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Sudan's troubled Darfur region to host national school competition with UN help



Two girls pause during their studies in a UNICEF-supported school in rural North Darfur

24 December 2009 – The United Nations is providing logistics, security and equipment to the Sudanese Government for its annual National School Competition, bringing together over 7,000 secondary school students from all 25 states in the country's war-torn Darfur region.

Under the theme 'Peace-building and Reconciliation,' and organized by the Ministry of Education with significant support from the joint African Union-UN mission in Darfur (**UNAMID**) and the UN Children's Fund (**UNICEF**), the two-weeks of intellectual and athletic competitions open on 31 December in El Fasher, capital of North Darfur, the first time that state hosts the 21-year-old event.

"UNAMID supports this competition in hope that it will provide an infrequent opportunity for young people from all over Sudan to meet across ethnic groups, make friends, dialogue and break stereotypes," the Mission said in a news release today that bring together students from all 25 states in Africa's largest country. "The Mission's objective is to encourage youth to commit to peace in Sudan."

UNAMID has loaned heavy machinery and engineers for the construction of three roads and a camp with tents, beds, mattresses and blankets for competitors. It will also provide 55 vehicles with drivers to transport participants to and from the various events, while a fire truck and five ambulances staffed by UNAMID medical personnel will be on 24-hour standby for the duration.

The Mission has also been asked to supply water tankers to deliver potable water, and two electrical generators with technical staff will be on hand to power one of the two stadiums and the camp.

The opening and closing ceremonies will be covered by UNAMID Communication and Public Information Division and broadcast live, and the Mission has agreed to support media coverage, providing the local radio station with equipment and necessary training. As part of its community outreach programme UNAMID is donating sports equipment.

UNAMID was set up almost two years ago help stabilize the three Darfur states (North West and South), an area torn apart by nearly seven years of war between the Government, its militia allies and rebels seeking greater autonomy, during which at least 300,000 people are estimated to have died and 2.7 million more have been driven from their homes.

The Mission has still only reached about 70 per cent of its authorized troop strength – some 14,650 military personnel out of the total 19,555, and 4,450 police – and still lacks key military elements, including two medium transport units, a level II hospital, an aerial reconnaissance unit, and 18 medium utility helicopters.

Next year's competition is scheduled to be held in Juba, South Sudan, a region where another UN peacekeeping mission, the more than 10,000-strong UN Mission in Sudan (UNMIS), is helping to restore stability after a peace accord in 2005 ended 20 years of war between Sudanese People's Liberation Army (SPLA) separatists and the national Government in the north.

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