs. There are several examples on this ambiguity. One is that at a time when

the African Peace and Security Council talks about agreement in principle, it talks in other paragraphs about the need to coordinate with the UN secretary general and start work on a transitional plan. The Council of Ministers concluded that there are positive points as well as ambiguous ones in the decision and they must be cleared up. Therefore, a committee has been set up to accurately study the statement so that the government can build its position on a clear basis.

(Ahmad) Vice President Ali Uthman Muhammad Taha and you made statements in this regard. The vice president said it is possible to look into the possibility of transferring the task from the African Union to the United Nations after reaching a peace agreement. The vice president said this during his recent visit to Brussels. You said this will be a normal thing that conforms to what took place in the agreement on the South. Therefore, there seems to be disagreement. Some say they absolutely do not want to transfer the mission to the international troops. What is your comment?

(Akol) We are not talking about a shift from the African Union to the United Nations. We said that the African Union has no authority to transfer its mission to a third party. We, however, spoke about a UN role and said it is possible to look into the possibility of finding a role for it after the peace process and as part of this process. This position is based on the precedent that took place in the South. There are now UN forces in southern Sudan and these went there under a comprehensive peace agreement and with the approval of the two sides. The task of these forces is limited and the size of the UN forces is also limited and their deployment is well defined. This is what we mean by the statement you referred to. If the United Nations asks Sudan to play a role in Darfur after reaching peace there, we will be ready to discuss this and hold dialogue with them about this issue and the way to deal with them if necessary.

(Ahmad) The Sudanese foreign policy in general is apparently not concentrated in the Foreign Ministry. Some from outside the ministry are making statements and these statements sometimes conflict with the position of your ministry. For example, we read in the papers one day statements by Dr Mustafa Uthman. He talked about a tripartite summit by Al-Bashir, Mubarak, and Al-Qadhafi although you denied that there were any plans to hold such a summit. Did the summit take place?

(Akol) The summit did not take place. This means foreign policy is still in the hands of the Foreign Ministry. However, every person has the right to make statements. Not only Mustafa Uthman is entitled to this right but others who make statements about foreign policy issues. This is their right, but the state policy is well known and the responsible state departments are known. The Council of Ministers is the side which approves policies and the Foreign Ministry implements these policies in cooperation with the presidency.

(Ahmad) There are contradictions even within the Foreign Ministry. I have noticed that acting Foreign Minister Ali Karti made statements criticizing the African Union. At the same time, Al-Samani al-Wasilah, minister of state in the Foreign Ministry, praised the African Union. He said what is required is the Union's continuation of its role. What is your comment in this regard?

(Akol) The official government position is that it commends the African Union's role in Darfur and calls for the continuation of its mission there. The government also calls for strengthening this mission so that it can be accomplished in the required manner. We have also contacted other countries to urge them continue to extend financial and logistic support to these African forces.

(Ahmad) Statements were also made threatening to withdraw from the African Union if it decides to shift its mission to the United Nations. Do you not think that such a threat might strain Sudan's relations with the African Union?

(Akol) As I said, our position does not conflict with that of the African Union, but we reminded the Union during our meeting with it that it was originally established for two main purposes. These are self-reliance and resolution of African issues by the African countries themselves. If the continent fails to solve its problems, some may ask: If the African Union cannot succeed in handling a small mission in Darfur, where can it succeed? We did not say we wanted to withdraw from the African Union. Sudan is a founding member of the Organization of African Unity and later the African Union. We play a large role in this Union. We are members of even the African Peace and Security Council.

(Ahmad) There is much talk about a hidden agenda that is playing a role in what is happening in Sudan through the African Union. How much do you support this opinion?

(Akol) I said in this regard that huge pressures were put on the African Union member states by certain states in order to adopt a certain decision. These pressures were not concealed this time. They came in papers that were publicly distributed among the member states. This is what I meant. If the African Union adopts decisions under pressure from states outside Africa, this will certainly undermine the credibility of the Union and make people doubt its ability to lead the continent. But as I said in a previous statement, the African states have proven that they do not take instructions from abroad all the time as some might imagine.

