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Ottawa, Calgary oil firm pursue peace in Sudan

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The federal government is soliciting the support of a Calgary-based oil company with major operations in Sudan to try to help make peace in the war-torn African nation.

The effort to bring a private-sector player into the diplomatic process is unorthodox, but one federal official says it's worth trying because so little else has worked during three bloody decades of civil war in Sudan.

Foreign Affairs Minister Lloyd Axworthy discussed the idea last Friday with executives of Talisman Energy Inc., one of the largest foreign oil companies operating in Sudan.

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

In an interview, Mr. Hares said the company expects that "there will be ways 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.

These shipments 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 Kenya. The two countries have taken a special interest in the Sudanese conflict, and now see a glimmer of hope for peace negotiations.

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

He told a conference 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.

Mel Middleton, a representative of Freedom Quest International, blamed the Khartoum government for the persecution of Christian and other minorities and forced expulsion of minorities 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 to 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.