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Girma Kebede

INTRODUCTION: SUDAN'S PREDICAMENT

SUDAN IS AFRICA'S largest country, covering two and half million square kilometers. Thirty million people live in this vast area, comprising of over 300 indigenous groups, speaking more than 100 different languages and dialects. The country is endowed with immense agricultural resources with about 200 million acres of arable land, more than three and one half times the size of Germany. By Food and Agriculture Organization estimates, in 1990 only 15.5 percent of this total was under cultivation (The Economist Intelligence Unit, 1995: 15). The White Nile, the Blue Nile, and the Atbara rivers, provide water for irrigation year round, and continuous cultivation of crops is possible, with up to three crops a year. The country's vast mineral resources, petroleum being one, have yet to be exploited. In spite of all this, however, Sudan is one of the poorest nations in the world. It is a country ravaged by war which has thus far taken one and half million lives, displaced over three million people, disrupted economic activities, wasted precious resources, and destroyed the nation's limited social and economic infrastructure.

The political future of the country is now more uncertain than any time since its independence in 1956. In the South, a brutal civil war has been going for nearly fourteen years, with no end in sight. Women and children caught in the agonies of war are among the most vulnerable in this continuing tragedy. The National Islamic Front (NIF) regime in Khartoum has thus far shown little interest to negotiate a political settlement. It has scuttled all efforts to end the war. The outside world has ignored the war, other than occasional attempts by humanitarian relief agencies to deliver food to war-displaced refugees. Both the government and the southern guerrilla groups have often frustrated even these efforts. While human lives are deliberately wasted by means of war and war-induced starvation, the international community has opted, unfortunately, to do nothing. As the debilitating civil war continues to drag on, the possibility for the North and South to coexist peacefully as one political entity has become less and less conceivable.

The NIF has an undertaken extensive program of Islamization and Arabization of the whole country. The entire educational system of the country is now based on the Qur'an and conducted in the Arabic language. All the universities in Sudan, once bastions of democratic freedoms and hotbeds of dissent, have been transformed into Islamic institutions, required to teach in Arabic rather than English and featuring a compulsory course in Qur'anic studies. University rules require female students to wear the veil. Female students are not allowed to mix with their male counterparts in public places outside the classroom. As a matter of fact, under recent new laws promulgated by the Khartoum City Council, women will be segregated from men in all areas of public life. All students entering the university are required to undergo three to six months' training in NIF's Popular Defense Force. An estimated 400,000 Sudanese men and women have undergone training to join the militia force. Students who do not share the NIF's vision of Islam have no access to a university education. Academics who do not fit into the Islamic curricula are evicted from their positions. Islamic militant fervor is widely in evidence around the university campus. The Khartoum University student union is taken over by Pro-NIF student supporters. Posted throughout the campus are revolutionary banners which read: "We fear no one because we count on God," "Jihad is our path and death for the sake of God is our wish." Outside the classroom, young NIF disciples give lectures on the holy war in the South and Islamic tenets almost on a daily basis. One student leader exhorted his followers in a recent university rally: "Be proud when they call you fundamentalists. You should never be timorous to call yourself fundamentalists. You should know that fundamentalists are people who follow the words and actions of the Prophet Muhammad." Speaking about the war, he advised his followers not to hesitate to volunteer to go and fight because "God has promised us the final victory." The government has proclaimed the war in the South as a "jihad" or holy war between Islam and the infidel, and pro-NIF students routinely attack students who voice opposition to the war.

Vigilante groups called Islamic Security reign supreme in Khartoum neighborhoods. They often beat women for failing to adhere to stringent Islamic dress codes or for interacting in public with non-relative males. These militant gangs are also placed in various civil institutions. The regime has empowered them to maintain social order and enforce religious obedience and restrictions on alcohol in the city. The Islamic Security is an extragovernmental force answerable only to the NIF. Southern refugees who sought refuge in the North have become easy targets of Islamization through intimidation and force. The government allows only Islamic relief agencies to operate in make shift refugee camps and these agencies provide food only to those who agree to embrace Islam. In the southern rural areas, the regime has armed Arab militias to act as proxy armies in its attempt to enforce its fundamentalist vision of Islam,

as well as to impose its cultural, political, and economic hegemony.