(Ahmad) At a news conference held yesterday, statements were attributed to the head of the government delegation to negotiations in Abuja. You might have heard these statements.

(Akol) No, I have not.

(Ahmad) The head of the delegation said some African leaders were bribed to peddle a western agenda. What is your opinion about such statements and their impact on foreign policy and Abuja negotiations?

(Akol) I have neither read nor heard such statements. I do not think a person like Dr Majdhub al-Khalifah (Sudanese Government chief negotiator to Abuja talks) would say such a thing. Therefore, I must first make sure that such statements were really made.

(Ahmad) In your latest statement (on Thursday), you said bad relations with the United States would harm the peace agreement. How can you improve relations with it under this tense atmosphere and lack of unity of vision in dealing with it?

(Akol) This, of course, is a fact because the United States played a large role in the Machakos and Naivasha negotiations. It also played a large role in persuading the two sides to sign the peace agreement and in financing the talks. It was a witness to the signing of the comprehensive peace agreement. Washington was so eager to establish peace that it shifted the UN Security Council sessions to Nairobi in November 2004 during its presidency of the UN Security Council as a clear message to the parties on the need to reach a peace agreement before the end of 2004. This did actually happen as agreement was reached at the end of December that year. Moreover, the United States is the world's superpower and it is not in Sudan's interest to antagonize the United States. We expected the United States to change its policies after the signing of the peace agreement and the formation of the national unity government because the government formed after the peace agreement was completely different from the previous one. We hoped the United States would give this government a chance to accomplish the tasks entrusted to it in accordance with the comprehensive peace agreement.

But the US policy continued as it is. It continued to oppose Sudan at world forums and continued to behave as if nothing had changed. Nevertheless, we insist on dialogue with the United States. We believe that there is a misunderstanding that should be cleared up so that relations can be normalized. They are relations of friendship, cooperation, and joint work. There are no differences in opinion about the need to improve relations between Khartoum and Washington. This is an opinion that is approved by the national unity government, but the methods used do not lead to this improvement. It is the job of the Foreign Ministry to study the way to improve relations with the United States and other countries. We are in constant contact with it. Dialogue with it has not stopped whether during the visit the first vice president paid to the United States in November last year or my meeting with the assistant foreign

secretary, in addition to other meetings designed to continue dialogue with the United States.

(Ahmad) Did the United States express a desire to establish diplomatic relations with the southern government in a bid to skip the sanctions imposed on Sudan as a whole?

(Akol) Foreign policy and foreign relations are decided by the federal authority. The United States cannot establish relations with the South except through the Foreign Ministry here. Yes, there are areas of economic cooperation that can take place directly, but there can be no duality in Sudan's foreign policy or relations with the United States.

(Ahmad) It seems that Sudan's relations with Uganda are not good. Also normalization of relations with Eritrea is not developing at the required pace. What is your comment on this?

(Akol) No, on the contrary, our relations with Uganda are at their best. Two months ago, a joint agreement was signed by the Sudanese Armed Forces, the Sudan People's (Liberation) Movement (SPLM), and the Ugandan Army on the issue of the Army of God. Diplomatically, nothing has happened to mar relations. I think our relations with Uganda are good. As for Eritrea, we have started work (to improve relations), but in view of the situation which prevailed in the past we cannot expect these relations to be normalized overnight. We have made huge steps in this regard. First, a joint political committee has been formed. This committee met in Asmara and is expected to meet in Khartoum this year. The committee set a framework on the way to create an appropriate atmosphere for these relations. It encouraged the exchange of official and popular visits between the two countries and encouraged the establishment of a direct air route between Khartoum and Asmara. The committee agreed to exchange diplomatic representation between the two countries on the level of ambassadors. God willing, we will see an Eritrean ambassador in Khartoum during the next few weeks.

(Ahmad) Several news media yesterday disseminated statements by Edward Lino, a leading member of the SPLM, in which he said the Sudanese Government is helping the Army of God through the military intelligence. Therefore, any observer will conclude that relations between Sudan and Uganda are not that good.

