Hearings on Religious Persecution in Sudan: Panel 1 Question and Answer

February 15, 2000

(Note: These are unedited and uncorrected transcripts)

RABBI SAPERSTEIN: Thank you all.

This is an extraordinary opening to these important hearings today, and I am deeply grateful for your presentations.

We are going to go around to the Commissioners. Let's have everyone take one question, and Elliott Abrams, I'll ask you to begin.

COMMISSIONER ABRAMS: Thank you.

I wonder if I could ask Bishop Gassis a question. There are now so many Southern Sudanese who have been displaced, who have gone away from their homes, many North, many in encampments around Khartoum. What kind of ability do they have to practice Christianity? Are their pastors able to reach them, are their schools or churches--or do they not at this point have any real ability to practice their religion?

BISHOP GASSIS: We have to make a distinction. Those who live within the range of the vision of the diplomatic missions in Khartoum might be a bit privileged because there are various embassies in the area. But if you go further into the remote areas, or even within the suburbs of Khartoum, in the Archdiocese of Khartoum, you will find that all of our prayer centers or, as we call them, multi-purpose centers--we use them for prayer, and we use them for kindergartens and for adult education--were always marked by the authorities as areas that have to be bulldozed because they have to open roads. Why are these roads only targeted at our centers and not at the other centers? They even stop our personnel from going to bring relief to these areas, which are actually built with cardboard and with sacks. People are harassed in their homes.

Take, for example, the issue of beer.
Let's talk about beer, locally brewed beer. It is a nutrient for people who have nothing to eat. Why do they go and arrest these women, flog them, put them in jail? Some of them are in jail with their children. Why?

And do you know who are the consumers of the
biggest share of that beer? Those who flog our women themselves; those who say that alcohol is prohibited. They are the biggest consumers.

So yes, there is harassment in our areas. Take also, lately, the priests. They were working among the refugees or the displaced. Why were they accused falsely of trying to create a kind of sabotage in the ammunition area? They have now been there in prison for one full year. They were flogged, they were tortured. And I am going to say something very openly. One Sudanese priest managed to go and talk to them in their local language, and Father Hilary [ph.] said, "Father, if they don't take us out, we are dead. They have even been urinating on us to humiliate us."

Therefore, yes, there is
oppression, there is persecution, there is a kind of torturing of the people who are also within the suburbs. The issue of allowing religion--now to become a Christian in the Sudan means you have got to be a hero.

RABBI SAPERSTEIN: Archbishop?

COMMISSIONER
McCARRICK: I want to start by welcoming Bishop Gassis. He is an old friend, and I know the extraordinary leadership and courage that he has had in these very difficult days where he has been a good shepherd to his people and a great voice for freedom.

My
question is basically concerning this whole question of freedom of religion in different parts of Sudan. Is there a difference according to different provinces? Is there a situation--and I would open this to all three of you--are there different situations? Has the Sudanese Government found a way in which, in certain areas, religion can be practiced without being a threat, as they would perceive it, to the unity of the country--or are we talking about a general, constant, changeless discrimination and persecution of Christianity throughout the whole country? Are there differences, and can we learn from that? Is there a chance that we can make some progress by trying to find the

areas where they have learned to allow some differences of religion and work on those? I would present that to whomever wants to speak. Dr. Deng?

MR. DENG: Yes, I think it is important to know that throughout the Sudan, the people are very religious in a very liberal sort of traditional African way, because the Islam of the North is in many ways Africanized. You will find the version which prevails in most of the Northern Sudan contrasts very sharply with the version of the orthodox view of the elites in Khartoum.

I once said to a very good friend who was our ambassador here--a scholarly man who in the Sudan you would have considered a model of character--I said: Don't you think Sudanese are very religious but also very liberal and that, depending on the leadership, their version of Islam could be very tolerant or intolerant?

And he said: No, Francis. There is only one version of Islam. Those people throughout the North who deviate from this version are not Muslims. They don't really understand Islam.

I said: Isn't it ironic that a country like Senegal would choose one of the great leaders of Africa--even though they are over 90 percent Muslim, they choose a Christian.

And his reaction was: Those Africans don't understand Islam. That version of theirs is not Islam.

