Hearings on Religious Persecution in Sudan: Mr. Francis Deng Oral Testimony

February 15, 2000

(Note: These are unedited and uncorrected transcripts)

MR. DENG: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman, especially for your very kind words.

Considering that China is one of your countries of focus, I wonder if some people saw the name "Deng" and wondered what the Chinese are doing commenting on the Sudan.

I wish I had time to speak really in praise of my fellow testifiers here, for whom I have very, very high regard, but I do not have time, so I will just rush through my points.

I think the main point that I would like to focus on, at least conceptually, is to try to understand why people in the Sudan, the leadership, behave the way they do. Here, I would like to focus on a few points and try to substantiate the mentality of the regime in Khartoum, and some of those before them that also had serious problems of freedom or lack of it.

In the Sudan, as I think Bishop Gassis has already implied, there is a sense in which religion is closely associated with race, ethnicity and culture. Northern Sudanese see themselves not only as Muslims but as Arabs, as a racial and cultural concept. And we have to see this in the context of stratification in history in which being an Arab, being a Muslim, being culturally Arabized obviously places one in a higher order than being an African and particularly a heathen.

This resulted in an evolution in which Sudanese, despite the fact that only a few Arabs came to the Sudan and intermingled with the local population, became as a matter of self-perception Arabs, imagining--even if they did not have--imagining some Arab ancestral genes which elevated them racially.

Let me just quote at random. There are five such Resolutions. Resolution Number 73 of 1996 of the Commission on Human Rights on the situation of human rights in the Sudan. The Commission at that time expressed its deep concern that continued serious human rights violations in the Sudan, including summary executions, extrajudicial killings, arbitrary arrests, detentions without due process, enforced or involuntary disappearances, violations of the rights of women and children, slavery and slavery-like practices, forced displacement of persons and systematic torture, the denial of freedom of expression, association, and peaceful assembly, and obviously, it expressed serious concern about reports of religious persecution and forced conversion to Islam in government-controlled areas of the Sudan.

This is only a small part of the bulk of the Resolutions which were adopted during the past year, I must say with great sadness, with little impact on the situation on the ground. I am not talking about the diplomatic or political level.

Among the cases of violations of freedom of religion, freedom of conscience of Christians and those people who are holders of traditional African beliefs, in fact, actually, I documented in my reports patterns of discrimination, and I will enumerate here some of them, the most important and most outrageous of them.

These are harassment, ill treatment, and restriction of the freedom of movement by members of the security forces of ordinary Christian citizens as well as church personnel, the clergy and nuns and leaders of various Christian denominations in the Sudan; expulsion of priests, missionaries and nuns from certain locations in the North and government-controlled towns in Southern Sudan; arbitrary closing of Christian schools, which is still going on. In certain areas like Damazin [ph.] Province, one of the most notorious areas in this regard, Christian preaching has been forbidden since 1992.

Another pattern is the confiscation of Church-owned land and other properties, which is and was the routine of the day; constant refusal to issue permits for building new churches; closure and destruction of religious centers in areas inhabited by Southerners displaced in Khartoum and other towns in Northern Sudan; demolition of churches, especially in the provinces, for example, in Kanana [ph.], which started earlier, in the early 1990's; arbitrary interdiction of prayer and Christian religious celebrations; prevention or delay by administrative means of humanitarian and relief activities by churches; use of food and other relief as a method of Islamization in the war zones in Southern Sudan, in the government-controlled areas, both by authorities and Islamic nongovernment organizations closely working with the Sudan Government, targeting Christians and persons of traditional African beliefs; conversion to Islam of individuals under threat, particularly in the

government-controlled areas in Southern Sudan; a general policy of intimidation of Christians and the imprint and strengthening of a feeling of insecurity; systematic, indiscriminate and deliberate aerial bombardment of civilian targets in Southern Sudan, as the Nuba Mountains--we just heard the latest cases--in particular, churches, hospitals, relief and distribution centers, and schools.

