

Wednesday, 17 April 2013

Sudan's South Kordofan rebels say 'ready' for peace talks



Rebels in Sudan's South Kordofan state said on Wednesday they are ready to talk with the Sudanese government in Ethiopia next week over ending a two-year-long war. The Sudan People's Liberation Movement-North (SPLM-N) told AFP that African Union mediator Thabo Mbeki had sent rebel chairman Malik Agar an invitation "for peace talks in Addis Ababa on the 23rd of April." "We replied that we are ready," rebel spokesman Arnu Ngutulu Lodi said. If the two sides meet face-to-face it would be the first direct talks in almost two years, Lodi said. The rebels and government have met indirectly through African Union mediators in a failed attempt to secure humanitarian access throughout the warzone. But talk of peace came amid heavy fighting. Rebels again shelled the state capital Kadugli on Wednesday, targeting what Lodi described as "military bases." He said they also fired on a military outpost several kilometers (miles) east of the capital, where an ammunition storage facility exploded. "Today there is heavy fighting around Dandor," a garrison about 18 kilometers (11 miles) east of Kadugli which government forces were trying to retake after rebels seized it on Monday, Lodi said. But army spokesman Sawarmi Khaled Saad told AFP his troops had "liberated" Dandor. "In reaction to that, the rebels tried to create a disturbance in Kadugli, shelling the town," Sawarmi said. Residents of the town could not be immediately reached. Sudan's foreign ministry said three civilians died in rebel shelling of Kadugli during weekly prayers last Friday, as President Omar al-Bashir held talks in the South Sudanese capital Juba with his counterpart Salva Kiir in a symbol of easing tensions, particularly over the South's alleged support for SPLM-N. Despite the attack on Kadugli, on Sunday the official SUNA news agency quoted Ibrahim Ghandour, head of the government's negotiating team, as saying his side was set and "waiting for the time of the negotiation." He said Sudan had contacted African mediators "and affirmed our full readiness for the launching of the dialogue that we hope to lead to peace. The government had long rejected talks with the SPLM-N, which has also been fighting in another state, Blue Nile. But on April 1 Bashir said his administration seeks a broad political dialogue, "including (with) those who are armed". He also announced amnesty for all political prisoners although none from the SPLM-N are known to have been freed. More than 200,000 people have fled the area to South Sudan and Ethiopia as refugees, the UN says. An estimated one million more have been affected inside the two states, where a senior UN aid official has said people were surviving on "roots and leaves".