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# (Yet Another) Crisis In Sudan: Khartoum's Religious Freedom and Human Rights Abuses

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*There are no reports about the killings in Sudan, but we hear on the radio about the killings everywhere else in the world. We don't feel like the international community cares. We are not a priority.*

—SPLM-N ELECTION VOLUNTEER, KADUGLI

*They want to arrest us. They don't want their own people to live.*

—TEACHER, TALLIE

In Sudan's provinces of Southern Kordofan and Blue Nile, located across the border from the Republic of South Sudan, a humanitarian crisis has unfolded and intensified almost simultaneously with the formation of that new state.<sup>1</sup> The humanitarian crisis is driven by the long-standing human rights crisis—and, most specifically, the systematic and egregious violations of religious freedom—endemic to Sudan under the control of President Omar al-Bashir. Led by Bashir, the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and Khartoum's paramilitary Popular Defense Forces (PDF) are targeting people based on their religious, ethnic, and political affiliations. Bashir's government has escalated a bombing campaign against civilian targets in Southern Kordofan and Blue Nile, producing loss of life, forced migration, and denial of assistance to the refugees created by this overall humanitarian emergency. The government's actions constitute a glaring violation of international human rights law, a violation on which the United States and the world community must shed light and take action. Furthermore,

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scholar-practitioners engaged in humanitarian intervention and relief must urgently recognize the linkages between religious freedom and the security environment.

In October 2011, David Dettoni and Tiffany Lynch traveled to South Sudan<sup>2</sup> as representatives of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), an independent, bipartisan federal government commission.<sup>3</sup> They visited refugees living with friends and family in Juba and refugees at the Yida refugee camp near the border from Southern Kordofan to investigate reports of abuses of international human rights law, including severe violations of freedom of religion or belief. The USCIRF representatives interviewed more than eighty refugees who had fled south from Southern Kordofan and Blue Nile, including Christian and Muslim religious leaders,<sup>4</sup> approximately thirty in individual interviews and fifty in focus groups. USCIRF also met with representatives from the U.S. government, the United Nations, the Sudan People's Liberation Movement-North (SPLM-N),<sup>5</sup> international human rights non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and Southern Kordofan and Blue Nile NGOs. Based on these interviews and meetings, a bleak picture of human rights violations—especially abuses of religious freedom—and attendant humanitarian crises emerged.

#### KHARTOUM V. SOUTHERN SUDAN: BACKGROUND OF THE CONFLICT

Contiguous with the northern border of South Sudan, Southern Kordofan and Blue Nile are religiously and ethnically diverse states. Their populations share the same grievances against Khartoum as the pre-independence Southern Sudanese, along with fellow Sudanese in Darfur, in

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East Sudan, and north of Khartoum. These grievances include political and economic marginalization, arbitrary expropriation of lands, forced displacement of populations, and the relentless attempts by Khartoum's ruling National Congress Party (NCP) to impose on Sudan a single identity based on Arab ethnicity and its own extremist interpretation of Islam. These policies have amounted to an ongoing process of religious and ethnic cleansing, as evidenced by the contours of the current humanitarian crisis engulfing Southern Kordofan and Blue Nile.

During Sudan's North-South civil war, Nuba and southern Blue Nile residents supported the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A), whose leader, John Garang, envisioned a "New Sudan" that would affirm the nation's diversity and uphold the human rights of all Sudanese regardless of religion or ethnicity. Prior to taking up arms against Khartoum, Nuba's cultures and religions had been ruthlessly suppressed and its language banned. The Nuba reside in Kadugli and the Nuba Mountains in what is today Southern Kordofan state and are black, African, and followers of either Islam, Christianity, or indigenous religions. In 1992, the NCP declared hundreds of thousands of Nuba Muslims to be apostates for failing to support the government and declared *jihad* on the population. The government and PDF raped, killed, or disappeared hundreds of thousands of Nuba. Hundreds of thousands more were forcibly relocated, denied access to food and humanitarian assistance, and forcibly converted to Islam.

The signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA)<sup>6</sup> in 2005 ended the North-South conflict. While it provided for a referendum on Southern Sudanese self-determination, it only allowed Southern Kordofan and Blue Nile residents to hold "popular consultations," defined vaguely as "a democratic right and mechanism to ascertain the views of the people on the comprehensive agreement reached." During the peace negotiations, Nuba Mountain and Blue Nile SPLM/A leaders had instead supported a self-determination referendum on whether to stay with Khartoum or join South Sudan if it gained independence. The CPA also required the two provinces to demilitarize, compelling their SPLM/A troops to disarm, join the government-run Joint Integrated Units (JIUs), or redeploy to South Sudan.