(Akol) I believe that one must first verify the statement attributed to that person and then the situation in which the person made it.

(Ahmad) You are also accused of not introducing any changes into the Foreign Ministry. You are specifically accused of not incorporating the quota of southern

diplomats into the ministry as specified by the agreement. This is said by many southerners.

(Akol) The national unity government has been in power for only four months and this is a short period of time to make the necessary changes. One has to first absorb what is present and the problems facing the ministry. One can then analyze things and find solutions to problems. This takes time. The one who expects this to take place overnight will be mistaken or unaware of the volume of work at the Foreign Ministry. This ministry is responsible for Sudan's representation in many countries. They are more than 50 countries.

This is the first point. The second point is that we ask those who criticize the Foreign Ministry and say we have not appointed the required cadre: Which other ministry did this? Cadres are required not only in the Foreign Ministry but all ministries of the federal government. I want someone to tell me which ministry appointed the required number of southerners so that judging us will be based on facts. Such talk is made by those who always want to belittle the accomplishment of others. We will not be influenced by this and will continue the required work without making hasty decisions that are not beneficial in the long run.

(Ahmad) Can we say that you have embarked on or completed any of the required stages whether these pertain to specifying the embassies that will be headed by the southerners or the appointment of southern diplomats?

(Akol) This, of course, is an integrated process and you cannot separate one part from the other parts. First of all, there is the issue of determining who can be nominated for work and then classifying them into various grades. This will be followed by talk about the way to distribute them. Some imagine that as soon as they are appointed at the Foreign Ministry they will be sent to the nearest embassy for work. This, of course, is not true. Anyone appointed at the Foreign Ministry will have to come to Khartoum and take a training and enlightenment course before he can be sent to an embassy.

(Ahmad) How do you view the donor states' fulfillment of their aid pledges? Are there attempts to avoid fulfilling them or dictate conditions?

(Akol) These states have not fulfilled their commitments in full as specified. Only about 30 percent of the funds pledged in Oslo have arrived in Sudan. This percentage does not include all the projects that have to do with the Oslo conference. Commitment to financial aid is little but some donor states link payment of what they pledged to pay to the resolution of the issue of Darfur. Therefore, I think the basis is implementing the peace agreement. We must work for the success of this agreement

so that it will serve as an example to be emulated in Darfur and the other areas of Sudan. The issue has now been reversed and people are talking about the need to first reach agreement on Darfur. This largely harms the peace agreement. This is what led to holding the Paris conference, during which these points were raised. The first vice president was clear when he told the donors that there is no reason to link payment of what was pledged in Oslo to the progress of the peace process in Darfur.

(Ahmad) Was there a positive response to what the first vice president said?

(Akol) The problem does not lie in the response because they might respond positively. What is important is the practical result.

(Ahmad) Your relations with the United Nations sometimes appear to be tense or in bad shape. Minister of State Ali Karti summoned UN envoy Jan Pronk and spoke to him in a language that sounded like a warning. Pronk, however, said he was not summoned but invited to a meeting. What is the truth about this issue?

(Akol) First of all, I do not think that our relations with the United Nations are bad. We are part of the United Nations and we cooperate with it. It is present in Sudan upon an agreement with the Sudanese Government.

Jan Pronk, the personal envoy of the UN secretary general in Sudan, makes statements which sometimes go beyond the limits of his work that are known to us. This is why he was summoned to the Foreign Ministry. He was summoned after the statements he made in order to be told that these statements, which go beyond the agreement the Sudanese Government and the United Nations signed, must be stopped. He must be playing with words when he says he was invited and not summoned. The ministry summoned him; he did not come upon his own will.

(Ahmad) Newspapers also said a few days ago that Pronk called for the release of a UN employee and for not trying him because he enjoys immunity, but the concerned quarters did not respond to him. Is the Foreign Ministry a party to this issue?

