



**"SLAVE REDEMPTION"
IN SUDAN**

**INDEPENDENT EVIDENCE
REVEALS SYSTEMATIC
FRAUD AND
SPLA COMPLICITY
IN THE
FRAUDULENT
PRESENTATION OF
"SLAVES" IN SUDAN**

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WORKING FOR PEACE IN SUDAN

In a July 1999 article entitled 'The False Promise of Slave Redemption', published by **The Atlantic Monthly**, American journalist Richard Minter provided unambiguous first hand evidence that there was fraud and corruption in the process of "slave redemption" in Sudan, whereby southern Sudanese tribesmen, women and children are supposedly "bought back" from northern Sudanese tribesmen said to have abducted them during raids on southern villages.¹ This "redemption" process, closely associated with Christian Solidarity International, has already been extensively criticised by the United Nations and its agencies such as UNICEF.²

Minter was accompanied during a visit to southern Sudan by James Jacobson, the president of Christian Freedom International. Jacobson, a former Reagan Administration official, had previously served as Christian Solidarity International's Washington representative. In 1998, the American branch of Christian Solidarity International USA went its own way as Christian Freedom International, with Jacobson at its head. He was an enthusiastic supporter of "slave redemption" until he actually visited southern Sudan to see the "slave redemption" situation for himself. Jacobson subsequently publicly disowned "slave redemption" because the financial incentives involved encouraged both the taking of captives as well as fraud and corruption.

SPLA Involvement in "Slave Redemption" fraud

The Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) is the rebel movement waging war in southern Sudan against the Sudanese Government. The "Sudanese Relief and Rehabilitation Association" (SRRA) is an arm of the SPLA. Minter's article clearly documents the involvement of what he terms "middle level" SPLA/SRRA officials in fraudulently presenting "slaves" to visiting Western would-be "redeemers".

The following is a direct quote from Minter's article:

I witnessed an attempted slave redemption that was unquestionably problematic during a recent visit to Nyamlell, a large settlement about fifty miles south of the Bahr al Arab river, in southern Sudan. Nyamlell has been the location of many slave redemptions covered by the U.S. media. The night before my visit officials from the local branch of the Sudanese Relief and Rehabilitation Association in Lokichokio, Kenya, asked for a meeting with James Jacobson, who had been hoping to redeem the slaves in Nyamlell. After half an hour of small talk the officials got down to business. "How much money are you bringing for slave redemption?"

"Four thousand dollars," Jacobson said.

"Ah, that is very helpful. There are forty slave children to be redeemed."

"Forty children? That would be a hundred dollars each. Don't other groups pay fifty dollars each?"

"No. Everyone pays a hundred."

"What about Christian Solidarity International?"

"Ah, they are different. They buy in much larger quantities."...

Jacobson exchanged no money, but two mid-level SRRA officials insisted on accompanying him and me to Nyamlell. When we landed on the dirt runway, a local commissioner named Alev Akechak Jok met our plane. He refused to make eye contact with the SRRA officials, and was adamant about meeting privately with Jacobson and me... The commissioner offered tea and an admission: "There are no slaves here for you to buy."... Hadn't the SRRA radioed his village the previous day and learned that there were forty children to be freed? He shook his head no.

¹ The article was published in two parts in **The Atlantic Monthly** and is also available online in two parts. Part one is available at <http://www.theatlantic.com/issues/99jul/9907sudanslaves.htm> and part two at <http://www.theatlantic.com/issues/99jul/9907sudanslaves2.htm>. Minter's work has previously appeared in **The New York Times**, **The Wall Street Journal** and **Reader's Digest**.

² See, 'UN condemns aid group for buying slaves', **The Times**, July 9, 1999, 'UNICEF slams buying freedom for Sudan slaves', News Article by Reuters on February 5, 1999 at 12:42:37.

As we returned to the airstrip, the SRRA officials rejoined us. One said that he had just found a trader and ten children to be redeemed. Jok suddenly became angry and pulled me aside: the officials could not hear us over the whirling propeller. "You must leave now!" he demanded. Are the children slaves? I asked. "No," he said, "they are the children of the village." Jok has since been removed from his post, probably in retaliation for his honesty.

The simple fact that Alev Akechak Jok was punished for his actions would clearly indicate continuing SPLA involvement in this fraud, a fraud which has obvious propaganda and financial advantages to the rebels. Minter also documented a further way SPLA officials are involved in fraud with regard to "slave redemption":

Corrupt officials set themselves up as bankers and insist that redeemers exchange their dollars for Sudanese pounds, a nearly worthless currency... The officials arrange by radio to have some villages play slaves and some play slave-sellers, and when the redeemers arrive, the Sudanese pounds are used to free the slaves. When the redeemers are gone, the pounds are turned back over to the corrupt officials, who hand out a few dollars in return. Most of the dollars stay with the officials, who now also have the Sudanese pounds with which to play banker again.