Throughout the peace agreement's six-year Interim Period, the security situation in the Nuba Mountains remained tense, while the lack of religious freedom continued to violate international human rights standards. A number of developments left Nuba residents feeling increasingly isolated, including the replacement of a referendum in the CPA with the ill-defined "popular consultations," the withdrawal of SPLA troops to South Sudan, the creation of Southern Kordofan by merging Western Kordofan with the Nuba Mountains, tilting the demographics in Khartoum's favor,<sup>7</sup> and the continued lack of international attention.

During the Interim Period, integration of Nuba SPLA and Khartoum-backed PDF soldiers into JIUs and the police was slow and incomplete. Each side accrued arms and acts of violence were frequent. Moreover, Nuba leaders concurred with international and SPLM complaints about the 2009 national census, alleging that it omitted large areas of Sudan, especially

SPLM-supporting regions. In Southern Kordofan, the results were so disputed that leaders postponed the 2010 state and local elections.

#### ETHNIC AND RELIGIOUS CLEANSING IN SOUTHERN KORDOFAN AND BLUE NILE

Elections were finally held in May 2011. As the ballots were being tallied, anti-NCP elements cited vote rigging and declared they would neither recognize the outcome nor participate in the government. The NCP candidate, Ahmed Haroun, who has been indicted by the International Criminal Court for crimes against humanity in Darfur, was elected governor.

As tensions rose throughout May, fighting between Khartoum's SAF and the SPLA broke out in Abyei, displacing eighty thousand persons. Abyei is a perpetual hotspot in North-South relations, as the African and religiously-mixed Dinka supported and served as leaders in the SPLM/A, while the Arab Muslim and nomadic Misseriya, who migrate through Abyei, backed the SAF.

On June 5, 2011, Khartoum initiated fighting in Southern Kordofan.

Hostilities began five days after the NCP deadline for all SPLA troops in the JIUs to disarm or withdraw to South Sudan. SPLM-N officials argued that SPLA troops in the territories were citizens of Southern Kordofan and Blue Nile and thus belonged in Sudan. The soldiers refused to leave their areas or disarm.

*Soldiers went house to house and arrested or executed people thought to be on the government blacklist. Government and paramilitary soldiers also shot and raped persons identified as Nuba solely due to their black skin tones.*

During the initial days of the conflict in June 2011, Khartoum's SAF and PDF conducted targeted executions, disappearances, arrests, and indiscriminate killings of Nuba. A blacklist of SPLM-N leaders, Christian leaders, and Nuba civil society leaders and teachers was created. Persons on the list were deemed NCP enemies due to their religious, political, or ethnic

identification. Soldiers went house to house and arrested or executed people thought to be on the government blacklist. Government and paramilitary soldiers also shot and raped persons identified as Nuba solely due to their black skin tones. They also killed Christians on sight as "enemies of Islam."

Following its investigation of the fighting in June 2011, the office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (UNHCHR) stated

that the killings and disappearances could be serious violations of human rights and international law and could amount to crimes against humanity. Numerous Sudanese human rights experts and monitors have warned that ethnic and religious cleansing is taking place against the Nuba people in Southern Kordofan.

On June 28, the NCP and SPLM-N signed the Addis Ababa Framework Agreement on political and security arrangements in Southern Kordofan and Blue Nile. Three days later, President Bashir denounced the agreement and has since banned the SPLM-N and refused to enter into peace negotiations with the party.

On September 1, fighting began in Blue Nile. SPLM-N chairman Malik Aggar was illegally removed from his post as governor of Blue Nile, his house was torched, and the SAF arrested more than 150 SPLM-N party supporters.

**“THE MILITIAS KILLED THE MAN”:**

**ASSAULTS ON NUBA MOUNTAIN RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES**

From the start of the fighting in Southern Kordofan, Khartoum's SAF and PDF targeted Christian religious leaders, worshippers, and houses of worship, cutting across Christian and Muslim confessional lines. Christians in Sudan have largely supported the SPLM because of the NCP's imposition of shari'a law and promotion of an Arab Muslim identity nationwide. The government estimates that Christians comprise just three percent of Sudan, while church leaders place the figure at between ten and fifteen percent. The Nuba people and Blue Nile populations are predominately Muslim, although a minority are Christians or followers of indigenous religions. There have been fewer reports of Christians being targeted in Blue Nile because fewer live there and because those who do live only in SPLA-N-held areas and are thus protected from attacks by the SAF and PDF.

