

Sudan undertecknar avtal om vapenvila i rebellkontrollerat område

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BUERGENSTOCK, Switzerland, Jan. 19 -- The government of Sudan and rebels fighting in the southern part of the country signed a cease-fire agreement today covering a key guerrilla stronghold, a move diplomats hope will lead to a wider peace deal after 19 years of war and at least 1.5 million deaths.

The cease-fire in the Nuba Mountains in central Sudan, which faces the gravest humanitarian crisis in the war-ravaged country, will initially be for six months but is renewable, a Swiss government spokesman said.

The truce goes into effect within 72 hours and will be monitored by a joint military commission made up of three representatives from each side and with a chairman from a neutral country yet to be chosen.

Africa's largest country has been wracked by civil war since 1983. In broad terms, the conflict pits rebels seeking greater autonomy for the mostly Christian and animist south against the Islamic government in the north.

Today's deal, mediated by Switzerland and the United States, was struck after five days of closed-door talks in central Switzerland between government representatives and members of Sudan's People's Liberation Army, the political wing of the main guerrilla group.

The two sides, which were already observing a shaky truce in the area, also agreed to allow civilians to move freely inside the 31,000-square-mile Nuba region and permit humanitarian aid to enter by air.

"We are grateful to God Almighty that a lifelong dream has come true," said Nutris Siddig, head of the Sudanese government delegation. "We feel like telling the whole world that we are cut for peace and we are peace lovers, that we have a great country and great people."

Abdal Azis Adam El Hilu, head of the rebel delegation, promised that his side would "uphold the letter and spirit of this agreement. . . . I hope the government of Sudan will for once do likewise. The full implementation of this agreement will act as a cornerstone for peace."

The Buergenstock talks stemmed from the initiative of U.S. envoy John Danforth, a former senator from Missouri assigned by President Bush to seek a peace settlement.

The Bush administration has separated the peace efforts from Sudan's perceived role as a haven for Islamic radicals and speculation that the country might be on a list of U.S. targets after Afghanistan. The United States hit a Sudanese factory with missiles in 1998 in response to the U.S. Embassy bombings in Kenya and Tanzania.

The Bush administration has maintained sanctions against Sudan, which for years has been on the State Department list of nations that sponsor terrorism. Recently, however, Sudan has given signs of cooperating with Washington.

Osama bin Laden, the Saudi-born fugitive accused by the United States of masterminding the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, lived in Sudan from 1991 until he was expelled in 1996 and moved to Afghanistan. Sudan says bin Laden worked as a businessman and investor while in Khartoum and denies he pursued any terrorist activities there.