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Ottawa, Calgary oil firm pursue peace in Sudan

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The federal government is seeking the support of a Calgary-based oil company with assets operating in Sudan to try to help make peace in the war-ravaged African nation.

The effort to bring a private sector player into the diplomatic process is unprecedented, but one federal official says it's worth trying because it's better than not working at all. The little-known division of civil war is large.

Foreign Affairs Minister Lloyd Axworthy disclosed the plan last Friday after discussions of Talisman Energy Inc., one of the largest foreign oil corporations operating in Sudan.

Nigel Bates, a Talisman spokesman, said the initial meeting went well and was just the start of what will be a continuing dialogue with Ottawa.

In an interview, Mr. Bates said the company expects that "there will be work we are going to work together on some issues that are as yet undefined."

Neither the federal government nor the company was prepared to discuss specifics yesterday. Mr. Axworthy noted that there is a crucial period between now and this summer, when oil producers will begin pumping crude oil through a new pipeline to Port Sudan on the Red Sea.

That shipment will be an important source of revenue for the Sudanese government.

Mr. Axworthy said the proposed partnership with the private sector is part of a broader peace initiative

Canada is pursuing in co-operation with Norway and Egypt. The two countries have taken a special interest in the Sudanese conflict, and now see a prospect of longer-term peace negotiations.

Ottawa is trying to push the issue into the agenda of the United Nations Security Council, where Canada is now serving a two-year term, Mr. Axworthy says.

He told a meeting of human rights groups that Canada has a special responsibility because Canadian companies are heavily involved in oil development in Sudan. The groups said they are concerned about the treatment of Christian minorities in southern Sudan by the government in Khartoum.

APPENDIX II

Media Coverage

Mr. Axworthy said a representative of the Quaker International Council, which has urged the Khartoum government to end persecution of Christian and other minorities and forced expulsion of thousands from areas where oil will be produced, and accused it of turning a blind eye to a slave trade that has sprung up in the midst of the civil war.

Mr. Middleton said recent statements by government leaders make it clear that they intend to use their new oil revenues to finance military operations against rebels.

He asked Mr. Axworthy to investigate the activities of the oil companies to make sure they are not unwitting accomplices in genocide.

It was then that Mr. Axworthy disclosed his talks with Talisman. "They occupy a very strategic place in what will happen in Sudan," he said.