

SUDAN: NO SIMPLE SOLUTIONS

Charity is not enough

By Gayle Smith

Famine and political turmoil have brought world attention to northeast Africa in the 1980s, and Sudan has come to symbolize tragedy. But the prevailing image of a starving child trapped in a sectarian war between Muslims and Christians provides a dangerously misleading and far-too-simple picture.

Sudanese reality involves far more than starving children. Continued civil strife, a violent North-South conflict, and acute political instability—highlighted by a June 1989 coup—continue to ravage the country. Today Sudan is caught not in a religious war but a battle over control of its resources. It now stands on the verge of renewed famine.

Many of the private charities that poured food into Sudan in the 1980s ignored the real roots of the country's problems. So did Sudan's political elite and the nation's foreign supporters—including U.S. policy-makers. They ignored the fact that Sudan's peril emerged from its history, public policies, and relations with the rest of the world.

WHAT CRISIS?

Major famine hit Sudan in 1985. By the spring of that year, political turmoil had swept the country's long-serving military ruler, Jaafar Nimeiri, out of office; the United States had cut military and development aid; and renewed conflict in the South had developed into full-scale war.

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While drought caused a decline in production of sorghum, Sudan's staple crop, from 3.3 million tons in 1981-82 to 1.22 million tons three years later, it didn't cause the famine. Famine struck only Sudan's small farmers, who produced food for local consumption, and not the large landholders and commercial farmers. The famine resulted from the steady erosion of the small farmers' capacity to cope with natural disasters, the government's military priorities, the country's debt crisis, and the failure of Sudan's leaders to utilize the nation's natural and human resources to develop a sound, diverse economy.

Sudan should not be poor. Africa's largest country, Sudan covers roughly one-third the area of the continental United States. But Sudan's population is far smaller—fewer than 20 million people inhabit the country. Although her people are among the poorest in Africa, the country has rich natural resources—enough to provide the basis for sustainable, environmentally sound development. It has significant untapped reserves of oil and uranium and, in addition to the 20 million acres of tilled land, it has another 208 million acres of cultivatable land, 69 million acres of pasture land, and 59 million acres of forest and woodland.

The fact that Sudan harvested a record cotton crop as drought ruined food crops in 1983 and 1984 amply demonstrated the misplaced priorities of the Sudanese government and its multilateral and bilateral aid donors. Cotton survived because, as the nation's leading export and foreign-exchange earner, it had benefited from investment in irrigation,

fertilizer, pesticides, and new mechanized farming equipment.

Sudan did produce food during the famine. Commercial farmers harvested an estimated 800,000 metric tons of grain in the eastern part of the country alone. Had the food stayed in Sudan, it could have fed hundreds of thousands of people until the next harvest. Faced with swelling debt payments and a burgeoning conflict in the South, however, the government failed to come up with funds to purchase the crop. But the government did manage to increase military spending threefold.

Because Sudanese producers of commercial food and cotton had greater access to inputs and irrigation, they fared relatively well during the drought. The small farmers, who comprise the majority of Sudan's population, suffered. Expansion of commercial agriculture for export began pushing farmers off their land in the 1950s. By 1982, this trend had left 49% of Sudanese agricultural workers landless. Many were displaced to marginalized areas far from necessary services or markets, while others simply couldn't afford to lease uncultivated land from the nation's largest landowner—the government. On top of this, neither the government nor its donors offered incentives for the production of food for local consumption.



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POLITICAL FALLOUT

Sudan's immediate problems resulted from the policies pursued by Nimeiri from the late 1970s until his downfall in 1985. During that period, military officer Nimeiri moved steadily to the right in an attempt to appease the domestic opposition. Meanwhile, his country received more aid from the United States than any other sub-Saharan African nation.

While aid to Sudan increased, Nimeiri faced escalating political turmoil in the South. In 1972, a 17-year war between the predominantly Christian and animist Southern Sudan and the Sudanese government—sparked by official bias against the South—had ended with a negotiated settlement. The agreement granted the South regional autonomy. The Northern-oriented government, however, steadily eroded this autonomy, so that by 1980 the South had little say in matters of finance, development, foreign relations, or defense.

