

Premature Adulation in Sudan

Written by Rebecca Tinsley

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REBECCA TINSLEY, AUG 16 2011

On July 9th diplomats celebrated the birth of Africa's newest country, South Sudan, like over-stimulated toddlers at a party. The media followed suit, with trivial and sometimes patronising stories about the new national anthem and flag, and the admittedly strange plan to create cities in the shapes of African animals.

Sadly, those involved should have focused on the agenda items they failed to address before sending out the independence day invitations. Postponed until an unspecified time were:

- 1) The location of the border between north and south;
- 2) Who has citizenship, and what becomes of the millions of southerners living in the north; and
- 3) How much the north would charge the south to tranship its oil across northern territory to Port Sudan.

Each issue has the potential to reignite war. Consequently, and entirely predictably, the region is falling apart before our eyes.

According to Human Rights Watch, the northern Sudanese regime of President Bashir, based in Khartoum, has been bombing South Kordofan state, in the disputed border area, on an almost daily basis since June; satellites reveal freshly-dug mass graves www.satsentinel.org; and the UN's OCHA estimates 200,000 civilians have been killed, wounded or have fled their homes to hide in the Nuba mountains where they face starvation. Given these unpromising events, celebrating the birth of the Republic of South Sudan (ROSS) seems premature.

The border

It is the Nuba people's bad luck to find themselves in South Kordofan state, on the northern side of the notional border, cut off from the ethnic, religious and political groups with which they identify in ROSS. Since June 5th, Khartoum has effectively branded all black Africans citizens in South Kordofan as enemy insurgents, and is hunting them down, dragging them from their homes and executing them in the streets.

Church members and educated people have been targeted, while UN peacekeepers stayed in their barracks; eyewitnesses even accused some Egyptian UN troops of joining in the killing on June 8th, supporting their co-religionists in the northern Sudanese army. On June 20th northern Sudanese security forces, dressed as Red Crescent workers, lured 7,000 terrified Nuba people away from the UN compound to which they had fled in the optimistic and unfounded hope the UN might protect them. Their fate is unknown. This information was contained in a leaked internal UN report that was rapidly withdrawn for fear of upsetting Khartoum and jeopardising ROSS's independence party. The above reports have also been verified by credible local faith groups with whom my NGO, Waging Peace, has been working for years.

There are recent reports that advanced war planes belonging to the Iranian Revolutionary Guard have been spotted at Ubayd airfield. The planes, the 66 Star, the 55 NT Star and the 49 NT Star, are proof of President Bashir's friendship with Tehran. The Sudan People's Liberation Movement believes the planes are equipped with nerve gas

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which will be used on the Nuba people sheltering in the mountains. Whether this is true or not, the rumours have had the effect of convincing the Nuba they have nothing to lose, so they might as well fight to the death.

It wasn't supposed to be like this. Back in 2005 when the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) was signed, it brought to an end a war that had claimed two million lives. Dedicated UK, US and Norwegian diplomats achieved the almost impossible by pressing Khartoum to stop decades of slaughtering its southern citizens.

The ethnic groups of southern Sudan, mainly black African and non-Muslim, had endured brutality at the hands of the mostly Arab and Muslim north for hundreds of years. To blame colonialism for current divisions ignores the historic role of Arab northerners in the slave trade, selling black Africans from Kordofan and Darfur to the Ottoman Empire, for use in Mohammad Ali's army, and to the white man. Sadly the same vile assumptions about Arab racial superiority persist to this day.

In the early 1900s Churchill, visiting the Nuba, was impressed by their desire for independence. He was also shocked that the Arab Sudanese army used the Nuba for target practice.

When the CPA was signed the plan was to use the following six years to resolve issues such as the border location, culminating in a self-determination referendum in January 2011. Despite the warnings from all who knew Khartoum's track record, those involved failed to grasp that any non-Arab or non-Muslim left on the northern side of the border would be in peril. South Kordofan, Abyei and Blue Nile states were thus assigned to the north, with ill-defined 'local consultation' on their future status pledged. In the case of Abyei, the Dinka (ethnically black African) were promised a referendum, but the tough decision on who was eligible to vote was ducked. Hence in May Khartoum's troops ethnically cleansed Abyei of black Africans, moving in the nomadic Misseria Arabs so they could claim voting rights.

The international community avoided rocking the boat for fear the north would drop out of the CPA. They appeased Khartoum, tolerating its stalling tactics, and averting their eyes as Khartoum broke its own promises, including in Darfur. Each failure to hold Khartoum to its commitments was rightly interpreted as Western spinelessness.

The result of this dithering diplomacy is there for all to see: the black African citizens of north Sudan are being hunted from helicopter gunships like animals; farmers who should be planting crops are hiding in the mountains where they face starvation whatever now happens.