The heavy attacks on Southern Kordofan's Christians led many pastors to flee to Khartoum, Juba, and other areas both within and outside Sudan. All clergy with whom USCIRF spoke said they left Southern Kordofan after learning that the SAF and PDF were searching for Christians and SPLM-N supporters. Several said family and friends warned that their names were on the blacklist and that soldiers had visited their homes.

*I left Kadugli three days after the war broke out. I was in the Sudan Council of Churches building. From my vantage point, I saw two houses being fired at and looted. The first was the Coptic Church guest-house, where an SPLA soldier had run to hide. The militias killed*

*the man. The second house was formerly used to house SPLA soldiers. It was set fire to and destroyed... I ran after three days when it was safe after realizing that SAF and militias were going house to house searching for church leaders, SPLA officers, and civil society leaders...*

—SUDAN COUNCIL OF CHURCHES  
REPRESENTATIVE, KADUGLI

In interviews with Southern Kordofan refugees in Juba and at a refugee camp in South Sudan, USCIRF was told of Christians being arrested and killed.

*On the Tuesday after the fighting started I was at school with my students. I saw a vehicle with SAF soldiers surround an ECS {Episcopal Church of Sudan} near the school. There were Christians inside the church praying. SAF soldiers started shooting inside the church at the people. SAF soldiers went into the church and pulled out a Christian, captured him, and shot him. As this was going on, my students and I were hiding behind the school, but could still see the SAF killing people with guns and knives.*

—TEACHER, KADUGLI

*I was in Kadugli the first four days of the fighting. I fled the first time I thought it was safe to leave my house. My family and I tried to go to the UN {compound}. When we got there I saw the SAF and the militias arresting people. I saw {seminary student Phillip} Kalo be shot as the soldiers said he was an enemy of Islam. When I saw this I thought I would be in danger because I am an SPLM supporter. I ran and my family stayed behind. I saw someone in a car driving by the UN and I jumped in his car to get a ride with that person, who was also fleeing.*

—ACCOUNTANT, KADUGLI

Christian clergy and Muslim refugees said that President Bashir's government views Christians as infidels ("*kaiffir*," in Arabic) and wants to extirpate Christianity from the country. One imam spoke of soldiers targeting non-Muslims in his town outside of Kadugli.

*A soldier came to me as the imam of the mosque with the message that all Muslims should leave the city because they wanted to kill the Christians. The SAF person said all Christians and SPLM supports are *kaiffirs*. I said I am a Muslim. But I am also a Nuba, and I refused to leave or separate Muslims from Christians. I was arrested by the SAF and imprisoned for five days.*

—IMAM, OUTSIDE KADUGLI

Religious-based assaults were also perpetrated against Muslims in the Nuba Mountains. Imam Mohamed Idress, an SPLM-N supporter, was killed in Kadugli on his way home from evening prayers. In Umdurin, a bomb was dropped near a mosque during Friday prayers. As one Muslim Nuba refugee said to USCIRF, "Khartoum does not consider us as real Muslims" since they are not Arabs.

Christians and Muslims alike were denied the right to sanctuary in their houses of worship. In addition to the attacks on Episcopal and Roman Catholic churches sheltering refuge-seeking congregants, USCIRF was told of similar attacks on mosques in Southern Kordofan.

*I worked in Kadugli as a teacher. I tried to stay at my school to be with my forty-four students because of how dangerous the town was. We were fleeing Kadugli and ran into a mosque in Dalami, but militias started attacking the mosque. People were going to the mosque to pray, but the SAF were shooting into it and killing people. We hid behind the mosque for three hours. After the shooting, I went inside the mosque and hid there until dark. Then we hid in mountains and slept.*

—TEACHER, KADUGLI

In violation of the international law of armed conflict, SAF forces attacked houses of worship through ground offensives and aerial bombardments. Four of Kadugli's five churches were destroyed, and their offices and guesthouses, as well as the Sudan Council of Churches offices, were attacked. The only church left untouched was the Egyptian Coptic Church, many of whose congregants throughout Sudan have business ties with the ruling party. Episcopal pastors and a Sudan Council of Churches representative in Kadugli described doors and windows torn down, documents and religious papers ripped apart, parts of churches burned, and supplies, vehicles, and electronic equipment looted. Refugees also spoke of mosques being looted or converted to military installations by SAF soldiers. And Khartoum's bombing campaign extended to churches and mosques, even during religious services. Numerous refugees reported fleeing as the bombings began and returning days later to find churches and mosques, as well as other buildings, destroyed.

USCIRF was told that since a large number of pastors have fled, few remain to lead services. To avoid the bombs, displaced Christians and Muslims sporadically hold religious services under trees or in caves.

