

Hearings on Religious Persecution in Sudan: John O. Voll Prepared Testimony

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(Note: These are unedited and uncorrected transcripts)

Position Statement. Religious freedom is suppressed and challenged in Sudan and there are significant and gross abuses of human rights in the country. The necessary first step in correcting this situation is to bring an end to the civil war that has raged in the country for two decades. This war will not come to an end as a result of a military victory by either the government or opposition forces but can only come as a result of a peace settlement which in some way includes all major groupings within Sudan. The United States can be an important constructive force in achieving this peace but only if it avoids being identified with one of the combatant forces.

Summary

of argument. Sudan is literally a "state and society in crisis" and this situation has prevailed for two decades.² Sudan is not, however, unique in this situation, and as states and societies elsewhere collapse into anarchy or rule by teenage gunmen, it is worth noting that the state and opposition forces remain relatively organized and effective forces.³ This does not lessen the horror and tragedy of the conflicts in Sudan but it does leave some hope for ways of finding solutions. The government and opposition forces still have the ability, if they can agree, to bring peace to Sudan. However, they are unlikely to reach this point by themselves. Outside agencies, both governments and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) play important roles in Sudan, in providing food for the starving and mediation between the conflicting forces. The key starting point for bringing peace to Sudan is the recognition that neither the government nor the oppositions can achieve peace by military victory. Any action by a foreign government to provide direct aid to the military forces of either side prolongs the war and creates additional obstacles to achieving peace.

For

United States policy, the key was clearly stated by Peter Bell of CARE USA: "What is needed is a unified and engaged U.S. policy in pursuit of a 'just peace' - a plan that encompasses the views of all parties within Sudan U.S. policymakers should emulate Carter's example by turning away from strategies that reward warriors and toward policies that support peacemakers."⁴

Present Moment of

Opportunity. In the past two months, there has been a significant change in the political constitution of the government in Khartoum. The

two political allies who came to power in 1989, Hasan Umar al-Bashir, the head of the military group that took control of the government and is currently president of the country, and Hasan al-Turabi, the head of the National Islamic Front (NIF) which provides the ideological basis for programs and policies of the government, essentially provided "joint leadership" for Sudan until December 1999. At that time, President Bashir proclaimed a state of emergency, relieved al-Turabi of his posts, and took direct control of government. This was not, however, a "coup" in the normal sense of the word, since no one was jailed, both al-Turabi and al-Bashir continued to have access to the media, and administrative procedures were followed. In this competitive context, the Bashir group could make important political gains if it could emerge as the group leading Sudan to an era of peace. Although the situation is not clear, there appears to be an opportunity for the international supporters of a negotiated peace settlement to make progress by a more flexible approach to the government of Bashir as it works to redefine the future of Sudan.

The Context of Crisis.

The basic facts of the crisis in Sudan are stark and alarming. Two million people have died in the current seventeen year old civil war and another four million people are internally displaced refugees. In 1998 at least two and a half million people confronted serious food shortages. Problems like increasing slavery and other human rights abuses are a part of the current situation in the country. It is this context of crisis that must shape any discussion of the situation of religious freedom in Sudan. The situation of religious minorities is directly related to the conditions of famine and civil war. Although an end of the civil war might not resolve all of the problems of religious freedom in the country, resolution of that conflict is an essential first step in that direction.

In terms of general indicators, Sudan had a low ranking even in the "low human development" classification determined by the United Nations Development Programme in 1998, with a rank of 157th out of a total of 174 countries in the world.⁵ This situation is a major human tragedy for many reasons, but one of the most saddening is that this severe crisis is not happening in a poor country with no resources. Sudan has historically not had problems of overpopulation or extreme poverty, and the development of oil resources provide the promise of capital for development. The combination of irrigated farm land in the Nile valley and substantial rain-fed farming historically provided adequate food for all. During the 1970s, although much of the actual planning was unrealistic, it was clearly possible to speak of Sudan as the future "breadbasket of the Middle East." Instead, in the 1980s, Sudan confronted a series of famines and crises of population displacement.