So it is really an elitist view of what Islam is that contrasts with the overwhelming view of the Sudanese people, and I think that that is aggravated by the racial and cultural tensions and conflicts that we have in the country, which tend to make the Muslims who are non-Arab perceived as not part of the mainstream of the Muslim community in the North.

RABBI SAPERSTEIN: Bishop?

BISHOP GASSIS: I would like to add--as long as the Missionary Societies Act is still a law applied, there will always be no way of getting out of this dilemma.

Secondly, as long as the Islamic Sheria [ph.] law--we are speaking about laws now--as long as the Islamic Sheria [ph.] law is there, there will always be discrimination against the non-Muslim. And when you read that the source of legislation is the Koran, that means that all those who do not believe in the Koran are automatically excluded.

PROFESSOR BIRO: With regard to the question about whether there are differences between various zones in the Sudan, obviously, in the Government-controlled areas, the patterns which are mentioned here are still going on and are the daily routine.

In the SPLA-controlled areas, the situation is a bit different, but after 1993, this practice of bombarding indiscriminately and deliberately civilian targets in the South by the SPLA has changed the situation. They are targeting schools, churches, redistribution centers, and the effects of the bombardments are devastating. Hundreds of thousands of people are on the move. Sometimes, it suffices that the Antonov just fly over the areas, and people are leaving; in this way, the self-sufficiency which had started to emerge in those areas is finished, and people find themselves in a new situation. And most of them in these cases fly to the Government-controlled garrison towns--again, in the South, between various Government-controlled garrison towns, there is a difference. Vao [ph.] makes a difference; Juba is a different situation in terms of religious discrimination. In Juba, the resistance toward enforced Islamization is--or it was at the time when I was a rapporteur--stronger than in Vao, because in Vao, the persecution and the methods were more brutal, and there was a long history of persecution. So there are differences, certainly.

RABBI SAPERSTEIN: Professor Biro, could you just clarify--beginning in 1993, who was targeting civilian--

PROFESSOR BIRO: The Government in Khartoum; the air force of the Government was starting this practice of bombarding civilian targets in the South on a systematic basis.

RABBI SAPERSTEIN: Mr. Ambassador?

COMMISSIONER SEIPLE: A question for Francis Deng. You talked about the option of self-determination and allowed that as an option, really, for the North as well as the South.

The concept has been around as part of a declaration of principles. What is hindering it? What political machinations are going on to stop going through the process of this kind of census of self-determination either in the North or the South?

MR. DENG: I think there is a certain ambivalence on the part of the international community. People do recognize the right of self-determination not only as a right in principle but also as a right which has been acknowledge in the peace process.

But at the same time, there is a certain fear that if the Sudan were to break up, people sort of think of Rwanda, of Somalia, of now Eritrea and Ethiopia, and fear the consequences.

On the part of the SPLM and SPLA, because they recognize these ambivalences from the international community, they believe that maybe the option of talking unity rather than self-determination leading to secession would enhance alliances against the regime, would alleviate the fears of secession, and then strengthen the military option for the time being until the South is in a position to exercise that right.

So the movement itself becomes somewhat ambiguous in what it is fighting for, because often, calling for self-determination alienates people.

If I might just also add, it seems to me the implication of what I was saying before is that to the extent there is sympathy for the South that is voiced in this capital, it sends the signal that there is support when there is not. So that either people back right against wrong and do something to support the cause of the people who are struggling for their rights, or it is better not to give much vocal or rhetorical support that is not backed by credible support and which Khartoum then uses to go to the Arab Islamic world to say: We are confronting this giant called the United States.

So I really think that people have got to be careful either to give genuine support that promotes the rights of the people or not speak so loud if they are not prepared to back it.

RABBI SAPERSTEIN: Our own academic, Dr. Kazemzadeh.

COMMISSIONER KAZEMZADEH: I would like to ask Professor Biro, since he is a former Rapporteur for the United Nations Human Rights Commission, what he thinks about the possible role that the UN can play in supporting human rights in the Sudan; what has it done up to now, and is there any hope that any of the actions of the UN could be effective in alleviating the situation in the Sudan?

PROFESSOR BIRO: Thank you for your question.