## ATTACKS ON NUBA IN KHARTOUM

Several refugees also spoke about threats to Southern Kordofan pastors and other members of the Nuba community who fled to Khartoum. This pattern of harassment of Nuba Christians is part of a larger trend of a deterioration of religious freedom nationwide, including attacks on churches or threats of closure, increased monitoring of church leaders and congregations, and more arrests of nonconforming Muslims for apostasy.

Pastors described being targeted and harassed in Khartoum after escaping Kadugli. Security officers searched for them in homes where they were believed to be staying, and a radical Muslim group reportedly posted flyers on the homes, calling them enemies of Islam and Sudan. The pastors then fled the capitol, many to South Sudan.

*After Kadugli I went to Khartoum. The security officers followed up with me there, looking for me, asking for me. They came to my house but I was not in. Where I was staying, an Islamic group spread flyers denouncing me as an enemy of the state. They also said that churches are supporting rebels and are opposed to Islam. When I was in Khartoum I received calls and threats.*

—EPISCOPAL CHURCH OF SUDAN PASTOR,  
KADUGLI

USCIRF also spoke with several Nubas who were in Khartoum when the fighting started. These refugees told similar stories of security officers searching their houses for them. Refugees told of relatives in Khartoum who were arrested or fired from their jobs. Two refugees said that a Pentecostal pastor whose congregation is predominately Nuba was arrested after leading a prayer for peace in the Nuba Mountains.

## REFUGEES, STARVATION, AND BOMBINGS: ANOTHER DARFUR?

The near-constant aerial bombardments and fighting in Southern Kordofan and Blue Nile have created a humanitarian tragedy. Local sources report that 400,000 persons have been internally displaced in Southern Kordofan and Blue Nile and require food and medical assistance. More than eighty thousand have fled to neighboring countries. Fields, farms, and crops have been destroyed and farmers are prevented from harvesting crops. Medical facilities have been damaged and staff has fled. Adding to the crisis, President Bashir and Governor Haroun have denied international monitoring and humanitarian access, including food and medical assistance,

to areas controlled by the SPLA-N. President Bashir used similar tactics during the 1983-2005 civil war when he closed the Nuba Mountains to humanitarian assistance and independent human rights monitoring for nearly a decade. Governor Haroun also ..... utilized this tactic in Darfur, killing an estimated four hundred thousand people through violence, starvation, and disease.

In January, the United States warned that by mid-March the humanitarian situation would worsen to one level below famine on the international famine early warning system and called on Sudan to allow help for needy persons. Khartoum responded by denying there was a humanitarian emergency. In February, the United Nations, African Union, and Arab League submitted a joint proposal to assist all affected areas in Southern Kordofan and Blue Nile, but Khartoum has yet to respond to this overture.

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In late October, when USCIRF visited the Yida camp in South Sudan—which was set up and administered by refugees themselves—it held more than seventeen thousand people who had fled Southern Kordofan, with new arrivals of about 280 to 300 per day. At the time of this publication, camp administrators reported that the number has increased to more than 22 thousand people, with more than 300 people arriving daily. More than 60 percent of the residents are women and children, and a large percentage of the children are unaccompanied minors.

Yida is in South Sudan, ten miles south of the border with Southern Kordofan. From the camp, refugees witnessed an attack aircraft flying over Jao, the closest city in Southern Kordofan. International interlocutors expressed concerns that Yida could be bombed, but the UN, U.S. government, and several NGOs have been unable to set up operations at the camp due to its proximity to the fighting. This fear became a reality on November 10, 2011, when the SAF dropped four bombs in and around the camp. One bomb landed in a schoolyard, but did not explode. More than 300 students were in class at the time.

The camp's isolated location makes it hard to deliver aid. Bentiu, the city closest to the camp, is more than a four hour-drive away. The roads

taken during the drive are dangerous due to land mines and are even more dangerous during the rainy season's flooding. Yida refugees and the international NGO, Samaritan's Purse, cleared an area for a small landing strip so that planes could deliver food and other materials from the World Food Programme. However, with increasing numbers of refugees arriving each day, food and other items are in short supply.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Through the Sudan Armed Forces (SAF) and the paramilitary Popular Defense Forces (PDF), the government of Khartoum continues to violate fundamental rights in Southern Kordofan and Blue Nile, including freedom of religion or belief, precisely as it has done elsewhere from South Sudan to Darfur.

Sudan is a signatory to a host of international agreements, such as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination; and the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights. These agreements affirm the equality of all citizens regardless of religion, race, or ethnicity, as well as affirm the right to life and security, freedom of religion or belief, protection from arbitrary arrest, and maintenance of cultural practices.

