



QUESTIONABLE SOURCES, QUESTIONABLE JOURNALISM:

THE *OBSERVER*
NEWSPAPER
AND SUDAN

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WORKING FOR PEACE IN SUDAN

Questionable Sources, Questionable Journalism: The Observer and Sudan

On 7 May, **The Observer** newspaper published a lengthy article by Julie Flint on the Nuba people, an amalgam of black African tribes in central Sudan. Entitled 'Nuba face Destruction' this article was yet one more example of the all too questionable and partisan journalism that has characterised much of the reporting of the Sudanese civil war. Simply put, the article was a crudely partisan projection of one side of the Sudanese conflict within one particular area in Sudan. While professing concern about human rights, **The Observer's** article was remarkably selective in those human rights abuses that it addressed. The article also once again returns to discredited accusations of the use of chemical weapons in the civil war, without presenting anything even remotely approaching evidence for such serious allegations.

Among several questionable claims about Sudan made in the article, **The Observer's** presentation of the conflict in the Nuba mountains as simply being a war between the Nuba people and the Sudanese government is particularly inaccurate. **The Observer** article boldly states, for example, that: "The Nuba are now in their thirteenth year of struggle for a democratic secular state in which the country's African south would be the equal of its Arab north". This type of crude projection is on a par with claiming that all Northern Irish Catholics support the Provisional IRA.

As is the case in most civil wars, the truth is that the Nuba communities are themselves divided into pro-government and pro-rebel factions. As much has been conceded by groups such as African Rights, no friend of Khartoum. African Rights has made several references to "prominent Nuba" who are supportive of the Sudanese government. African Rights actually lists a number of prominent Nuba leaders who have taken a pro-government position.¹ In addition to prominent Nuba leaders in the Nuba mountains, African Rights also states that "a number of prominent Nuba in Khartoum have also actively supported the government". It lists some of them and states "[t]his list is far from exhaustive. There are many other civil servants, meks, omdas and sheiks, teachers and merchants who have joined with the [government's] policy of 'Peace from Within'.² Ms Flint has ignored this large Nuba constituency.

The Observer claims that the Nuba are "in their thirteenth year of struggle". What the article does not mention is that the vicious conflict in the Nuba mountains erupted in mid-1985 when a SPLA unit entered the Nuba mountains and deliberately attacked a civilian encampment, murdering scores of unarmed civilians. A vendetta was started and both sides began arming tribal militias.

All civil wars are brutal and vicious. Human rights are the first casualty of war and particularly civil war. All abuses, by which ever side, must be condemned. **The Observer** stated that "evidence of human rights abuses pile up". But **The Observer's** article was remarkably selective about which abuses it appeared to consider worthy of attention. There was no mention of rebel human rights outrages, despite the fact that these systematic abuses are all too well documented. Reporting on his visit to the Nuba Mountains, the United Nations' Special Rapporteur on human rights in Sudan, for example, spoke of a "very dark picture" of gross violations of human rights by the SPLA. The Special Rapporteur was given lists of hundreds of victims of SPLA terrorism. Local Nuba chiefs have described murders, torture, rape, kidnappings, abductions, the forced conscription of Nuba children, and the destruction of homes and looting of property by the SPLA.³

The Observer unquestioningly cited a SPLA spokesman who stated that "All we are asking is equal treatment so people can decide freely whether they stay in SPLA areas or go to the government". It ignores the fact that Amnesty International has reported that the SPLA has imposed a "civilian exclusion zone" around areas it controlled in the Nuba mountains in order to deter civilians leaving.⁴ Those attempting to leave were murdered or punished by the SPLA.

Given that the article dealt with the alleged attempt to destroy the Nuba people, it is surprising that neither **The Observer** nor Ms Flint have shown any interest in the thousands of Nuba children who

¹ **Facing Genocide: The Nuba of Sudan**, African Rights, London, 1995, pp.140-142.

² *Ibid*, p.144.

³ **Situation of human rights in the Sudan**, UN Special Rapporteur Gaspar Biro, A/48/601, 18 November 1993.

⁴ **The Tears of Orphans: No Future Without Human Rights**, Amnesty International, London, 1995, p.89.

were forcibly removed from their parents by the SPLA. These children represent the very lifeblood of the Nuba people and culture supposedly of such concern to **The Observer** and Ms Flint. The fate of these children has still not revealed by the SPLA. An indication as to what may have happened to many of them was given by Dr Peter Nyaba, a serving member of the SPLA national executive council. In his 1997 book, **The Politics of Liberation in South Sudan: An Insider's View**, for example, Nyaba publicly criticised the SPLA for not disciplining those of its members responsible for the deaths of thousands of under-age Nuba children:

For instance, the officer responsible for Bilpam was not held accountable for the deaths from starvation and related diseases of nearly three thousand Nuba youths under training in 1988. And yet it was known that their food was being sold at the Gambella market, and the proceeds appropriated by the commander.⁵

Thousands more under-age Nuba children are believed to have died while forced to fight as SPLA child soldiers. There are still thousands of Nuba mothers anxiously awaiting news of what happened to their children.