This is not the first time that an American journalist has questioned SPLA involvement in the whole issue of "slavery" and "slave redemption". William Finnegan, in his article 'The Invisible War', which appeared in **The New Yorker** in January 1999, tells of having himself come across a "slave trader" at Nyamlell similar to the one spoken of by Minter:

To me, perhaps the most disturbing aspect of the mystery surrounding Nyamlell's slaver rescuer was his relationship with the S.P.L.A. If he was in fact a double-dealer, running a nefarious business, could the local rebels be in league with his operation? They certainly seemed to endorse his work.³

Local Southern Sudanese Views on "Slave Redemption"

Minter was also able to interview local southern tribesmen at first hand about the issue of buying captives abducted during raids.

(T)he Dinkas I spoke with, all of whom live in villages that have been victimised by the raiders, strongly oppose redemption altogether on the grounds that it promotes raids.

Minter quotes Longar Awic Ayuel, the executive chief of the Akoch Payam settlement, which was raided in February 1999 as saying:

Redemption is not the solution. It means that you are encouraging the raiders.

Minter also interviewed Machar Malok Machar, a tribesman from Akoch who had escaped from captivity during a previous raid, about "redemption":

It is bad. They do these terrible things to put shillings in their pockets. They are crazy for the money. Why would you give it to them?

These are not views usually heard by those naïve Westerners who arrive to "redeem slaves". They arrive within SPLA-controlled areas in which SPLA/SRRA officials have a clear propaganda or financial interest in presenting these Western visitors with "slaves" to be bought back.

Minter also interviewed Manase Lomole Waya, a representative of Humanitarian Assistance for South Sudan, based in Nairobi, about his view on "redemption":

³ William Finnegan, 'The Invisible War', **The New Yorker**, 25 January 1999.

Where does the money go? It goes to the raiders to buy more guns, raid more villagers, put more shillings in their pockets. It is a vicious circle.

Fraud and corruption confirmed by Reuters

A Reuters report in July 1999 confirmed the “massive corruption” reported by Jacobson:

Local aid workers... say that they have seen children who they have known for months passed off as slaves... And Reuters interviewed one boy in Yargot who told a completely implausible story of life in the north, a story which he changed in every respect when translators were swapped.⁴

In May 1999, the **Christian Science Monitor** also clearly stated:

There are increasingly numerous reports that significant numbers of those ‘redeemed’ were never slaves in the first place. Rather, they were simply elements of the local populations, often children, available to be herded together when cash-bearing redeemers appeared.⁵

Interviewed after his visit to Nyamlell, James Jacobson told the **Denver Post** of his clear reservations about “redemption”:

I just felt everything was not as it appeared to be. You don’t know if after several days these groups of people get reabducted.

Speaking to Reuters, Jacobson stated that:

It has turned into a circus. The problem now is that Western dollars are making the situation worse, both in terms of abductions and in terms of corruption.⁶

The **Denver Post** reported that the leaders of major human-rights organizations were stating that abductions are “not only... increasing but that the increases almost certainly are related to the sudden availability of Western money for buybacks”:

It’s like paying hostage takers ransom, they say, arguing that any payment lends credibility to the notion of buying and selling human beings. They say the money encourages scams...⁷

Perhaps the final word on the “redemption” of abductees should be given to those closest to the issue. Referring to the **Baltimore Sun**’s original sensationalist “purchase” of two “slaves” in 1996, a source close to the Dinka retrieval committee, the Dinka community’s own grouping which exists in the affected areas to secure the return of abductees, was quoted by Anti-Slavery International as saying that they were concerned that:

Such outside intervention with big sums of money may make matters worse and can encourage others to capture and “facilitate” the retrieval of more children for economic motives.⁸

It is clear that exactly the very situation warned of above has come about, fuelled by partisan and naïve groups such as Christian Solidarity International. Hundreds, if not thousands, of Sudanese civilians may have been abducted specifically to cater for those Western organisations who, for political and religious reasons, have been willing to pay large amounts of money in order to project anti-Sudanese propaganda.

⁴ ‘Aid group tries to break Sudan slavery chain’, News Article by Reuters on July 11, 1999 at 23:40:58.

⁵ ‘Slave ‘Redemption’ won’t save Sudan’, **Christian Science Monitor**, 26 May 1999.

⁶ ‘Aid group tries to break Sudan slavery chain’, *op.cit.*

⁷ ‘Rescue of slaves backfiring’, **The Denver Post**, August 22, 1999.

⁸ Peter Verney, **Slavery in Sudan**, Sudan Update and Anti-Slavery International, London, May 1997, p.20.