

## **Qatar makes first Arab payment for AU force in Darfur**

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Qatar became the first country to contribute to the 150-million-dollar pledge made by the Arab League to beef up the African Union monitoring force deployed in Sudan's war-torn Darfur region.

Qatar paid 2.3 million dollars out of the seven million it promised, sources at the Arab League said. The pan-Arab body made a total pledge of 150 million dollars during its latest summit in Khartoum last March.

The 7,000-strong, cash-strapped and ill-equipped, African Union force has failed to stem the bloodshed in Darfur, where up to 300,000 people have died since the start of a civil war in February 2003.

The conflict pits local rebels, who complained that Khartoum ignored the needs of the area and discriminated against them, against government forces and Khartoum's allied Arab militia.

Known as the Janjaweed, the militia has been blamed for mass murder, rape, and the burning of villages, causing thousands more to flee the area -- many of them going in to neighbouring Chad.

The African Union's Peace and Security Council is due to gather in New York on Wednesday to decide whether or not to extend its mandate beyond its official expiry on September 30.

The African body, whose Darfur deployment was its first peacekeeping mission, has already asked the United Nations to take over but its request has been roundly rejected by Khartoum.

Late last month, the UN Security Council adopted a resolution calling for the deployment in Darfur of up to 20,000 peacekeepers, a plan which Sudan's President Omar al-Beshir has fiercely opposed and branded a US-engineered attempt to overthrow his regime and plunder his country.

The Arab League has supported Sudan in rejecting the deployment of western troops in Darfur and called for further dialogue between Khartoum and the United Nations on the issue.