In the conflict in Southern Kordofan and Blue Nile, the Sudanese government has violated each of these agreements. The government in Khartoum has targeted people based on their religious and ethnic identities. It has attacked their houses of worship even while they prayed. It has denied unrestricted humanitarian access to the region after causing death, dislocation, and starvation. It has flouted the many international agreements to which it is a signatory, including the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which affirms the rights to life, food, housing and medical care.

Khartoum's attacks against Christians, ethnic Nubas, and the SPLM-N in Southern Kordofan and Blue Nile are part of a greater battle for the future of religious and political freedoms in Sudan. As Khartoum wages war and denies crucial assistance to civilians in the two states, President Bashir and the NCP have engaged in a nationwide crackdown on civil society. Hundreds of SPLM-N supporters have been arrested, SPLMN-N offices and equipment confiscated, peaceful protestors detained and tortured, and newspapers censored. In December 2010, President Bashir announced that Sudan's new constitution will be based on *shari'a* law and will erase references to Sudan's religious, ethnic, and cultural diversity.

Khartoum's violations of human rights and religious freedom will continue in these two states and elsewhere in Sudan as long as there are no serious challenges from either the international community or regional associations to the abusive, undemocratic governance of President Bashir and the NCP. Likewise, absent an effective response to the ethnic and religious cleansing that has become a hallmark of the Sudanese regime, the potential for a stable security environment in the region is limited. It is time for the world to confront Sudan and persuade its leadership to move toward a more democratic regime of governance, one that would promote lasting security by respecting human rights, including the freedom of religion and belief. ■

#### ENDNOTES

- 1 South Sudan gained independence from Sudan on July 11, 2011.
- 2 Travel dates were October 15-26, 2011.
- 3 USCIRF has worked in Sudan since 1998. During the North-South civil war, USCIRF named Sudan the world's worst abuser of religious freedom. Since 1998, USCIRF has travelled to Khartoum three times, travelled to Juba eight times, organized three public hearings on U.S.-Sudan policy, convened five private roundtables with Sudan policy experts to strengthen U.S. policy to implement the Comprehensive Peace Agreement, held three press conferences to highlight USCIRF recommendations, and issued dozens of publications. More information about USCIRF and USCIRF's work on Sudan can be found at [www.uscifr.gov](http://www.uscifr.gov). Further information on current and longstanding violations of freedom of religion or belief in Sudan, including in USCIRF 2012 annual report, can be found on the USCIRF website.
- 4 Religious leaders were from the Catholic, Anglican and Protestant Christian faiths and Sunni Islam.
- 5 The Sudan People's Liberation Movement-North (SPLM-N) is an opposition political party in Sudan. It was the Northern Sector of the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM) during the 1983-2005 North-South civil war and through the Interim Period of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) from 2005 to 2011. After Southern Sudanese voted for independence from Sudan in January 2011, the Northern Sector voted in February 2011 to form its own political party in Sudan called the Sudan People's Liberation Movement-North, separate from the SPLM party in the Republic of South Sudan. During the civil war, the rebel forces were called the Southern People's Liberation Army (SPLA), which became and continues to be the official army of South Sudan. The rebel forces fighting in Southern Kordofan and Blue Nile today consist of former SPLA soldiers from the two states who fought in the civil war and SPLM-N supporters. It is called the Sudan People's Liberation Army-North (SPLA-N).
- 6 The Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) was signed on January 9, 2005, between the National Congress Party (NCP) and the Sudan People's Liberation Movement-Army (SPLM/A). It subsumed a number of previous peace agreements between the two parties and included provisions for: a federal state with a national power-sharing government in Khartoum and a Government of South Sudan in Juba, national and local elections in 2010, a referendum on self-determination for South Sudan in January 2011, and a number of human rights commissions. The CPA also included special protocols for the

three disputed areas of Abyei, Southern Kordofan, and Blue Nile. The SPLM fought during peace negotiations for the Abyei Protocol, which allowed residents of the Abyei area to vote in a referendum to be part of South Sudan or remain in the North. The push for the referendum in Abyei left the SPLM with little remaining leverage to address the political and economic grievances of its supporters in the other two disputed areas. As a result, the SPLM could not get a referendum similar to that promised to Abyei residents for Southern Kordofan and Blue Nile residents, instead those two states were promised popular consultations to determine their governing arrangements with the central government in Khartoum.

7 Southern Kordofan consists of the black African and religiously mixed Nuba and the Arab Muslim and nomadic Baggara, who are cattle herders from the Misseriya and Hawazma tribes. While the Nuba joined the SPLM/A, the Bagarra formed the PDF.