Ineffective leadership, drought, and a variety of other factors provide some of the foundation for this tragedy. However, the major factor is the

continuing civil war. Almost a decade ago, specialists working on issues of food security for Sudan, for example, stated: "There is no doubt that an end to the war is the single most important requirement for improved food security."⁶ This is also the case with almost every other major issue facing Sudan. While the end of the civil war cannot insure the end of slavery or limitations on human rights and religious freedom, no significant progress can be made toward improving the situation in any of these areas as long as the war continues.

The civil war in Sudan presents some special problems because of its complexity and long history. In examining the history of civil conflict in Sudan since its independence, one conclusion appears inescapable, however much wishfully thinking people may try to avoid it: The Sudanese civil war cannot be won militarily by anyone. Over the years, governments in Khartoum and leaders of opposition groups have proclaimed an approaching "final victory." I heard such claims when I first went to Sudan forty years ago. I am convinced that such claims are no more true now, when proclaimed by either John Garang of the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) or government officials in Khartoum, than they were when they were made by General Abboud or the first Anya Nya forces in the early 1960s. Any approach to bringing an end to the conflict in Sudan that starts with the assumption of the victory of either side is unrealistic. An end to the war in Sudan, which is a necessary starting point for resolving virtually all other problems in Sudan, will be achieved only through some form of a negotiated settlement rather than victory for one side or the other. This means that a solution will have to include the National Islamic Front (NIF), however much that regime might be defined as a "rogue state" in current United States policy.

Policy Issues.

Concerns

and interests of the United States in Sudan relate to a number of specific issues. One aspect of U.S. policy is that, after the end of the Cold War, the U.S. has no major or overriding national interest that is involved in U.S.-Sudanese relations. During the Cold War, the U.S. viewed Sudan, territorially the largest state in Africa, as an important part of our effort to contain Soviet influence in Africa. The Sudan's location in the Red Sea basin, the Nile Valley, and the Horn of Africa gave it importance in the eyes of American strategic planners. The Sudanese Communist Party in the 1960s was one of the largest and most effective in the continent and the United States provided support for non-communist Sudanese governments, whether elected civilian or military. The US AID program in Sudan was one of the largest in Africa during the 1960s and we actively supported the military regime of Ja'far Numayri during the 1970s. Cold War strategic concerns took priority over other interests in U.S. policy toward Sudan. One might note as an early example of this that the expulsion of American Christian missionaries in 1964 had virtually no impact on U.S. policy toward Sudan. Even in the 1980s, Numayri's persecution of religious dissidents, and the execution of Mahmoud Mohamed Taha, leader of a small religious group, or the expulsion of important relief organizations like Worldvision and Catholic Relief Services by the civilian government in the late 1980s aroused little formal American

response.

The end of the Cold War changed the broader policy context and also coincided with the coming to power in Khartoum in 1989 of a regime formally dedicated to the establishment of an Islamic state and the Islamization of society. In the new global situation, no major U.S. interests were involved in U.S.-Sudan relations. As a result, policy toward Sudan could be part of broader patterns of policy supporting significant goals American goals elsewhere. One example of this is the U.S. relations with Egypt. Cooperative and friendly relations with Egypt are of very high priority for the U.S. and are probably essential for the successful continuation of the Arab-Israeli peace process. Throughout most of the 1990s, President Mubarak was strongly opposed to the National Islamic Front (NIF) government in Khartoum and U.S. policy could readily support that mode. One result of this was that the United States tended to become identified with policies aimed at the overthrow of the NIF regime and this made a constructive role in Sudanese peace negotiations more difficult.

In 1999 many aspects of the global and Sudanese situation are changing and there is the potential for greater opportunities for expression of religious freedom in that country. However, the key to success in this and many other areas is bringing an end to the civil war. It is important to recognize the complexity of the issue. The end of the civil war would not insure religious freedom in Sudan. It is only the first step, but the necessary first step, toward that goal.

