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Common Sense on Darfur:

An Open Letter to the British Prime Minister
Rt Hon Tony Blair MP

Dear Prime Minister

The Darfur crisis is now in its fourth year. The conflict began in early 2003 with attacks on towns and government facilities and the murder of hundreds of policemen and civilians in Sudan's western region of Darfur by rebel groups such as the 'Sudan Liberation Army' (SLA) and the 'Justice and Equality Movement' (JEM). The conflict subsequently spiralled out of control and has caused an acute humanitarian crisis. Tens of thousands of civilians have died and millions more have been displaced as the crisis has unfolded. The search for a peaceful, negotiated settlement of the crisis has been led by the African Union (AU). The AU has hosted several rounds of peace talks between the government and rebel movements and has deployed thousands of soldiers to supervise ceasefire agreements and stabilise parts of Darfur.

In May 2006, the Darfur Peace Agreement was signed between Darfur's largest rebel movement, the SLA, led by Minni Minnawi, and the Sudanese government. Drawn in large measure from the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement which ended the long-running civil war in southern Sudan, this agreement addresses the issue of political and economic development in Darfur and the demobilisation of militias and outlines a democratic

political process establishing a transitional Darfur Regional Authority headed by Mr Minnawi. This authority will be responsible for implementing the peace agreement in the lead up to elections in three years' time. In the meantime Darfur rebels will hold 12 seats in the national assembly, 21 seats in each of the three Darfur state legislatures as well as other key positions in state and local government in Darfur. The Darfur Peace Agreement also commits the international community to provide considerable financial assistance and political support to the peace process. A commission has also been created to work with the United Nations to help refugees and displaced persons to return to their homes. The Sudanese government will also provide tens of millions of dollars in compensation to victims of the conflict.

The Darfur Peace Agreement is a Darfurian solution for a Darfurian problem. It is additionally an African agreement negotiated and secured with the close and indispensable assistance of fellow Africans in the form of the African Union. The Darfur Peace Agreement represents the last best opportunity to bring peace to Darfur. It must succeed.

There is no doubt that the conflict in Darfur has presented a very complex situation with very complex problems. And, in the words of the Washington Post's able Eastern African bureau chief, Emily Wax, "much of the conventional wisdom surrounding the conflict...fails to match the realities on the ground." (1) Ms Wax has said, for example, that American government attempts to label events in Darfur as "genocide" are "counterproductive" and that they have made matters "worse". The very reputable Médecins Sans Frontières aid organization has been present in Darfur since the start of the crisis. MSF president Dr Jean-Hervé Bradol, a close observer of the Rwandan genocide, has clearly stated that the use of the term genocide was inappropriate: "Our teams have not seen evidence of the deliberate intention to kill people of a specific group." (2) We are sure that Britain's able ambassadors to Sudan have been able to confirm the observations made by Médecins Sans Frontières. Britain went to war with Iraq on the basis of Washington's lies about weapons of mass destruction. The Bush Administration's lies about genocide in Darfur are no different.

The British government must distance itself absolutely from the American position on Sudan, and particularly Darfur. Washington's Darfur policy has followed the pattern of often farcical misanalysis that has characterised its approach to Sudan in general. This is at least in part because the policy is hopelessly intertwined with shallow, short-sighted and politically opportunistic domestic constituencies. The British government has had its own experience of American incompetence regarding Sudan. You may recall that your government blindly supported the American government's cruise missile strike on the al-Shifa medicine factory in Khartoum and echoed American claims that the factory was linked to Osama bin-Laden and was making weapons of mass destruction. Every single American claim about the al-Shifa factory was proven to be false and it is generally accepted that the attack was a disastrous intelligence failure. Britain's reputation suffered as a direct result of taking American claims about Sudan at face value. Washington's Darfur policy is just as flawed. It is also a matter of record that the

British intelligence services and the leaders of the British Muslim community have both warned that Britain's previous identification with disastrous American foreign policy moves have made the United Kingdom a target for terrorism. (3) It is additionally very clear that the vast majority of the British public want Britain to distance itself from American policy. (4) Darfur is a very good place to start.

Of all the key members of the international community, Britain knows Sudan and Darfur best. Britain has played and must continue to play a crucial role in the resolution of this conflict. It is vital that Britain argues against the further internationalisation of the Darfur crisis. This can be assisted by the following positions:

* The United Kingdom must support the continued close involvement of the African Union in the negotiating and peacekeeping framework for Darfur. Your passionate interest in Africa is clear, not least of which through your creation of the Commission for Africa. The Commission's report emphasised the need to politically strengthen and financially support the African Union's core capacity for peace-keeping and peace operations. Darfur is the African Union's first peace-keeping mission – it cannot be allowed to fail, be sidelined or replaced. It is important that the British government works to actively secure the funding necessary to ensure that the African Union continues its vital work in Darfur.

* Britain must absolutely reject any American attempts to further internationalise the Darfur conflict by introducing NATO or United Nations military forces in western Sudan. This would be a recipe for disaster. Your own British ambassadors and military commanders have warned that similar international military interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq, at the behest of Washington, have totally misread situations on the ground and have resulted in civil war and anarchy.^v The international community is all too aware of the appalling consequences of misguided Western military intervention in these Muslim countries.

* The British government must bring as much diplomatic and political pressure to bear as possible upon those Darfur rebel movements such as the "Justice and Equality Movement" and sections of the SLA that have not as yet embraced the Darfur Peace Agreement.

* The British government must bring as much diplomatic, political and economic pressure to bear as possible upon the governments of Eritrea and Chad to genuinely support the Darfur peace process. These governments have previously actively supported Darfur rebel movements, and Chad and Eritrea continue to provide sanctuary to dissident rebel factions. This sort of foreign military assistance and financial support merely serves to prolong violence and suffering in Darfur.

* The British government must argue against the involvement of the International Criminal Court within the Darfur crisis. The ICC can often further complicate already complex problems. We must let Sudanese courts deal with those who have been party to serious crimes during the Darfur conflict.

A successful conclusion to the Darfur peace process will depend in large

part upon the steadfastness and support of the United Kingdom. A Darfur Peace Agreement will not only bring peace to Darfur, it will also reinforce the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement which ended the north-south conflict in Sudan. In addition, a Darfur Peace Agreement will bring much needed stability to the Sahel region of Africa and serve as a model for similar conflicts on the African continent.

Notes:

1 Emily Wax, "5 Truths About Darfur", 'The Washington Post', 23 April 2006.

2 "Thousands Die as World Defines Genocide", 'The Financial Times' (London), 6 July 2004. See also, Bradol's views in "France Calls on Sudan to Forcibly Disarm Darfur Militias", News Article by Agence France Presse, 7 July 2004.

3 See, for example, "Muslim Leaders Say Foreign Policy Makes UK Target", 'The Guardian' (London), 12 August 2006, and "Iraq Terror Backlash in UK 'For Years'", 'The Times' (London), 2 April 2006. The latter article reported that British intelligence chiefs stated that the war in Iraq has "exacerbated" the threat of terrorism by radicalising British Muslims and attracting new recruits to anti-western terror attacks.

4 "Ditch US in Terror War, Say 80pc of Britons", 'The Daily Telegraph' (London), 17 August 2006.

5 See, for example, "Ambassador Warns of Iraq Civil War", New Items by CNN, 3 August 2006, and "Afghanistan Close to Anarchy, Warns General", 'The Guardian' (London), 22 July 2006.

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