At present the country is financially bankrupt. Its treasury is drained by an endless civil war and corruption. The government's "everything for the war" policy is costing the country over \$2 million a day. The country's total value of imports in 1995 nearly doubled that of exports. The government introduced in 1992 an economic program which removed subsidies on basic commodities such as flour, medicine, and gasoline. It also imposed new taxes that apply to most citizens, including the indigent. The country is struggling with a staggering foreign debt (\$20 billion in 1997); total external debt stood at 268 percent of gross domestic product in 1996. The failure to pay off in order to meet payment arrears (estimated at \$1.7 billion) has damaged the country's credibility with the International Monetary Fund. It is now faced with the threat of expulsion from the IMF if it does not implement strict economic reforms and resume regular payments of its arrears. Growing international isolation has hurt the country's non-agricultural sectors of the economy. Ever increasing prices have put even staples out of the reach of the overwhelming majority of citizens. Consumer price inflation reached 163 percent in mid-1996, almost doubling since the beginning of that same year. In 1988, a kilogram of meat cost 16 Sudanese pounds; it cost 350 pounds in 1994 and 950 pounds in 1996, which is four-week's pay for a civil servant.* Many people cannot recall the last time they had meat in their diet. The price of a pair of sandals skyrocketed from 20 pounds to 1,500 pounds during the same period. The price of petrol rose six-fold since 1994, from 400 to 2,500 pounds per gallon because of the increased demand to truck new "volunteer" soldiers to the war front. Hardly a week goes by without riots, demonstrations, and strikes in major cities protesting drastic increases in basic commodity prices. Hardships will worsen and the country's living standard will continue to spiral downward as long as the war continues to rage.

The prolonged civil war has destroyed the livelihoods and lives many of its citizens, particularly those in the South. Between 1983 and 1996 an estimated 1.5 million people have died from war-related causes. Over one-quarter of those who perished were children. Fighting has also forced over one-half million southerners to flee and seek refuge in neighboring countries. There are some three million internally displaced southerners who, having been forced to leave their homes, are effectively refugees in their own country. The vast majority of these people now live in make-shift refugee camps around Khartoum where they form desperately wretched masses of alienated souls, totally detached from their culture and traditional way of life.

* Sudan's civil servants earn LS10,000 (\$7.00) per month, private sector workers LS17,000 (\$12.00), and a university lecturer about LS45,000 (\$30.00). Source: Yasin Miheisi (ed.) *Sudan News and Views* 20, July 1996.

For those who remain in the troubled South, the war has vastly eroded the traditional subsistence base of the economy. In many southern areas, the civil war has destroyed livestock, crops and game animals. In parts of the region, especially the eastern and southern areas, land under cultivation has significantly diminished because of massive displacement and lack of security. Insecurity has destroyed trade and markets in much of the region. As a consequence, the traditional complementary exchange of goods (for instance, exchange of cattle for grain, a way of making up food deficits) has been severely curtailed. The collapse of the transport infrastructure and the prevailing insecurity in much of the region have prevented surplus produced in some areas to be moved to cereal deficit areas. The war has also caused relief efforts to be constantly interrupted. In areas where relative security exists, frequent flooding, pest infestation, and cattle diseases (largely exacerbated by the disruption of veterinary services) are causing a substantial reduction in subsistence outputs. Education and health services, which have always been woefully inadequate in the region, are now largely ravished.

Elsewhere in the country food shortage has driven millions of rural Sudanese to hunger and malnutrition. Despite the overall food surplus production in the country in the last three years, several states in Kordofan and Darfur and the Red Sea state are experiencing severe food deficits. In some areas prolonged drought is partly to blame for shortage of food. Where food is available, the price is exorbitant. The high cost of transportation, largely fueled by high fuel costs and poor infrastructure, has made access to staple grains next to impossible. The purchasing power of the majority of the rural population has been sharply reduced due to the ever expanding civil war and economic downturn. In many northeast states, cattle herders have been forced to sell most of their livestock to buy grains at skyrocketing prices. In 1994, for instance, it cost only one goat in Red Sea state to purchase a 100 kilogram bag of sorghum. But in early 1997, one needed up to 20 goats to buy the same amount of grain.