Slavery

is one of the most controversial and tragic dimensions of the current situation in Sudan and it illustrates well the complexities of "problem solving." It has been said that slavery is a long-established part of Sudanese social institutions and this has sometimes been used as an excuse for ignoring the current situation. However, the civil war has created a context in which old-fashioned raids between neighboring groups have been transformed into large-scale military actions by well-armed militias. The result is the capture, sale, and displacement of significant numbers of people, creating a grave human tragedy. One humanitarian response to this has been to organize significant programs like that of Christian Solidarity International (CSI) for buying and freeing slaves. This is not the place to get into the controversy over whether or not such programs create a "real danger of fueling a market in human beings" or are an appropriate response to human tragedy.⁷ No one argues that slavery would disappear in Sudan if the civil war came to an end. However, the civil war is creating conditions in which the situation is getting worse and is changing the nature of the slave trade itself. As long as the civil war continues, these conditions will continue as well.

The issue of slavery is related to issues of religious freedom in Sudan. Often the slave raids are depicted as part of a war of Muslims against

Christians. It has been argued that slavery, "while not an official Sudanese government policy, has become an instrument in Sudan's own ethnic cleansing," and the victims of the raids "are tamed through rape, brutality, and Islamization."⁸ However, an analyst after a tour of parts of southern Sudan noted: "The consensus among villagers I met was that slave raids occurring there are happening as part of the conflict, not solely as religious persecution."⁹ This again emphasizes that bringing an end to the war is the necessary starting point for reducing and ultimately bringing an end to slavery associated religious persecution.

Prospects for Peace.

Developments

in recent months lead me to the conclusion that there is a new opportunity for real progress toward peace in Sudan. It is important not to be too optimistic but it is even more important not to let this chance go by without some significant effort.

The

possibilities are emphasized by the events of this past July. The Inter- Governmental Authority on Development (IGAD), an organization of governments in eastern Africa that has played an important role in creating opportunities for peace discussion among Sudanese combatants, held a series of discussions in Nairobi in July 1999 and a formal secretariat for the IGAD peace process on Sudan was established. The IGAD sub-committee gave special notice of the fact that both the Government of Sudan and the Sudan People's Liberation Movement had expressed full confidence in the IGAD peace process and both reaffirmed their commitment to the IGAD Declaration Of Principles which had been articulated in the mid-1990s and finally accepted by the Sudanese Government as a framework for negotiations in 1996-7. The head of the IGAD group spoke of "a new spirit of openness and flexibility."¹⁰

Along

with this process, there have been important discussions among major figures. Sadiq al-Mahdi, a major leader of the northern opposition to the NIF government, has engaged in a series of talks with Hasan al-Turabi looking for lines of reconciliation. In addition, as a part of the background for the recent Nairobi discussions, a senior southern Sudanese statesman, Abel Alier, worked to achieve more direct communications between the government and the SPLM.

In

addition, there has been some respite in the most extreme famine conditions, especially in Bahr al-Ghazal, as a result of a relatively successful and long-lasting cease fire in the most desperate regions. In April 1999, a report from the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) reflected important optimism: "The last four months have seen a confirmation of signs of an improving humanitarian situation

across southern Sudan compared with 1998. As a result, the ICRC's focus is now on post-emergency and rehabilitation activities. However, the ongoing conflict, with sporadic outbreaks of fighting in the south, in particular in the Upper Nile region, on the eastern border (the Blue Nile region, Kassala, the Red Sea) and in the Nuba area means that the security environment remains fragile"¹¹

It becomes important for the United States to affirm its support for the peace process and to avoid actions that might impede the developing efforts of the IGAD committee. This becomes in many ways the most effective action that can be taken in the long term effort to achieve religious freedom in Sudan.