Let me begin by saying what has happened so far. The human rights situation in the Sudan came under scrutiny in 1992 within the UN System. It started under confidential procedure, and in 1993, it was moved into public. Since then, we have had 11 Resolutions, six by the General Assembly and five by the Commission on Human rights, which had a political, diplomatic and moral impact on the image of the Government in Khartoum.

During these years, the Sudan Government simply took the position of denying all reports on violations and abuses, which was obviously not accepted by these UN bodies.

Second, the United Nations has been running Operation Lifeline Sudan since 1989, if I remember correctly, providing food and relief to the population in the South, mainly, but they have some operations in the North as well.

My criticism to the UN is and was at that time that the UN was not pressing enough to gain control in those areas which were for years unaccessible by foreigners from outside, the Ingasema [ph.] Hills, the Nuba Mountains area, the Western Darful States, Bahr-el-Ghazal--the most terrible reports on atrocities came out, and the UN should have done more to gain access to various local institutions--UNICEF, WFP, UNDP--working in the field, but it was not to be, unfortunately.

In the future, if this regime means what it says now, that it wants peace, it wants national reconciliation, then the UN can play a constructive role in asking and gaining access to those areas which were forbidden access of foreigners for years and try to catalyze the emergence or the strengthening of the

civil society, because there is a civil society, even despite 10 years of despotism.

So in this regard, the UN can do something, really but after all, it is up to the members of the UN States and the political will of the leading members of the United Nations to take the initiative. The System will act only after we receive input on behalf of the major players.

BISHOP GASSIS: The tragedy of this organization known as OLS is not only that they are vetted from rescuing the people when the need is there. The trouble is that all NGOs registered with OLS cannot enter the areas vetted by Khartoum. That means that the Nuba Mountains were never reached by OLS or by NGOs; similarly, the Southern Blue Nile and certain areas of Northern Bahr-el-Ghazal.

RABBI SAPERSTEIN: Ms. Shea?

COMMISSIONER SHEA: I would also like to welcome all of the panelists, whom I have known for a number of years and admire.

I have two quick questions that I want to ask, since I am going last. The first is to Professor Biro. I would like to ask you about your assessment of the regime. You have met many of these personages and have evaluated whether there is a moderate element emerging in the regime and whether there is a significant change since the end of last year with the ouster of Mr. Turabi.

PROFESSOR BIRO: Yes, thank you.

As I can see from the news, as a distant observer of the Sudanese situation, I notice with concern that in the entourage of President Bashir in the past two months has emerged--those hard-liner elements of the National Islamic Front have emerged who used to be called hard-liners even in Turabi's time in the early nineties--some of them, I know personally; others, I know what they have done. So they are in the entourage and are the closest advisors of President Bashir, and to me--again, I would stress, as a distant observer, as a private individual, but with experience in Sudan--this is a sign of concern.

COMMISSIONER SHEA: So you are saying the hard-liners are emerging now?

PROFESSOR BIRO: Well, these were hard-liners all the time. When I first went to Sudan, I was told half jokingly, half seriously, by Western diplomats in Sudan that Turabi is the "moderate" in the system. You can imagine Joseph Stalin as the "moderate" of the Soviet politburo. So it is a bit absurd. But those below him in rank--the second man, Mohamad Usman Daha [ph.], or Sala Hagahezadin [ph.], these are young elements, and they are regarded in Sudan by the opposition and by all those whom I contacted, as really determined people to carry out the program of the regime. While Turabi was in public declarations hesitant, these fellows openly spoke out. And these individuals, these personalities, are now the closest advisors of President Bashir, according to the news--I was not able to check this news, but if this is true, Ari Anafi [ph.], who was the security chief in the first half of the nineties, the first 5 years of the regime, and who was personally responsible for and masterminded most of the security operations in that period, is now talking to the U.S. representative in Nairobi as the foreign policy advisor of President Bashir. So this is a bit contradictory and confusing.

COMMISSIONER SHEA: Thank you.

Bishop Gassis, you are indeed the good shepherd, willing to lay down your life for your flock every time you revisit your diocese. You have been a heroic champion of human rights for the world's most oppressed people, the people in your diocese.

