



A Tangled Web: Slavery, Genocide and Christianity in Sudan

Winston Churchill once described Russia as *a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma*. No such witticism exists to explain the tangled web of complexities that engulfs Africa's largest country, the Republic of Sudan in East Africa. Sudan is a mosaic of 27 million people that encompasses almost every problem in the modern world. Its beleaguered people tread through a labyrinth of religious and racial strife, acerbated by tribal and ethnic differences. It is a boiling cauldron of slavery, robbery, rape, and murder, bordering on genocide, flavored by lucrative oil reserves.

A History of Conflict

The foundation for Sudan's history goes back to the introduction of Christianity to the former Egyptian colony in the 6th century. By the 15th century, Muslim domination had set the stage for a never-ending battle. During the 1870s, British elimination of the slave trade, under the direction of the legendary Major-General Charles *Chinese* Gordon, caused an economic crisis that precipitated the rise of the *Mahdi*, a religious leader with the stature of an Islamic Messiah. He unleashed a *jihad*, a *holy war* on the Sudan's occupiers, culminating in the fall of Khartoum in 1885 where the Mahdi massacred Gen. Gordon and thousands of Egyptians and Sudanese inhabitants. Though the Mahdi died that year, his forces remained in control until Lord H. H. Kitchener recaptured the city 13 years later. The following year the Sudan became *Anglo-Egyptian Sudan*, ruled jointly by Britain and Egypt until independence was granted in 1956.

Since the end of colonial rule, Sudan has suffered through a revolving door of coups, and revolutions that have constituted the longest civil war of the century, at the cost of two million dead. The Sudanese in the south are mostly black Christians while the northern Sudanese are mainly Arab. In the early 1960s, Khartoum expelled all missionaries in order to Islamize the Sudan.

In 1989 Omar Hassan Ahmed al-Bashir assumed power. Al-Bashir's imposition of the punitive Sharia laws, which are applicable to all regardless of their religious affiliations, greatly intensified civil unrest. Its cruel and unusual punishments include sentencing adulterous women to death and the *cross amputation*, which involves the loss of the right hand and the left leg. In 1998 the leader of Sudan's ruling party, the National Islamic Front,

Dr. al-Turabi declared his goal of establishing his *Grand Islamic Project*, an Islamic empire in eastern Africa where the Sharia would be universally enforced.

By declaring the Sudanese civil war a *jihad*, al-Bashir added a religious dimension to his internal conflict. To the prophet Mohammed, the *jihad* was a fundamental tenet of Islam. Westerners often fail to understand the relentless Muslim persecution of Christians and the *jihad* stems from Islam's militant nature whose primary purpose is political rather than spiritual.

Islamic scholars identify different forms of *jihad*. The most prevalent in Sudan are the *Jihad of the Sword* and the *Jihad of Slavery*. While it has been over 120 years since *Chinese* Gordon suppressed the slave trade in Sudan, Islam's *Jihad of Slavery* is still one of its most vital imperial tactics. This *jihad* is a trusty weapon Muslims use to destabilize Christian communities in the south while forcing them to convert to Islam. Since 1956 several thousand Sudanese Christians have been kidnapped and sold as slaves. These black slaves were in most cases young women and children, taken north to provide agricultural labor, domestic work, and sexual service.

Oil revenues have added a new dimension to the periodic civil wars. Al-Bashir's ruthless Muslim power elite invoked a policy of *ethnic cleansing* against the south whose inhabitants surround Sudan's rich oil fields. The government has opened these fields to companies from China, Sweden, Austria, and Canada. Al-Bashir has used the oil revenue to purchase more weapons for his army.

OMAR AL-BASHIR

The conditions in Sudan have not gone unnoticed. In an article for *Parade Magazine* on February 11, 2007 author David Wallechinsky unveiled his *World's 10 Worst Dictators*. Of a list of 70 ruthless dictators he ranked Sudan's Omar al-Bashir in the top spot for the second year in a row, just ahead of North Korean dictator, Kim Jong-il, and Iran's Sayid Ali Khamenei. Not exactly a household name, al-Bashir earned his top spot with his barbarous ethnic, racial and religious vengeance, especially in Darfur.

Al-Bashir was born in the village of Hosh Bannaga, Sudan in 1944. He joined the Sudanese Army at an early age and later studied at a military academy in Cairo. Before leading the coup that

overthrew the democratically elected Prime Minister Sadeq al-Mahdi, he served with the Egyptian army in Israel in 1973. Al-Bashir is a controversial figure, often accused of harboring and encouraging Islamic extremists. Osama Bin Laden operated in Sudan for five years until he was finally banned from the country in May of 1996. The United States does not trust al-Bashir and has included Sudan on its list of seven nations that supported international terrorism.