The regime in Khartoum, one of Africa's most despised, is locked in a bitter war of words with virtually all its neighbors who accuse it of trying to export Islamic radicalism. Egypt, its populous and powerful neighbor to the north, has accused the Khartoum regime of plotting the June 1995 attempt to assassinate President Hosni Mubarek during a visit to Ethiopia, and with arming Egyptian Islamic insurgents who have been fighting since 1992 to replace Egypt's secular government with Iran-style theocratic rule. The regime has few allies in the Arab world. Iraq and Iran, its loyal allies, offer little help, if any, since both are internationally isolated themselves. Its persistent calls on Islamic countries for help have not produced the needed support. Remittances from Sudanese nationals working in Gulf State have dwindled as many host nations evicted thousands of Sudanese workers to punish the Khartoum regime for siding with Iraq during the Gulf War in 1991.

In March 1996, in an attempt to legitimize its dictatorial rule, the Islamic regime organized presidential and parliamentary elections, the first balloting of any kind since 1986. All major opposition parties refused to take part in the elections, describing them as an attempt to give the government a semblance of legitimacy. The two largest parties in the previous government (the Umma Party and the Democratic Unionist Party), and the National Democratic Alliance, an umbrella group of all major opposition parties, had called for the formation of a national unity which would organize new elections under a multiparty system. Instead the regime designed an electoral system that made it next to impossible for opposition parties to mobilize their supporters and financial resources behind their candidates. All candidates had to stand as independent without party organization or affiliation (all political parties have been banned since 1989) and had no access to the mass media to put their ideas to the electorate. Candidates had only twelve days to campaign in the country almost a third the size of the United States. On the other hand, the government set up “popular committees” in every neighborhood and rural community and provided adequate financial resources to mobilize support for its preferred candidates. Hence, the electoral system naturally favored government-picked candidates. For all intents and purposes, everybody knew the election results before the voting took place, and when the votes were counted, there were no surprises. Bashir, the NIF-disciple who overthrew the democratically elected government of Sadiq Al Mahdi in 1989, easily ‘defeated’ the 42 or so candidates for president, most of whom were little-known before the election. NIF’s supporters captured nearly all the 400 parliamentary seats, of which 125 members have been appointed by the president. The new National Assembly elected, unopposed, Hassan al-Turabi, the leader of NIF, as speaker of the parliament. President Basher’s new cabinet included NIF extremists in larger numbers than before.

The elections have not made any difference as the regime continues to rule through sheer terror. The regime has taken thousands of suspected government opponents prisoner. Most are held without any trial or charges pressed against them. Freedoms of speech, peaceful demonstration, assembly, and of the press continue to be severely restricted. Trade unions, once an independent force to be reckoned with, have been largely gelded. Any gathering of more than five people without the government permission is against the law. Recently the Sudanese security police used tear gas and live ammunition to subdue student protests at the University of Khartoum. The students were protesting the election of Dr. Hassan al-Turabi as speaker of the new National Assembly. The security police took similar actions against thousands of people who took to the streets in Khartoum’s twin city of Omdurman. Security authorities also arrested a group of army officers on suspicion they were recruiting others into an anti-government movement. The regime has ordered

the permanent closure of the country's only independent newspaper—*al-Sudan International*—which has been allowed to operate under strict censorship, for its criticism of the Islamic war the regime is waging against Southerners. All non-governmental organizations that are not affiliated with the government continue to be banned. Opposition leaders and former officials and army chiefs have been thrown in jail several times over the past seven years. One such leader, the former Prime Minister, Sadiq al-Mahdi, finally escaped the country and went into exile in Eritrea, after living under house arrest and close surveillance since his overthrow in 1989. Angered by its continued losses in the war fronts, the government continues to throw into jail opposition politicians, trade unionists, and civilians suspected of backing rebel forces.