I would like to ask you about the conditions in the Nuba Mountains at this time, and Bahr-el-Ghazal, if you like; I know your dioceses straddles both. We were all shocked and horrified about the bombing of your school last week and even more astonished and horrified by the response of the Government. Mr. Ahmed, an official at the Sudanese Embassy in Nairobi, told Reuters that, quote: "The bombs landed where they were supposed to land"--totally unrepentant and justifying it.

I would like to ask you specifically what is life like in the Nuba Mountains--how many people are there, what are their living conditions, are they getting food? I am aware that you ere in a bombing raid a year ago Christmas. Is that common? How widespread is that? What is that like for the agricultural enterprises of the region?

BISHOP

GASSIS: The Nuba people are totally isolated. No supplies--even when there was famine, the international community could not take food to the famine-stricken people. It was only the diocese who went there to help the people at exorbitant prices. We had to hire planes at $13,000, $15,000, and $18,000 per flight. And I don't have King Solomon's mines. If I had them, I would have bought the plane. Yet we had to take this relief food to the people.

But while we were giving the people food, we also wanted to rehabilitate them. We do not want the Nuba people to fall into the same trap as other parts of the world, where people become mendicants because they become dependent on relief aid and only relief aid. So we are also trying to help them to develop farming, ox plow farming; we are trying to open the schools, to rehabilitate them for the future.

There is no way for the Nuba Mountains to survive in the present condition unless something is done. The same holds for the people of northern Bahr-el-Ghazal and certain areas of Malaka [ph.], like Gumbriak [ph.] and Paryang [ph.]. This is not my diocese, but I have to look after these people because they are isolated as well.

I received a fax from Nairobi, from my administrator there, and he said--he wrote in Italian, because he is Italian--he said: [Quote in Italian.] He asked me to speak about what happened in Kauda to the United States and to the international community. This is the Governor's office of the Nuba Mountains. Now they are asking me. So I am repeating it--I am just the repeater now. What are we going to do? Are we going to keep quiet? Where is the media? Why doesn't the media speak about us? Why do we get lip-service? We are isolated. Something can be done.

These airplanes that come over us--and I was bombed while I was celebrating Christmas Mass, and I had guests from the United States--nobody spoke about it.

MR. DENG: Mr. Chairman, may I just say a word about the Bishop?

RABBI SAPERSTEIN: Please.

MR. DENG: It is something he would not say. He keeps talking about "my

people, my people." This man has done a tremendous job in transcending the killing divisions within the country. You look at him, and normally, he would be considered a Northern Sudanese, and by normal words of identity, he would be called an Arab. This is a man who has identified himself with the victims of racial and religious persecution by more or less taking a side that is different from what he would normally be identified with. I think that that is important for people to know, that it is not simply a question of a priest identifying himself with his flock, as a shepherd; it is a question of a man leaving the privileged category to identify with the underdogs.

RABBI SAPERSTEIN: I deeply appreciate that tribute to the Bishop. It is a helpful insight into the complexity of the situation.

It turns out that our Executive Director and I had the same closing question to ask, so I am going to ask Steve McFarland, on behalf of both of us, to pose a final question to Gaspar Biro and Dr. Deng.

MR. McFARLAND: Dr. Deng, you indicated that the United States should--I believe you words were--exercise leadership in the pursuit of self-determination for the South. Do you have some specific recommendations on what that leadership would look like? And the same question to Professor Biro.

MR. DENG: I think that leadership should mean that the United States as a member of the IGAD Partners Forum, in which now Norway and Italy are the co-chairs, should be more assertive in seeing to it that the guiding principles, what we call the Declaration of Principles, in which self-determination is a central principle, but it also says that we should try to give unity priority, that these principles are pursued vigorously and uncompromisingly.

At the moment, the United States is deferential to the viewpoint of Egypt, which claims Sudan to be its backyard, and which is concerned about the emergence of a non-Arab country on the Nile and, looking at its vested interests, trying to block the right of the Southern Sudanese people to self-determination.

The United States should talk to Egypt and make sure not only that the people of the South are entitled to exercise their rights, but that the interests of Egypt are not necessarily going to be compromised by the South.

Everybody involved in the peace process, including the Europeans and the Africans, tell those of us who are involved with them that nothing can be done without the United States being truly committed to it.