Nimeiri attempted to further curtail Southern influence in 1983 by re-drafting regional borders. He also moved to appease the growing Islamic right by declaring Islamic law the law of the land. This sparked Southern mutinies and gave rise to the Sudanese People's Liberation Army (SPLA). The SPLA demanded decentralization and local control over

resources. Aside from hitting political and military targets, it attacked economic projects that used Southern resources for the benefit of the Northern elite.

Meanwhile, the already weak economy spiraled toward disaster. In 1978, Sudan's debt was less than \$2 billion, and—though poor by any standard—her farmers could rely on surplus produce, informal markets, and livestock to survive natural calamities. A decade later, Sudan's debt exceeded \$14 billion and her farmers, their surplus expended, faced recurrent famine. This, in part, spurred the popular dissent that confronted Nimeiri.

Swelling popular discontent pushed other elements of the military to take over from Nimeiri in 1985. The transitional government established by the military held elections as promised in 1986. With the war in the South limiting voting there, Sudanese voters elected a member of the traditional Northern Arab elite, Sadiq el Mahdi, president. Faced with the loss of a key ally and facing a regime and populace critical of the past U.S. role, the Reagan administration reduced military and development aid, although it did continue to deliver humanitarian assistance.

El Mahdi refused to allow international relief into the SPLA-held Southern countryside. The SPLA also blocked the free flow of goods. Starving civilians abandoned their land and fled to government-held cities. Close to one million Southerners fled north to Khartoum, where they remain in dusty encampments on the outskirts of the capital. Hundreds of thousands escaped to Ethiopia as refugees.

During this time, international human-rights organizations documented extensive abuses by government forces in the South, including what some termed an officially sanctioned campaign of genocide against the Dinka—a major ethnic group in the non-Arab South.

Ironically, El Mahdi's government tolerated civilian activism—particularly in the North—by trade unions, non-governmental organizations, and the media. But he failed to address the sources of famine and war, and continued instability led to the June 1989 coup.

The new military government headed by General Omer Hassan Ahmed El Beshir shows little sign of changing



Sudan at independence with north-south demarcation line.

course. Negotiations with the SPLA have gone nowhere, and observers say the right-wing National Islamic Front, which favors neither negotiations with the SPLA nor economic decentralization, heavily influences the regime.

Even though the new military government declared trade unions illegal, they have re-emerged as a vibrant political alternative. In tandem with academics and other local organizations, trade unions are calling for open debate about the country's future. This, coupled with the war in the South and the renewed threat of famine, raises questions about the new government's ability to maintain its hold on power.

THE COLONIAL LEGACY

Both the war and the economic crisis trace their roots to British colonialism. British policies laid the foundation for the North-South division of the country, and they established its cotton-centered export economy.

During its colonial rule, Britain centered its economic interests in the Arab-dominated North, where a relatively advanced Islamic culture predated the colonial experience. At the same time, Britain effectively sealed off Southern Sudan to all but Christian proselytizers in an attempt to stem the tide of Islam in Africa. In the process, the colonial power laid the foundation for continued economic and political inequity between the North and South,



Relief into certain southern areas, as like this one.

as well as religious and civil conflict.

The colonial government turned arable land in the North to cotton production to support the British textile industry. Out of the "Gezira cotton scheme," a huge irrigated plantation built by colonial authorities in the early 1900s, arose a class of Northern Sudanese managers and educated nationalists who inherited the post-colonial state at independence in 1956.

The families dominating commerce and agriculture joined with elements of the military to form a narrowly based Northern and predominantly Muslim class that has governed Sudan to the present. Official Sudanese policies have thus embraced a mono-ethnic bias that does not reflect the country's multitude of diverse cultures and nationalities.

SUDAN AND THE UNITED STATES

In the eyes of U.S. State Department strategists, Sudan's location is its most valuable asset. The country straddles Black Africa and the Middle East and sits between Ethiopia and Libya, both key ideological adversaries of the U.S. government. Sudan provides coastal access to the Red Sea and thus proximity to shipping lanes, as well as to Saudi Arabia and other Gulf allies. Perhaps most important, in the Middle East conflict Sudan has played understudy to Egypt, the United States' most reliable Arab ally. Sudan has accepted isolation from the Arab world as the price for supporting its northern neighbor's Camp David accord with Israel.