In 1994, in early October, Sudanese President Omar Al-Bashir announced the abolition of the 1992 Missionary Act, which was generally considered repressive and discriminatory against the Sudanese churches. While this announcement was welcomed by the international community and by those concerned in the Sudan, soon it was revealed that something worse was going to happen.

On October 4, 1994, a provisional order entitled, "The Miselenas [ph.] Amendment Act of Organization of Voluntary Work" was made public. The Catholic Bishops' Conference, in a paper made public in 1994, considered this new Act of 1994 as, and I quote, "the most comprehensive, total, and far-reaching attempt to control and potentially terminate the life and the activity of the Church in the Sudan." As far as I know, the legal situation has not changed since then.

Mr. Chairman, let me briefly refer to an aspect which is not much publicly discussed in international organizations and the media, and that is the religious persecution against members, including the leaders, the imams, or the traditional Sudanese Islamic sects and orders.

Since 1989, the activities of traditional Sudanese Islamic orders and sects were systematically severely contained by the Government. Leaders of these orders and sects, and especially ordinary members, who are the most exposed and who were considered as political opponents or just not displaying enough their loyalty to the new rulers, were harassed, arbitrarily arrested, subjected to torture or other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment, or forced into exile.

Here are some excerpts from one of the many protest letters to the Government about such practices, signed by prominent figures of the Ansar [ph.] Order. Following the arrest on May 16, 1995 of former Prime Minister Sadik El-Magdi [ph.], the leading imam of the Ansar, on charges of involvement in subversive activities--I received personally a copy of that letter from Ansar members--I quote from this letter: "Since the beginning of this regime, the Ansar have been subjected to continuous harassment and intimidation, which started with intimidating their leadership, confiscating their properties, and denying them their civil rights and their freedom of expression. The Ansar imams and preachers

have been subjected to harassment and imprisonment. The Grand Mahdis [ph.], which includes the Mahdis Stone and the Ansar headquarters, has been confiscated in May 1993 by the Government."

Finally,
let me say a few words about the policy of jihad, which is an official policy of this Government and was an official policy after 1989.

Calls
to jihad by the Government of Sudan representatives meant in this period--I am talking about the period 1993-1998--in general two things. One, when such calls were made in public, it meant that the Government has the intention to intensify the fighting against Southern rebels; and second, it meant the adding of further groups to the list of domestic enemies of the regime. This list was led by the SPLA mainstream, led by John Garang.

Public calls to jihad
by senior Government representatives at rallies, which were well-publicized by the State-controlled communication channels, were made principally in the period under discussion with the view of preparing the Sudanese public opinion with access to media for the mobilization of new resources in the war in the South. In practice, the effects of such calls were further economic hardships imposed on the population, since additional money had to be spent for military purposes; a new wave of harassment and arrest of suspected political opponents, and a new campaign of enforced recruitment of young men in the North, especially in the Khartoum. These young men, Mr. Chairman and distinguished Commissioners, Arabs and non-Arabs alike, who had usually just finished their secondary schools, were sent to the battlefield following a summary training and in most cases became easy targets of the more experienced rebels, ending their young lives as cannon fodder in senseless military operations in the South.

Let me just quote briefly
from a 1994 official Government of the Sudan document which was circulated as a UN official document, in which the Government explained its concept of jihad.

"The term 'jihad,' which is
Arabic for 'just war,' is part of the cultural and linguistic heritage of the Sudanese people, and we make no apologies," said the representative of the Government of the Sudan in the United Nations, "for using the term in the context of the just war which the majority of the Sudanese are waging to safeguard the common interests of the society."

"The struggle for self-defense against aggression in this context is the most just struggle, and the people there were right to describe it as the symbols they cherish."

Mr. Chairman, the Government of the Sudan is continuously claiming that it is speaking on behalf of the majority of the people. This is only a presumption, since free and fair elections have not been held in Sudan since 1989.

I am running out of time, so I will stop here. I will be happy to answer your specific questions. Thank you.