

# Hearings on Religious Persecution in Sudan: Caroline Cox Prepared Testimony

February 15, 2000

(Note: These are unedited and uncorrected transcripts)

Chairman,  
thank you for this opportunity to give evidence on religious freedom in Sudan. One cannot calibrate human suffering: one person dying for their faith is one too many. But in the cruel calculus of man's inhumanity to man, Sudan is probably the nation with the highest toll of persecution in the world today.

In the jihad (holy war) waged by the National Islamic Front (NIF) regime which took power by military coup in 1989 from the democratically elected coalition government, over 2 million have died from war-related causes and over 5 million have been displaced.

I will briefly offer:

- my credentials and those of the organization with which I work, Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW); and details of visits to Sudan on which my evidence is based;
- examples of persecution of Christians, Muslims and traditional believers;
- some policy considerations for the US Government.

Credentials.

CSW is an inter-church human rights organization working for victims of persecution, whatever their faith. We never proselytize. We operate according to the principles of "the 4 A's:" Advocacy, based on the Authenticity of firsthand evidence. We try to reach in particular people who are cut off from other aid organizations -such as those in Sudan in areas designated by the NIF as 'No Go' for UN's Operation Lifeline Sudan (OLS). As people in these areas are usually cut off from major aid organizations, we have an Aid dimension to our work; and we try to be Accountable to those for whom we speak, giving accurate information on their plight.

I have visited Sudan 25 times. First, in 1985, working as a nurse among Arab communities in Northern Sudan. In July 1993 I made an official visit to Khartoum to meet the NIF leadership to hear their viewpoint and to visit areas under their control in Juba, the Nuba Mountains and camps for the displaced around Khartoum.

Since then, with CSW, we have made numerous visits to 'No Go' areas in Bahr-EI- Ghazal, the Nuba Moutains; Southern Blue Nile; Western Upper Nile and Eastern Sudan from Kassala region in the north to Southern Red Sea locations south of Port Sudan. We have the confidence and support of the leadership in all the areas we visit, with the exception now of the NIF regime, which dislikes our commitment to visiting civilians in areas to which access is denied.

#### Evidence

In Khartoum in 1993, we heard repeated reference by NIF leaders to commitment to Jihad. 'Jihad' has many interpretations; in Sudan it is full-scale war against all who oppose the NIF. It includes policies of forced Islamisation and Arabisation. The weapons of Jihad include military offensives against innocent civilians; denial of food and medicine to victims of these offensives; and slavery.

In Eastern Sudan, the Beja Muslim people have been driven off their lands to scavenge and to die in the desert.

In the North, there have been numerous reports of extra-judicial arrests, imprisonment, torture and killing of political opponents and Christians; harassment, and destruction of churches.

Our detailed evidence is based on first-hand witness and testimonies. Time allows few examples. More details can be found in the fuller reports available on request.

Christian Persecution.

The African communities in Southern Sudan comprise mostly Christians and traditional believers; in other areas such as the Nuba Mountains, and Southern Blue Nile, mixed communities of Muslims, Christians and animists live peaceably together. All suffer at the hands of the NIF.

#### Military

offensives are designed to kill civilians, or to terrorize them and drive them off their lands. Raids involve up to 2000 Government soldiers, Popular Defense Force militia (PDF Jihad warriors) and locally recruited Murahaleen, armed by the Government with Kalashnikov automatic rifles. Aerial bombardments by high flying Antonovs or low-flying helicopter gun ships often accompany ground offensives.

#### We

have witnessed massacres on a huge scale; we have walked for miles AMONGST human and cattle corpses; we have seen scorched earth policy with systematic burning of homes, churches, mosques, animist shrines, clinics, schools and crops. The scale of killing in many areas justifies, we believe, the use of the term 'genocide'.

#### As

these raids are carried out in areas classified as "No Go" for UNOLS, survivors have no food or medicine, and die of disease, injury and starvation. They tell us that the NIF's objective is to force them to go to Government-controlled areas, where those who are Christian have to adopt Muslim names and practices in order to obtain life-saving supplies; and where African girls and women will be sexually exploited by Arabs, irreversibly changing their racial genetic identity.

#### In

the Nuba Mountains, the Government's military offensives are designed to force local people to go to so-called 'Peace-camps' with similar policies of forced Islamisation and Arabisation. In May 1995, the UN Rapporteur reported the execution of 12 civilians by Government soldiers at Lobonok because they refused to convert to Islam

#### It

is impossible to estimate numbers, but on repeated visits we have witnessed the aftermath of raids in which hundreds of civilians have been killed. Possibly hundreds of thousands more are dying from starvation and disease, many choosing this fate in preference to sacrificing their Christian faith and African identity. Again and again, we meet people dying of starvation and disease who emphasize that they will never go to the Government-held areas for food or medicine, because: "We are Christians, and we will live and die as Christians."

We also estimate many tens of thousands have been taken into slavery.

## Slavery as Tool of Persecution

We have interviewed many returned slaves. Those who are Christian testify to pressures to convert to Islam. Their accounts are consistent, but diverse in details of individual experiences. One must speak for all, with a typical description of the experience of slavery:

"I was captured with my three children and forced to walk for 10 days. There were more than 1000 people captured from different areas. We were fed left-overs like bones and a cup of water. We were not allowed enough water to drink. We took the leaves of the tamil tree to get water. We were tied together in groups at night. We were driven north to Cetep village near Abyei and then divided into groups and ordered to fetch water, grind grain or tend animals. We were given Arabic names. I was called Amuna, the children Mohamed, Abdullah, Adam. We were forced to observe Islamic practices such as attending mosque; when we refused, we were beaten. I conceived a child by my owner."

