

Sudan hearing - Testimony of Douglas Johnson

United States Commission on International Religious Freedom

Sudan's Unravelling Peace and the Challenge to U.S. Policy

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10:00 - 12:30

Room 2359 Rayburn House Office Building

Statement by Dr. Douglas H. Johnson

I first testified at a Washington hearing on the Sudan in 1984 when I appeared before the House Africa sub-committee at the beginning of the Sudan's twenty-two year long civil war. At that time the US government backed the regime in Khartoum militarily, economically and diplomatically as part of its wider strategic vision in the region. I argued that the US had misread the political situation in the Sudan and that support for the regime was only contributing to the escalating violence of the country's civil war. Obviously these remarks were considered hopelessly naïve, and for the following decade the US continued to support each successive regime in Khartoum, including the NIF regime of Omar al-Bashir, until such time as new strategic considerations began to dominate US foreign policy.

Now, twenty-four years later, we have a peace process, but not yet peace, a US government which still misreads the political situation in the Sudan, and a Sudan policy still subordinated to a dominant security policy.

I will confine myself to three observations:

1) The only people who can make peace in the Sudan are the Sudanese. Peace cannot be imposed from outside. It will come only when the majority of those forces currently holding power see it as in their interest to make a real and lasting peace.

2) The US's ability to promote any policy in the Sudan is restricted by other external factors, such as the consequences of its engagement in Iraq and its confrontational, often hostile, relations with the UN.

3) Just as the US's Sudan policy in the 1980s was subordinated to its wider strategic priorities in the Cold War, so today US policy appears to place a higher priority on the Sudan as a partner in the 'war on terror' security network than on achieving peace in the Sudan. The one undermines the other.

Let me deal with each of these points in turn. As academics are better at asking questions than answering them, I will pose a number of questions.

1) The Palestinian author Raja Shehadeh recently said of Israel and Palestine: there is a peace process, but no peace, and as long as the parties are engaged in the peace process, they don't feel that have to make peace. His analysis could also be applied to the Sudan.

One of the fundamental mistakes of the peace process begun by the Danforth report, which resulted in the CPA, was that it viewed the conflicts in the Sudan as separate and unrelated to each other. It still characterised the war as essentially a North-South conflict (as this hearing also does), even though by 2002 the war was being fought in the Eastern Sudan, the Blue Nile and the Nuba Mountains, and conflict was escalating in Darfur. The Sudanese opposition, including the SPLM, had agreed in broad terms on the type of constitutional process that would be needed, not just to bring an end to the war, but to construct peace throughout the country. The peace process inaugurated by the Danforth report excluded the wider Sudanese opposition and ignored the consensus they had reached about restructuring the state.

Under this formula the National Congress Party was not only able, but encouraged to reach separate agreements with different regional and opposition movements, based on power-sharing as the distribution of government offices, rather than any fundamental restructuring of political and economic power within the Sudan. There were separate deals for the South, the Nuba Mountains, Blue Nile, the Eastern Sudan, and separate deals with individual Northern opposition parties.

The result was that the NCP, which represents only a minority within the North, has been entrenched in power while the majority of the country, represented by the northern opposition, SPLM, and Southern opposition parties are a permanent minority within the current constitutional arrangements. It is true that the SPLM has been given an escape clause of a referendum for self-determination in the South, but this had always been their fallback position if it became impossible to bring about a restructured 'New Sudan' through negotiation. The current imbalance makes it almost inevitable that the vote in the 2011 referendum will favour separation.

Given this very likely outcome, who, in the Sudan, has a stake in the CPA and is committed to its implementation?

Most of the SPLM is committed, because it has something to gain in the long term, if not through the current power- and wealth-sharing provisions, then through the escape clause of the referendum. But Southern secession provides no solution for the peoples of the Nuba Mountains and the Blue Nile along the South's border, so separation will not by itself bring a lasting peace.

The NCP is not fully committed, because in the long-term they have much to lose, especially if the South votes for separation. The faction within the NCP who feel that too much was conceded in the CPA now seem to be in the ascendant and is preparing to hold on to as much as possible in the future, which is why the border regions of Abyei, the Nuba Mountains, and Blue Nile are in so much turmoil now.

The northern opposition is not committed, because they have no effective place in the CPA; therefore they have no stake in its success.

The question US policy makers must face, then, is what is needed to persuade the majority of Sudanese political forces that it is in their interest to implement the CPA? What is needed to ensure that they feel that they have a stake not just in the peace process, but in the peace? And since the CPA is only an interim solution, what discussions and negotiations must be started now to deal with the post-2011 situation?

2) It should be obvious to everyone in this room, whatever their political affiliation, that the US's ability to provide leadership over the Sudan has been adversely affected by events in the wider region. Until that changes, the US will have to find ways to support initiatives taken by other governments or bodies. At the very least it must be more supportive than it has been in the past.

It was a great mistake that the Sudan was allowed to expel Jan Pronk as the UN Secretary General's personal envoy to

the Sudan without any consequences to itself. At the time, of course, the US had generated its own confrontation with the UN and was not in a position to take a leading role supporting the Secretary General and the UN. As a result the NCP government in Khartoum continues to issue threats against other senior UN officials in the Sudan whenever they report anything critical about the government.

UNMIS has not always performed its duties in the Sudan well, and there is a lot to criticise. But all too often the US's approach has been to scold the UN without examining how it contributes to undermining the UN's work. The fact of the matter is that UNMIS has the largest international presence of any body in the Sudan, and the UN's role will only increase as UNAMID is brought into play. The US must find ways to work more effectively with and through the UN, so that the UN can work more effectively in the Sudan.

In this respect I do have two specific suggestions:

1) UNMIS should be enabled to follow a more robust peacekeeping mandate, not only to investigate violations of the cease-fire and keep former combatants apart, but to enforce demilitarized zones, especially in the three border areas of Abyei, Nuba Mountains and Blue Nile. UNMIS forces should be more active in areas where the Joint Integrated Units are to be deployed, and should be the only military forces allowed to operate in those areas until the JIUs are adequately trained and deployed. The US can support this diplomatically in the UN and logistically on the ground.

2) There must be a more vigorous policy of training the Sudan's JIUs in peace keeping. This cannot be done in the Sudan. It would be far better to train the JIUs outside the Sudan, in countries such as Ghana or South Africa, so that the units were instructed not only in the essentials of peace keeping, but in operating as integrated units. The US can support and facilitate such a training program.

3) The US currently has a contradictory approach to the Sudan. On the one hand the Sudan is still on the list of supporters of state terror, and on the other it is an ally in the war against terror. We have to know where peace in the Sudan comes in the US's foreign policy priorities: does it come above creating an intelligence network monitoring al-Qaida and other Islamist groups, or below it? Sudanese state security agencies, who are currently collaborating in the US's security network in the global 'war on terror', are also centrally involved in prosecuting the war in Darfur and co-ordinating resistance to the implementation of the CPA in such sensitive areas as Abyei, the Nuba Mountains and the Sudan's oil fields.

Has the US government decided that there is an acceptable price to pay in Sudanese lives to maintain its own security? Has it decided that the information fed into its intelligence network by Sudanese state security is more important than securing peace in the Sudan? To what extent have our current security priorities contributed to undermining peace in Sudan?

These are the questions that must be put to the current administration and to the administration that will succeed it next January. Until we get honest answers to these questions we will have no hope of formulating a positive and effective policy promoting peace in Sudan.