If I may add also, there is a tendency for the West to bend over backward because of the fear that backing the non-Muslims of the South may be seen as anti-Islamic. This kind of apologetic approach, frankly, means neutrality in the face of rights and wrongs, and I think it becomes a sort of blackmail against an assertive policy of taking sides with the right side. It does not necessarily mean being anti-Islamic.

I should also say that the Government has been very clever at sometimes sending signals about wanting interfaith dialogue and therefore appearing to be wanting to bridge the differences. We should separate the important concept of interfaith dialogue, which is a universal phenomenon, from the local problems of persecution and domination in the name of religion.

RABBI SAPERSTEIN: Thank you.

Professor Biro, as Steve indicated, the same question, but even a little more broadly, about what you think United States policy ought to be even beyond the IGAD process, if you have thoughts based on your experience.

PROFESSOR BIRO: Yes, thank you. I fully agree with Mr. Deng's statement.

I would add some very concrete measures which can be implemented by the warring parties, and especially by the Government of Sudan, very quickly and at low cost. In this regard, U.S. leadership--which means, if I can translate it, putting pressure on the parties to take these steps--can be asserted and can be effective.

First of all, put pressure on the parties to end military operations effectively in the South. That is, withdraw the army to the barracks. This is with regard also to the SPLA. And deploy monitors on the ground to monitor the cease-fire effectively.

There are germs of civil society in the South, so there will be no state of nature or chaos after the Government presence is limited to the barracks.

The second and most urgent step which can be undertaken by the Government very quickly is to dismantle the popular defense forces which is created in 1989 and dismantle these various tribal militias, or murahaleen, whatever they are called, who are fighting with the Government against the revels in the South and who are responsible for most of the atrocities against the civilian population.

This can be done, again, very speedily and very quickly if the regime means what it says--that is wants peace. The arms and the guns distributed by the same regime to these people can and should be collected and taken back.

Further, allow free access to humanitarian and human rights organizations throughout the country, in particular to the Nuba Mountains, Bahr-el-Ghazal and Western Darful [ph.]. The international presence has been nonexistent for years. In the North and to the South, allow civil organizations, in particular trade unions and student organizations, to function freely. Allow free access to the electronic media to all political forces and civil organizations in the country. And finally, organize free and fair elections by the end of the year.

All of these things can be done effectively and at low cost if the political will is still there--and obviously, stop harassment of non-Muslims, Christians and animists after all, which is again at low cost.

RABBI SAPERSTEIN: The elections that you refer to are a referendum about the future, or actual elections to--

PROFESSOR BIRO: Well, a referendum can be held parallel with the general elections, I think

RABBI SAPERSTEIN: General elections to the existing governmental structure.

One last question to Dr. Deng also, if I may. The OLS structure--what will be the implications of the United States simply saying: We are

going to get aid directly to the people in the South; if it happens with the cooperation of Government allowing the OLS structure to do it, fine, if it doesn't, then we are just going to do it.

What would be the implications of that?

MR. DENG: Well, I sincerely think the time has come when sovereignty is no longer accepted as a barricade in which governments protect themselves against international scrutiny. I think a view has emerged that sovereignty carries with it responsibilities for the protection and assistance of citizens and all those under the sovereignty of the state, which means that if a government does not live up to at least the minimum standards of responsibility toward the citizens, they can expect international involvement.

Already, OLS was perceived as quite a breakthrough to the normal, conventional view of sovereignty. But to the extent that governments still exercise considerable influence, OLS continues to be very much influenced, and some would say controlled, by the Government.

I think the fact that there are still needy areas where sometimes the intervention of the Government blocks access would justify any action to be able to reach people who need to be reached, whatever the position of the government.

RABBI SAPERSTEIN: Professor Biro?

PROFESSOR BIRO: Operation Lifeline Sudan is functioning on a tripartite agreement between the United Nations, the Government of Khartoum and the SPLA. It is simply like that--put pressure on the parties to respect their undertakings under the OLS conventions. Just last week, an agreement was signed in Geneva by UNICEF, which in fact is running OLS, and the SPLA--the SPLA in particular has undertaken unilaterally obligations to respect international human rights convention as customary law; the same applies to the Government, without any specific new agreement or undertaking--just put pressure on the parties to live up to their commitments so far.

RABBI SAPERSTEIN: I want to thank all three of you. This has been an extraordinary beginning to this hearing. We are grateful.