## The Effects of Oil Exploitation.

The present UN rapporteur stated that the oil issue has "seriously compounded and exacerbated the conflict."

## Last

year we visited locations near the oil exploration sites at Bentiu, in Western Upper Nile. We saw the effects of Government raids: bomb craters from aerial bombardment; and the scorched earth policy in which 6,000 homes, 7 churches, 3 . mosques, several animist shrines, 3 schools, and a clinic were destroyed.

## These attacks

are oil-related: land clearance of the indigenous people rather than religious persecution. But they serve the NIF's jihad by destruction of local communities, with their spiritual and cultural traditions. It has been estimated that at least 150,000 people have suffered from such raids in this area alone. (UN Report, Nov. 1999)

## Persecution of Muslims.

Many Muslims are fighting with Christians against the NIF. The Beja

people in Eastern Sudan, and African Muslims in Southern Blue Nile and the Nuba Mountains all give, the same justification for opposing the NIF: they believe that all Sudanese should have freedom to practice their own faiths and that the NIF is a perversion of Islam.

One

imam, from Yabus in Southern Blue Nile must speak for all. He described the new freedom the Muslims enjoy since the SPLA took control from the NIF:

"We have more freedom now than ever. Before we were not allowed the freedom to know many things. Older people who had been well educated and who had knowledge were taken and the regime only brought in people from outside to teach what the regime wanted taught. Now, we can pray in peace with no repression. The NIF regime was not a pure religion or pure Islam but it was highly politicized. The regime talked about a jihad. But that is not true Islam. Their jihad was to take freedom away. I would myself be ready to fight against them because as an Imam I do not believe this is a true jihad."

#### Conclusion and Recommendations.

Evidence of large-scale, systematic and continuing persecution by the NIF is irrefutable. It forms a large and significant part of the broader spectrum of violations of human rights by the Government of Sudan, which has been condemned by the UN Security Council, the UN Human Rights Commission, the former UN Special Rapporteur for Sudan, Dr. Gasper Biro and by numerous NGOs concerned with human rights.

The

US Administration has led the world in taking a principled, firmly critical stand against the NIF. If I may do so, without being patronizing, I would like to commend the USA on its principled policies. If the international community now wishes to help the people of Sudan to achieve peace with justice, the current military and political situations must be taken into account.

#### The Military Situation.

\* The war is continuing: the NIF is undertaking aerial bombardment of civilian targets such as hospitals, and offensives are currently being reported in the oil-rich areas around Heiglig and Unity oil- fields and a new oil drilling rig 18-19 miles south of Bentiu. Hundreds of homes

have been destroyed and countless civilians are hiding in swamps.

\*

The 'oil factor' is helping the NIF to fuel the war; encouraging foreign investment and generating a veneer of respectability .

\* The Opposition forces are still resolute. Attacks on the pipeline have been attributed to Beja Congress forces, who still seem robust in their opposition to the NIF. The Beja are an important Muslim constituency living and operating in strategically significant areas, including those around the key Port Sudan -Khartoum road.

\* The SPLM/ A is consolidating control over vast areas and is working hard to establish the principles and structures of civil society.

#### The Political Situation.

\* The NDA seems to be fragmenting, with separate agreements being negotiated by some Opposition parties with the NIF .

\* However, recent reconciliation efforts, often facilitated by the churches, have been encouraging. Noteworthy is the recent Nuer-Dinka Wunlit agreement.

\* The recent rapprochement between Riek Machar and the SPLM/ A may strengthen the SPLM/A and enhance resistance to the NIF, although the situation remains unstable.

\* All major parties to the conflict have formally subscribed to the IGAD agreement, which includes commitment to the right to self-determination; secular government and democratic principles.

\* However, the northern parties (NIF, Umrna and DUP) do not agree to the South's call for a secular state as a condition for unity; and the people of the South, represented by the SPLM/ A, do not accept the proposed formula of a basically Islamic State with some exceptions for Christian and other non-Muslim communities.

\* Discussions between NIF and SPLM/ A have been long and exhaustive. Both sides have defined their 'bottom line' positions and little change can be expected unless external pressure is applied.

\* Recently the NIF leader El Turabi has been marginalized by President El-Bashir. The latter has made some positive statements but judgment must be reserved until there is hard evidence of commitment, including a cessation of all military offensives.

#### Possible Ways Forward.

\* Until hostilities cease, there is an urgent need for more political, humanitarian and practical support for the people suffering at the hands of the NIF, especially for those in 'No Go' areas, bereft of all aid.

\* The time may be ripe for a negotiated political solution, building on the formally agreed commitment to the right to self-determination.

\* To facilitate this, it might be helpful if a Conference were convened, hosted abroad, to bring together all parties to agree basic conditions for a settlement, together, if appropriate, with international guarantees to ensure that any agreed conditions are kept.

\* Apart from full independence, there are options such as federal status for agreed 'states', including traditionally marginalized areas, such as the Nuba Mountains, Southern Blue Nile, Southern Kordofan and the Beja territories.

\* Such a Conference could provide a forum in which a formula for peace with justice for all the people of Sudan could be hammered out, taking into account all relevant factors, both internal and external, and stipulating all the conditions and confidence- building measures which would be required by people who have suffered so much for so long.

\* It is for the people of Sudan to decide their own future. However, the international community has a legitimate interest in helping them to find a peaceful solution, as it has been shouldering the responsibility for caring for millions of Sudanese citizens for too long.

As we speak, the people of Sudan are suffering and dying. The need for peace is desperate; the time for effective action is overdue. If this hearing can help to precipitate such action it will perform a service of priceless value and I wish it every success.

Caroline Cox,

9 February 2000