The West German dilemma

How long will black Africans and Christians in ROSS and the neighbouring Blue Nile state in the north stand by as Nubans and Dinka are killed by Khartoum and its proxies? Will they settle for co-existence, as West Germans did, knowing their cousins were being oppressed?

On July 1st Khartoum's President Bashir ordered his soldiers to "continue operations in South Kordofan until they clean the state of rebels." If the black African people of Blue Nile state and ROSS cannot tolerate mass murder next door, there could be war along the border, from Darfur to Ethiopia.

The international reaction

The UN Security Council met privately on July 15th to discuss the leaked internal report on South Kordofan mentioned above. They were urged to intervene by the International Red Cross, the Red Crescent and UN senior staff. However, the US envoy to Sudan, Princeton Lyman, cast doubt on the UN's report, numerous eyewitness accounts and the satellite pictures, saying there was no clear evidence of mass graves. Given Washington's disengagement, it was little surprise that Russia and China used their veto on a UN Security Council resolution on South Kordofan on August 12th.

So, while the US uses the Responsibility to Protect to justify intervention in Libya, it will not do so in Sudan. Why? Khartoumis "helping" Washington in the war on terror in Somalia and Yemen. A former US envoy has also suggested

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the Obama administration wants to repair its relations with the Arab and Muslim worlds. Good luck with that, as they say in the States.

Citizenship

During the war, millions of southerners fled to Khartoum to escape the bombardment. They found work and had families. Now, they are being fired from their jobs because of their, or their parents' ethnicity, and are being intimidated. Thousands have fled, giving up homes and possessions in fear of reprisals from a northern population that has never welcomed them.

Last December, President Bashir proclaimed that the new northern Sudan would be a monolithic Islamic Arab state. "There will be no time to speak of diversity of culture and ethnicity," he declared. "Shari'a [law] and Islam will be the main source for the constitution, Islam the official religion and Arabic the official language."

It is estimated as many as five million people of southern background live in the north, potential hostages in any argument with ROSS. It was therefore careless of the international community to have left the details of citizenship unresolved, and to walk away from Sudan without demanding constitutional civil rights for minorities.

Oil revenues

ROSS has one thing going for it: 385,000 barrels of oil a day. An estimated 75% of the former nation's oil reserves are beneath ROSS territory. Until independence the oil was exported to its Chinese buyers through a pipeline running north to Port Sudan. It would cost an estimated \$1.5 – \$3 billion to build a pipeline to a suitable Kenyan port, but ROSS's reserves are not big enough to justify it. Hence Khartoum is taking advantage of its monopoly position by charging \$33 a barrel duty, sixteen times the highest going rate. In neighbouring Chad, they pay \$0.4 a barrel for transshipping.

What is ROSS's future?

History teaches us that it doesn't always go well when rebels become politicians. A foreign diplomat in Juba points out that of the \$12 billion in oil revenues going to the interim southern administration since the 2005 peace deal, \$3 billion is unaccounted for. Regrettably, Africa's newest country is a one-party state, where journalists and opposition are arrested and beaten up, and where jobs go to loyal rebel Sudan People's Liberation Movement or Army comrades. Of the 170 seats in parliament, only four are held by non-SPLM parties; a local civil servant told us 40 of the 170 were illiterate. The SPLM controls an estimated 40-60% of the economy, with savvy Ugandan and Kenyan traders benefiting most in the six years since the ceasefire.

The US alone has poured \$2 billion into the south since 2005. Yet, visitors find a land with a stone aged economy and infrastructure, with the highest maternal mortality rate in the world (one in seven pregnancies ends in the mother's death). Female illiteracy is 80 to 90%, and a fifteen year old girl has more chance of dying in childbirth than she does finishing primary school.

If farmed efficiently, ROSS could feed all of Africa, but training people to grow crops has not been a priority. The president, Salva Kiir, skilfully provides Western nations with the development clichés required to unlock donations. He speaks of cracking down on corruption, and of appointing officials on the basis of merit rather than tribe. But African citizens know from experience that words count for little.

The UK position

On July 20th Foreign Office minister, Henry Bellingham made his second trip to Bashir's Sudan. He "reiterated the preparedness of his country to assist Sudan in building a prosperous future," the regime's news agency gushed, describing joint development projects: business as usual, then. His stance is at odds with the honourable position taken by DFID chief Andrew Mitchell, who also remains concerned about the upswing in regime-sponsored

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bloodshed in Darfur.

What must happen:

If the UN had the political support of its powerful members, it would impose a no-fly zone to stop Khartoum bombing its own people. The UN would also demand access for its agencies and for humanitarian groups to both South Kordofan and Abyei. But Ban Ki Moon is not the man to face down Bashir, particularly when America is equivocating.

In the words of Briec Pont, a spokesman for the French mission to the UN, "Violence against civilians cannot be met with blank stares from the Security Council." But that is exactly what will continue, as with Darfur. Those responsible will face no consequences. And as for ROSS's future? Good luck with that.

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