(Akol) No, we have no knowledge of what happened in Kadugli. They (not further identified) wrote to us in this regard and we sent an inquiry to the Justice Ministry to know what exactly happened. The issue is still at the Justice Ministry, which will make a decision. We are a party to this issue but if there is a crime, no envoy will be above the law regardless of who he is. This is what we want to make sure of.

(Ahmad) Now that one year has passed since the agreement was signed, do you think implementation was satisfactory? What are your expectations in the light of what happened and continues to happen? Is the situation closer to unity or separation?

(Akol) We are satisfied with what has been accomplished during the past year. There is accomplishment but we look for more. We can also blame ourselves by saying we could have accomplished more, but politics is the art of the possible as the saying goes. Besides, the development of events cannot be separated from the surrounding circumstances. We signed the peace agreement after a war which lasted more than 20 years. Relations between the government and the SPLM, the two main components of the national unity government, were hostile for over two decades. Under such circumstances, you cannot expect relations between the two sides to be as smooth as some might expect. Yes, there is a will on the level of the leadership to forget about the past and move forward on the basis of a joint plan. However, the lower the level is, the less understanding you will find. Therefore, you have to expect discrepancies in views and exchange of accusations. This is normal in such relations, but what is finally important is that many accomplishments have been made during this period of time. The interim constitution has been completed. The presidential institution, the national unity government, the southern government, the Federal Legislative Assembly, the State Councils, the state governments and commissions, and the Board of Directors of the Bank of Sudan were established. All these institutions, commissions, and councils were established within one year. Someone might say it was possible to accomplish more and he is right to say so, but the one in the soccer field is not like the one who is watching. Therefore, we believe that the accomplishment is reasonable. This, however, does not negate the fact that there is a delay in implementing some articles of the agreement.

Also, this does not mean there are no differences in opinion between the National Congress and the SPLM in handling certain issues like the issue of Abiye and the issue of transporting and deploying the armed forces in the north and the SPLM in the south. This is normal, but the one who says the peace agreement was not implemented in a reasonable manner will be mistaken. It is, of course, too early to talk about unity or separation but the peace agreement is based on an extremely important point, which is making unity look attractive. Therefore, it is difficult in four months to talk about unity or separation. The government of the South has not been established yet. There is a minister and deputy minister, but the higher levels are not there. This means the government of the South has still not been established. We need time so that governments can settle down and serve the citizen and provide the basic needs in the fields of health care, education, and infrastructure.

(Ahmad) Since we have spoken about this aspect, I would like to say that there are differences between the National Congress and the SPLM. These are considered normal in dealing with contentious issues between the two sides or within the government. Do you think these differences will be so large that they will be difficult to be solved, or you have mechanisms to solve these differences?



(Akol) This, of course, is partnership and it is like any other coalition government. A coalition government has joint committees to deal with issues when presented. I also believe there is a will to implement the peace agreement because the alternative will be ugly and none will accept it. Therefore, the two sides bear the large responsibility of trying to overcome all difficulties facing the peace agreement and these difficulties are many. People must think realistically instead of dreaming of things that cannot be achieved. We must be realistic and realize that not all things can be achieved the way we want. We must put everything in its right perspective and objective circumstances. Things become more difficult when the donors do not fulfill their pledges. All these operations, including resettlement, rehabilitation, rebuilding of capabilities, and even establishment of infrastructures, need money and the people will not wait. If we are talking about evacuees and refugees, these must return home at the earliest possible time. But we cannot take them to a place where there is no hospital, health care center, school, or water. These are the challenges facing the government of southern Sudan.

(Ahmad) How do you view the possibility of reaching peace in Darfur?

(Akol) The problem of Darfur worries all. I think a peaceful political solution will be the most ideal solution. Actually, it is the only solution which can end all problems in Darfur. We must address the root causes of the problem in order to be able to find suitable solutions. We embarked on dialogue with the National Congress right from the beginning in order to jointly and urgently discuss the issue and spare blood as we did in the South. Agreement was reached with the National Congress on a common concept for negotiations in Abuja. This is the reason for the presence of SPLM members in the government delegation there. We are in agreement that top priority must be given to the peace negotiations. The delegation there is fully authorized to reach a peaceful solution. We are glad that the latest African Peace and Security Council meeting has emphasized the need to expedite the attainment of peace. It has even set a deadline for reaching a peace agreement.