U.S. interest in Sudan grew in the late 1970s. With foreign aid its main tool, the apparent aim of U.S. policy was to maintain the stability of the country, not by promoting democratic development, but by bolstering Nimeiri's increasingly unpopular military regime. In 1982, Sudan became one of the world's top 10 recipients of U.S. military assistance, a position it maintained until 1985. The United States also provided important development and humanitarian assistance. Most significant to Nimeiri was the provision of Economic Support Funds (ESF)—economic aid tied directly to security concerns. This aid had ballooned to \$120 million by 1985 and included cash grants to help offset the Sudanese trade deficit and to support the import of commodities. The level of U.S.

TOM BENTON/IMPACT VISUALS



This Dinka chief now lives in a refugee camp near Khartoum.

aid did not drop until Nimeiri fell in 1985.

Development initiatives funded by the United States over the past decade reflect the conviction that production for export and an enhanced role for the private sector are the keys to economic growth, a view shared by the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF). In addition, the Sudanese government's continued bias against the South has been mirrored by both bilateral and multilateral aid programs. These policies and initiatives generated a dependency on imports to fulfill basic needs and helped spark a series of balance-of-payments crises.

IMF AND THE WORLD BANK

The IMF and the World Bank expanded their roles in Sudan even before the United States increased its direct involvement. The role of the multilateral financial institutions grew enormously

in the late 1970s when the World Bank succeeded in its efforts to convince Sudanese policy-makers to overhaul the mammoth Gezira plantation. The plantation had fallen into disrepair when Sudan shifted its emphasis from cotton to food production for export in the early 1970s.

The World Bank also favored agricultural development built around mechanized and irrigated schemes, which benefited large landholders who could afford to lease land and purchase tractors, fertilizer, and pesticides. Following a 1971 act decreeing all unregistered land the property of the government, large-scale investors were able to lease major tracts of land very cheaply. These events helped push small holders off their land. With the large farmers producing for export, and small producers displaced, food production for domestic consumption declined.

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While the World Bank's emphasis on cotton directs Sudan's resources away from meeting local needs, it has also proven unsound in other ways. A fluctuating world market creates uncertainty and periodically drives prices down. What's more, cotton production requires that 43% of earnings be spent on imported equipment and supplies. Overall cotton production has increased, meanwhile, only because the amount of land under cultivation has expanded. In recent years, production per farm has declined and overall export earnings have fallen by 15%.

Throughout the 1970s, Sudan's budget and trade deficits grew. From 1978 to 1985, although Sudan had fallen in arrears on IMF payments, the IMF kept the country afloat. The IMF negotiated successive "stand-by agreements" with the government each time Sudan was unable to make its foreign-debt and trade payments. Essentially, the Fund coordinated an international donor bailout of the Nimeiri regime. In 1984, for example, the U.S. government assisted in the bailout by providing Nimeiri's government with the \$18 million needed to pay back the IMF. As one long-time observer of Sudan noted, the fight for survival of the government had replaced the aim of developing its economy.

POLITICS OF AID

Today, the ongoing Sudanese relief operation continues to be marred by a seemingly endless war. Despite increasing pressure from members of Congress and representatives of private aid agencies, Washington has done little to challenge the Sudanese leadership's

economic and physical war against the Southern people.

Holly Burkhalter of Human Rights Watch testified before Congress last winter that she had "seen no evidence that the executive branch used leverage of U.S. aid, our votes in the multilateral lending institutions, or even public statements to pressure the government of Sudan to change the policies which resulted in the death of a half million Sudanese by the end of 1988." In early 1989, marking a clear shift from Reagan's policy, the Bush administration finally agreed to provide food aid to non-governmental organizations working in SPLA territory.

Both Britain and the Netherlands, major bilateral donors to Sudan's development programs, have cut off assistance to the central government until it reaches a peace accord with the Southern opposition. But the major development organizations, such as the World Bank and the U.S. Agency for International Development, have yet to support the equitable distribution of resources between North and South and local control over those resources. At the same time, none of the conditions placed on aid to the country by the World Bank, IMF, or U.S. government has addressed the ongoing war in the South, although the conflict consumes at least one-third of the government's annual budget.

Washington's continued public focus on the starving child comes at the expense of Sudan's long-term future. What the United States and other donors to Sudan must recognize is that the economic injustice that brought about the war is the heart of the matter. To reduce development to food shipments is to save perhaps thousands of lives now, but to ensure that millions will starve in the future. Address the causes of war and famine and the starving children will disappear. ■