I want to conclude with a statement about the importance of the religious dimension of the issues that I have been discussing. People frequently note that while combatants in the Sudan's internal conflicts are religiously identifiable as Muslims and Christians, the war is not itself exclusively, or even primarily, a religious war. The conflict that is now almost forty-five years old, is complex and has taken many forms. However, it is important not to understate the religious dimensions in both the positive and negative dimensions.

When people speak of the religious dimensions of the conflict, they usually talk about Muslims and Christians fighting each other. However, there is also a positive religious dimension. It is important to remember that when there was a successful negotiation which led to the Addis Ababa Agreement in 1972 and a decade in which there was no open civil war in Sudan, religious organizations and leaders played a very important role in the discussions. In particular, we might note, for example, the crucial role played by the All Africa Council of Churches. Similarly, in recent months in a remarkable agreement between warring Dinka and Nuer groups in the south, the New Sudan Council of Churches was able to play a significant role.

One role that the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom might play is to encourage more active support for the participation of such groups in the current negotiations. One might here note the actions of the Roman Catholic Church. The Church has consistently been a strong voice in condemning violations of human rights in Sudan but, at the same time, has engaged directly in discussions with the Government and the opposition. The visit of Pope John Paul II to Khartoum in 1993 reflected this critical engagement, when he directly criticized policies of the government but also was open to working with it.

This engagement becomes very important in what might be the next steps in

the development of religious freedom in Sudan. Most solutions to the conflict still assume that "The North" and "The South" are somehow separate. People often speak of the North as being overwhelmingly Muslim and Arabic-speaking. However, as a result of the conflict, that is no longer the case. It is estimated that between 1.5 and 1.9 million southerners live in the area around Khartoum alone and they have large and active Christian congregations. Although there are restrictions on activities, last year it was reported that "in dozens of interviews, Christians acknowledged that they do not face overt oppression. By and large, they say, they are free to go where they please and worship at the existing churches."¹² It will be essential for any peace accord not to give so much attention to "the South," that it ignores the needs of the rapidly growing Christian communities in northern Sudan. While the current situation in the north is not good, it does provide a somewhat positive foundation on which to build, if proper encouragement and support is provided. I think that your commission can play an important role in providing that support.

¹This statement is a revised and expanded version of a statement presented to the Commission on 13 August 1999.

²In

1991, it was possible to give the title Sudan: State and Society in Crisis and the title could affirm even at that time a longstanding condition. See John O. Voll, ed., Sudan: State and Society in Crisis (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991).

³It

is interesting to note that Sudan did not make the itinerary of the "journey to the frontiers of anarchy" described in the important analysis of global crisis spots, Robert D. Kaplan, The Ends of the Earth (New York: Vintage Books, 1996).

⁴Peter D. Bell, "Don't Choose Sides in Sudan," Washington Post, 19 December 1999.

⁵Human Development Report 1998 (New York: Oxford University Press for United Nations Development Programme, 1998), p. 130.

⁶Simon

Maxwell, "Introduction," in To Cure All Hunger: Food policy and food security in Sudan, ed. Simon Maxwell (London: Intermediate Technology Publications, 1991), p.5.

⁷This is the observation made by Reed Brody of Human Rights Watch and is similar to criticisms

made by UNICEF officials. See, for example, Paul Lewis, "U.N. Criticism Angers Charities Buying Sudan Slaves' Release," New York Times, 12 March 1999, p. 8.

⁸Browyn Lance, "An overlooked atrocity: slavery in Sudan," Christian Science Monitor, 15 March 1999.

⁹Lance, Christian Science Monitor, 15 March 1999.

¹⁰For a report on this, see Foreign Broadcast Information Service (FBIS), FBIS-AFR- 1999-0727 which presents the text of the communique by the IGAD ministerial sub-committee meeting on the conflict in Sudan.

¹¹Update No. 1 on ICRC Activities in Sudan (1 April 1999).

¹²James C. McKinley, Jr., "Sudan Christians Take War's Culture Clash North," New York Times, 5 April 1998.