To his credit, in January of 2005, al-Bashir signed a peace treaty with the Christian South. It provided for their autonomy for six years, followed by a referendum on secession. Islamic rule would reign in the north but the Sharia would be put to a vote in the south. Oil revenues in the south would be split in half.

DEVILS ON HORSEBACK

Just when the conflict in the south seemed settled, a more serious one erupted in the western province of Darfur. According to an article in a September 2004 issue of *Time Magazine*, *The Tragedy of Sudan*, the conflict in Darfur was *literally rooted in the soil*. Most of the region's six million people are African farmers or Arab grazers who migrate between the arid north and the south. This has created a deep tension, not unlike that in the American West between the cattlemen and the sheepherders. A persistent drought has forced the Arabs to move to Darfur in greater numbers because of the arable lands. This seriously strained relations with the Africans. Light arms, fueling the hostilities, poured in from Chad and the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

When Khartoum failed to restrain the grazers, the Africans, led by a group calling itself the Sudan Liberation Army (SLA) violently rebelled against government outposts in Darfur in April of 2003. In response, instead of sending in government troops, al-Bashir called on local tribes to crush the rebellion. The most eager recruits came from small groups of Arab nomads who saw this as an opportunity to grab more land and livestock under the government banner. Locals dubbed them derisively the *Janjaweed*, which means literally *devils on horseback*.

Without restraint, the Janjaweed brutally attacked civilian populations, hospitals, schools, market places, food distribution centers, and churches. Many of these undisciplined hordes pillaged the villages, where they raped at will. They rationalized their brutal conduct that the civilians deserved it because they provided aid and comfort to the anti-government rebels. This strategy, according to the *New York Times*, *became the justification for the mass murder, summary execution, and mass rape of civilians*. Since its outbreak about 100,000 civilians have perished.

Al-Bashir promised to disarm the Janjaweed but to date that has not happened. The truth is the Janjaweed often work closely with Sudan's regular security forces, attacking alongside government troops in military vehicles or relying on air support in the form of bombers or helicopter gunships. Millions have fled their destroyed villages for camps near Darfur's main towns or set up camps in neighboring Chad.

A QUESTION OF GENOCIDE

The radical American left has accused the Janjaweed of *ethnic cleansing* and even genocide. Led by actor George Clooney, the left has demanded that George Bush send military troops to Darfur. They argue that the West's failure to intervene will have the same bloody result as Rwanda a decade ago where 800,000 people perished. Clooney and his enlightened minions are the same people who oppose American intervention in Iraq or Iran, yet they *insist America should intervene in Haiti, Rwanda, Kosovo, or Sudan*.

In his new book, *The Enemy At Home: The Cultural left and its Responsibility for 9/11* author Dinesh D'Souza accuses the left of wanting to use American power to promote their radical agenda. To do so they call for the *United States to intervene militarily in countries where no American self-interest is involved*. To them the United States military is nothing more than an armed *meals on wheels*.

One thing is certain: there is no real consensus on events in Sudan. The World Health Organization is alarmed by the high mortality rate in Darfur as hundreds die of disease each day. In August of 2004 a mission from the European Union declared that Darfur fell short of genocide. The African Union has tried to mediate the situation with a small force of 7000 soldiers. The United Nations has stated that the human rights abuses in Sudan are the worst humanitarian disaster in the world today but has stopped short of calling it genocide, a term minted by jurist Raphael Lemkin in 1944. The UN has been rendered useless because China and Pakistan, members of the Security Council, have opposed any sanctions. Both countries buy oil from Sudan.

Former United States Secretary of State Colin Powell testified before Congress that *the government of Sudan and the Janjaweed bear responsibility, and that genocide may still be occurring*. Despite Colin Powell comments, there is no agreement in the Bush government that what is transpiring in Darfur really constitutes genocide.

THE INTERNATIONAL SPOTLIGHT

The same is not true among newspaper editors and global politicians, who have engaged in a worldwide crusade for international justice in Sudan.

In late February 2007 after 20 months of criminal investigations into Darfur's enormous vat of bloodshed and humanitarian disaster, the International Court of Justice called the massacre in Sudan *genocide*. After the loss of over 200,000 lives in Darfur since 2003, the Court charged Ahmed Harun, a junior minister of humanitarian affairs and former interior minister for Darfur and militia leader Ali Kushayb with 51 counts of *war crimes* and *crimes against humanity*, language reminiscent of Nuremberg.

While the prosecution document was not an indictment, the evidence proved that there were sufficient grounds that the two persons bore criminal responsibility for murder, rape, torture, and persecution. The Court recognized that those charged were only small fry but they vowed to bring to justice the senior government

and military officials who were most responsible for the death and destruction in Darfur.

