

## Hearings on Religious Persecution in Sudan: Ms. Victoria Ben Ding Oral Testimony

February 15, 2000

(Note: These are unedited and uncorrected transcripts)

MS. DING: Thank you.

I would like to thank the Commission on Religious Freedom for giving me this opportunity to testify about religious persecution in Sudan.

The ongoing political unrest, civil war, disobedience, human rights violations, religious persecution and torture of innocent civilians in my country of origin, Sudan, has made the life of the average Sudanese miserable and appalling.

Today, I am here in the United States as a direct result of that persecution. Before leaving the country, I experienced and witnessed a lot of things happening to Christians in Sudan. The persecution of Christians in Sudan has been going on for a long time; now it has turned into genocide.

Priests and faithful believers have been arrested, tortured, and many are killed or disappear under mysterious circumstances. Father Felix, our Chaplain at the Kamburi [ph.] Sisters School, was deported to Italy because of being the leader of our Christian youth group at school. The case of the two priests arrested along with 26 other people on charges of conspiracy against the state is something which is known to everybody.

With the Sheria [ph.]--that is Islamic law--in force during Ramadan, all restaurants, shops and refreshment centers are closed, depriving Christians of their rights of freedom and having food.

In schools, Christian children are forced to learn and recite the Koran. The children of my aunt come home from school with Koranic materials for homework. Women have to dress in Islamic dress, covering the whole body, including the face. They are segregated in places of work and looked upon as second-class citizens.

In the displaced camps of people from the South around Khartoum, small children are forced to become Muslims in return for food and clothing. The law prohibits Christian activities and public gatherings. At Juba University, being a member of Saint Augustine's Society, our activities were disrupted on several occasions by Islamic students and Government security agents. Security agents, making life insecure, have harassed many of us who have been active members in Christian activities.

Theresa, one of our students who had been an active member of a Christian organization, is now living in Boston after being harassed by security agents all the time going to her home.

Destruction of churches and seizure of church properties--the Islamic Government has intensified destruction of churches and seizure of church property. In the South, Government forces have destroyed many churches in areas they occupy. Government planes have constantly bombarded church buildings, making them a major target.

In Khartoum, the Catholic Club, situated directly opposite Khartoum International Airport, visible to visitors leaving and entering Sudan, was seized by the Government.

According to the Islamic fundamentalists, the Sign of the Cross and the name "Catholic Club" reflect a bad image of Sudan to visitors entering Sudan, especially from the Islamic world. Sudan is an Islamic country, so they cannot tolerate such unwarranted Christian exposure.

The Government bulldozed a church in Jabarona [ph.] in the displaced camp. Their next target was another church in Caraca [ph.], but many Christians decided to go to the church compound, occupied it, and waited there for weeks. In one incident, four people had to lie by the entrance of the church compound to stop a bulldozer from breaking the church. A similar incident happened recently to the church in Umdruman [ph.].

The Government has seized cars, gas, and relief food items from Sudan church organizations and used them to

force Christians to convert to Islam. Sudan Aid, a Christian organization helping churches support the displaced community in Khartoum, is a victim of such actions.

Peter, a relative of mine who works with Sudan Aid, said the Government forced Sudan Aid to employ one of its agents by the name of Zahir [ph.] to monitor the activities of the organization and send a report to them.

The displaced Southern communities living in the outskirts of Khartoum are constantly being relocated to desert areas where there is no shelter, food, transportation or water supply, leading to many deaths among young children and the elderly. The Government bulldozed Dar-es-Salam [ph.], a shanty area on the outskirts of Khartoum, and moved the inhabitants to Jabalulia [ph.], 45 miles out of the city. The forced relocation is a continuous process--as the city grows, shanty areas have to be destroyed.

The persecution of Christians in Sudan under the fundamentalist Islamic rule, forced starvation, slavery, torture and killings will continue unabated unless serious action is taken by the United States Government to bring an end to this tragedy.

I would like to thank you.