Regarding eastern Sudan, we have reached a common vision on the way to reach a peaceful solution to the problem. The Eritrean Government's position on the mediator obstructed the start of talks. In fact, we have not called him a mediator thus far. We called him a facilitator. The Eritrean Government wants to play a role in this regard.

(Ahmad) What do you expect from the next UN Security Council meeting?

(Akol) This meeting is considered a continuation of a previous UN Security Council meeting that was held after the African Peace and Security Council meeting, during which it issued its known decision. There were differences in views. Some countries, including the United States and Britain, thought that the decision authorized the United Nations to take over the mission of the current African Union forces in Darfur

and that six months were needed to prepare for this shift and that this will be done in accordance with a decision by the concerned party. The other countries, including China, Russia, Qatar, and Congo believed that what happened was a decision extending the mandate of the African forces and that the decision approved in principle the possibility of this shift. This shift, however, should be negotiated with the Sudanese Government. We expect the next session to witness a continuation of this discussion.

(Ahmad) Khartoum will host an important Arab summit within days. What have you prepared for this summit? What do you expect this summit to do for Sudan and the Arabs?

(Akol) The Arab summit will be held in Sudan, which will celebrate its 50th independence anniversary this year and the 1st anniversary of the peace agreement. The first topic on the summit agenda is Arab-African cooperation. There are many other topics on the agenda. These include issues related to Sudan like establishing a fund to help the areas affected by war in southern Sudan. There is also a clause on the Arab African countries' participation in the African peace-keeping forces in Darfur. There are also issues related to the Arab Justice Court, the Arab Peace and Security Council, and other such issues. There are many topics on the summit agenda. We expect large participation. We also expect the summit to issue clear resolutions that serve the Arab homeland as a whole, particularly Sudan at this stage.

(Ahmad) When Mrs Rebecca Garang was in the United States, she made all sorts of statements. She strongly criticized the Foreign Ministry and Sudanese embassies and said she would not deal with these embassies. At that time you were in Qatar, where you said she would be asked about what she said. What happened in this regard?

(Akol) These statements were reported by various sources but we did not hear them from her directly. In an interview with a newspaper she denied much of what she said or what was attributed to her. Therefore, we cannot express an opinion about something she denied.

(Ahmad) Also leading SPLM figures accuse you of appeasing the National Congress and of pursuing a policy that is not in the interest of the South. What is your comment on this?

(Akol) When did this happen? Who are these leaders? This is a phenomenon reflecting lack of press integrity. Those who wrote this were not SPLM leaders. They were in Canada among citizens who asked to settle there. We have not heard of any activity by them within the SPLM. They are (four youths) who wrote this, but the ones who published this in the press wanted to give the impression that SPLM leaders

made these statements. One can read their names on the Internet, but he will not recognize the name of anyone of them.

(Ahmad) Also I have once read that a report written by the embassy in Washington was sent to the Sudanese Foreign Ministry but it was withheld from you. Are some reports withheld from you sometimes?

(Akol) No, they (not further identified) did not say the report was withheld from me. They said they could not cooperate with the embassy because it wrote reports about those who go to the United States. But such talk is made out of ignorance because it is the embassy's responsibility to write reports. Even when the president of the republic visits a state, the Sudanese embassy writes a report on his visit. Also if a person goes to an embassy on business, the embassy will write a report. What is new in this?

(Ahmad) Do you really feel that the team working with you at the Foreign Ministry cooperates with you and carries out your directives?

(Akol) Of course, because the one who does not cooperate will be punished and this is a responsibility.

(Description of Source: London Al-Sharq al-Awsat (Internet Version-WWW) in Arabic -- Influential Saudi-owned London daily providing independent coverage of Arab and international issues; editorials reflect official Saudi views on foreign policy)

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