From a purely geopolitical position, the United States has little national interest in Darfur. President Bush and former UN Secretary General Kofi Annan called for Sudan to co-operate with the African Union and NATO. Many observers believe that a small NATO force with US support would be sufficient to bring stability to the situation. As of March of 2007, Washington stated that it has no immediate plans to intervene in the Sudanese situation, other than encouraging further negotiations.

BISHOP IN EXILE

One man who understands Darfur is Bishop Macram Max Gassis Bishop, of El-Ofeid Diocese, Sudan. Through his Relief Fund, which was established in 1998, he has not only heightened awareness of Sudanese suffering but also has increased international assistance of food, clothing, shelter, and medical attention.

The Bishop is increasingly weary of religious and political liberals telling him that he must dialogue with the Muslims. He says that Muslims believe that Jesus was a mere prophet while the Church believes that He was the Son of God. The Bishop also wonders out loud why the West has not intervened in Sudan since it has gone to the well to militarily assist Muslims in Kosovo, Bosnia, Kuwait, and Iraq.

Bishop Gassis fully realizes that preaching the Gospel of Jesus Christ is an intricate part of his mission in the Nuba Mountains. Instead of bringing a godless democracy to the people, the Bishop's teachers bring the love and forgiveness of God and knowledge of the Holy Spirit to the Sudanese. Since women are the backbone of society, the Bishop has made special efforts to upgrade the status of women, especially prenatal health care.

Bishop Gassis was born in 1938 in Khartoum. After completing his seminary studies in Italy and England, he returned to Sudan as a parish priest in 1964. After five years as apostolic administrator in central Sudan he was consecrated a bishop in 1988. He was acting as liaison between the Catholic bishops and Khartoum until he was indicted for criticizing the human right records of Khartoum before the United States Congress. *As a persona non grata*, Bishop Gassis lives in exile in Nairobi, Kenya.

THE LUCKY SAINT

John Paul II's canonization of St. Josephine Bakhita during the Jubilee Year of 2000 has been one of the great stories to emerge from the turbulent history of Sudan. Her fascinating spiritual journey to sainthood came at a critical moment for Sudanese Catholics. According to Bishop Gassis, her life served as *a beacon of light for her people who daily walk in via crucis where religious persecution, ethnic cleansing, slavery, rape, and man-made famine ... are the order of the day.*

Born around 1869 in southern Sudan, Arab slave traders abducted her in 1875 even though slavery was against the law. The trauma was so great that she forgot her given name. Her abductors called her *Bakhita*, an Arab word for the *lucky one*. The irony of her name has not been lost on those who have read about her personal history of slavery, torture, and deprivation. One of her many masters, a Turkish general, had her tattooed with 114 razor cuts on the 13-year-old's arms, breasts, and abdomen. Her last owners moved to Venice where she was their daughter's nanny. Accompanied by Bakhita each morning, the girl received religious instructions from the Canossian Sisters. Bakhita was deeply affected by the Catholic nuns and what she heard there.

After her owners returned to Sudan, Bakhita petitioned the court to allow her to complete her religious studies at the convent. An Italian judge ruled that she had been illegally enslaved, since Sudan had outlawed the institution before her capture and therefore she was free to stay. In January of 1890, she was received into the Church and was given the name Josephine Margaret Bakhita. In 1896 this humble daughter of Sudan became a Canossian sister. She served the Lord in grace and quiet dignity until her death from pneumonia in 1947. Her holy life bears the full promise of Sudan.

To support the needy Sudanese people and church, contact: Bishop Gassis Sudan Relief Fund, Inc., a 501(c)(3) tax exempt corporation, P.O. Box 2540, Manassas, VA 20108, 888-288-0348.

Email: bishopgassis@petersvoice.com



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ST. MATTHEW 11:28-29

"Come to me, all you who labor and are burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am meek and humble of heart; and you will find rest for your souls."

The Most Important Person on Earth is a Mother

Cardinal Mindszenty's respect for Mothers was deep and abiding. Below is the Cardinal's quote on a cream card 5 1/2 x 3".



The Most Important Person on earth is a mother. She cannot claim the honor of having built Notre Dame Cathedral. She need not. She has built something more magnificent than any cathedral—a dwelling for an immortal soul, the tiny perfection of her baby's body ... The angels have not been blessed with such a grace. They cannot share in God's creative miracle to bring new saints to Heaven. Only a human mother can. Mothers are closer to God the Creator than any other creature; God joins forces with mothers in performing this act of creation ... What on God's good earth is more glorious than this: to be a mother?

—*Joseph Cardinal Mindszenty*

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