Through Islamic banks, the NIF now exercises a virtual monopoly on access to capital. It also controls the black market currency exchange business and captures large amounts of foreign exchange for the regime. It makes enormous profits from currency and real estate speculation. The NIF government has recently announced that it will begin to extract oil in the disputed southern region. In the 1970s, oil was discovered in the upper Nile region, but the civil war has precluded significant exploration. Canada's International Petroleum Corporation, which is under contract with the NIF regime to extract crude oil from the southern Sudanese oil fields at Bentiu, is said to be planning to employ a foreign private army to help guard the oil wells. This new development will certainly affect the course of the war. If the regime succeeds in extracting oil, it will use the income to further finance the war. The Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA), however, forewarned companies working in the oil fields in southern Sudan to pull out or face an imminent military attack. True to his words, in December 1996, Garang's forces forced Canada's Arakis Energy Corporation to temporarily shut one of its oil-drilling rigs in El Saqr in southern Sudan.



This volume deals with the roots of Sudan's internal conflicts, social and economic breakdown, and ecological impoverishment. In Chapter Two of this volume Kebede argues that northern Arab elites who have ruled the country for four decades are responsible for the predicament in which the country finds itself today. All governments in Khartoum since independence have totally neglected the economic, political, and cultural interests of the non-Muslim and non-Arab natives of southern Sudan. The current National Islamic Front government, which usurped political power since 1989, is especially responsible for the ongoing tragic civil war and economic and social dislocation in the country. The regime's insistence on making Islam the sole religion and the law

of the land and an instrument for political transformation has alienated the inhabitants of southern Sudan, the overwhelming majority of whom subscribe to a wide variety of traditional African beliefs, but are also heavily influenced by Christianity. Such religious and ethnic bigotry—which has dominated the Sudanese political scene since independence—has brought the country nothing but continuous human suffering, political instability, violence, and economic and social retrogression.

The impact of the war has been devastating for both the people and the environment in the war-torn region of the South. The loss in human lives and the devastation of the regional economy are enormous. In Chapter Three Kebbede argues that both the Khartoum government and the SPLM/A are to blame for the lack of concern for the rights of civilian population, especially the government and the peoples militia it supports. Both sides have used food as a political weapon, even though they aggressively deny applying such a stratagem. Kebbede also argues that the division within the SPLM/A and the interethnic violence and warfare have destroyed the lives and sources of livelihood of the citizens of southern Sudan.

In Chapter Four Dan Connell examines the regional implications of the civil war in Sudan as well as the involvement of external forces. In Chapter Five Jok Madut Jok writes about “war, social transition and illness conception in South Sudan” by studying the case of tuberculosis. Tuberculosis has reemerged as one of the leading causes of death among the civil-affected population of South Sudan. Ethnographic field work among the Dinka of southwestern Sudan has given attention to local causal analysis to understand how culture perceptions of the illness influence health-seeking behaviors. Jok presents the views of several patients and care-givers in several communities in Western Dinka. In these communities, tuberculosis affliction is explained in terms of inheritance, being triggered by the use of machine guns in combat, malnutrition, and inadequate clothing during the cold season. While only very few people understand tuberculosis in biomedical terms, nearly all patients and care-givers seek biomedical treatment. However, due to the war, population movements, lack of health services, the long duration of tuberculosis treatment, and the social aspects of care-giving, the illness continues to spread. The sad thing, Jok says, both patients and care-givers have no perceptions of contagion.

The reappearance of war between northern and southern Sudan has generally been interpreted as a typical ethno-religious conflict deriving from differences between Muslims and Christians, or Arabs and Africans. In Chapter Six Mohamed Suliman contends that, while this categorization had served as description of the earlier manifestation of the conflict in the 1950s, and still has some bearing on how the war is being conducted and perceived, the nature of the conflict has changed. Suliman argues (p. 99): “Conflicts are processes, not

static states, and over the last three decades developments in the Sudan have gradually if consistently changed the nature of the conflict from being a classic ethno-religious conflict to one mainly over resources, with the economic and resources crisis in the North emerging as a driving force in the Sudan civil war.”

In Chapter Seven Kebede deals with the social, economic, and political aspects of environmental degradation in Sudan. He argues that environmental and natural resource degradation in the country have been driven primarily by state policies since colonial times that promoted ecologically unsustainable land use practices and massive land alienation. Sudan is fast impoverishing its agricultural resources. The vast majority of the Sudanese people work on land and are directly dependent on natural resources for their food, shelter, and employment. Their welfare in both the short and long term is inextricably tied to the productivity of natural systems. At present, their means of livelihood—soil, water, grazing land, and natural vegetation—is undergoing extreme degradation.