Ms Flint is a close and willing associate of the Sudan People's Liberation Army. Her **Observer** article is mute with regard to SPLA human rights abuses. However, a clearer and less partisan picture of the SPLA emerges from statements by eight reputable US-based humanitarian organisations working in Sudan, groups such as CARE, World Vision, Church World Service, Save the Children and the American Refugee Committee, no friends of the Sudanese government, who, at the end of November 1999, felt it was their responsibility to publicly state that the SPLA has:

engaged for years in the most serious human rights abuses, including extrajudicial killings, beatings, arbitrary detention, slavery, etc.⁶

Human Rights Watch, similarly no friend of Khartoum, stated in December 1999 that: "The SPLA has a history of gross abuses of human rights and has not made any effort to establish accountability. Its abuses today remain serious".⁷

The **Economist** has summed up the general image of the SPLA when it stated that:

[The SPLA] has... been little more than an armed gang of Dinkas... killing, looting and raping. Its indifference, almost animosity, towards the people it was supposed to be "liberating" was all too clear.⁸

The **New York Times**, a vigorous critic of the Sudanese government, states that the SPLA: "[H]ave behaved like an occupying army, killing, raping and pillaging".⁹ The **New York Times** has also categorised SPLA leader John Garang as one of Sudan's "pre-eminent war criminals".¹⁰ These perspectives on the SPLA are noticeably absent from **The Observer's** presentation of the Sudanese conflict.

The nature of Ms Flint's associates was also illustrated by the Ganyiel massacre. The United Nations Special Rapporteur on human rights in Sudan, documented this incident in which SPLA forces attacked two villages in the Ganyiel region in southern Sudan. SPLA personnel killed 210 villagers, of whom 30 were men, 53 were women and 127 were children. The Special Rapporteur stated that:

Eyewitnesses reported that some of the victims, mostly women, children and the elderly, were caught while trying to escape and killed with spears and pangas. M.N., a member of the World Food Programme relief committee at Panyajor, lost four of her five children (aged 8-15 years). The youngest child was thrown into the fire after being shot. D.K. witnessed three women with their babies being caught. Two of the women were shot and one was killed with a panga. Their

⁵ Peter Nyaba, **The Politics of Liberation in South Sudan: An Insider's View**, Fountain Publishers, Kampala, 1997, p.55.

⁶ 'Humanitarian Organizations Oppose Plan Providing Food to Sudanese Rebels', Press Release by InterAction, the American Council for Voluntary International Action, Washington-DC, 30 November, 1999.

⁷ 'Rights Group Warns US Against Feeding Sudan Rebels', News Article by Reuters on 14 December, 1999 at 11:34:40.

⁸ **The Economist**, March 1998.

⁹ 'Misguided Relief to Sudan', Editorial, **New York Times**, 6 December, 1999.

¹⁰ Ibid.

babies were all killed with pangas. A total of 1, 987 households were reported destroyed and looted and 3, 500 cattle were taken.¹¹

The Ganyiel incident is sadly only one of many similar instances of gross human rights abuses involving civilians - a war on Sudanese civilians. Its behaviour in the Nuba mountains has been no different.

The article made much of the slowness with which aid is filtering through to the Nuba mountains. What is not mentioned by **The Observer** is that one reason for that delay was that in June 1998 the SPLA murdered several relief workers on a food aid assessment mission in the Nuba mountains. The SPLA has murdered dozens of humanitarian aid workers from the mid-1980s onwards. In one attack alone, for example, SPLA gunmen killed 23 relief workers, drivers and assistants.¹² In 1999 the SPLA murdered four aid workers assisting with a Red Cross project in southern Sudan.¹³

Given **The Observer**'s excellent investigative journalism in shredding the Clinton Administration's claims that the al-Shifa medicines factory in Khartoum was in some way involved with chemical weapons¹⁴, it is disappointing to see that Ms Flint's article contained similarly sensationalist and unproven allegations of the use of chemical weapons in contested areas of Sudan. The sum of her evidence is that the SPLA said that a pig fell down a crater and died. One would have expected somewhat more professionalism from a newspaper of record such as **The Observer**.

Such claims were independently scientifically investigated by the United Nations in 1999 and found to be baseless. On 17 October 1999, the United Nations revealed that several tests conducted by the laboratories of the internationally-renowned Center for Disease Control in Atlanta on medical samples taken by Operation Lifeline Sudan staff in areas in which chemical weapons were said to have been used "indicated no evidence of exposure to chemicals".¹⁵ The British Government, no supporter of Khartoum, also confirmed that tests "indicated no evidence of exposure to chemicals."¹⁶

It has to be said that allegations of involvement in weapons of mass destruction are amongst the most serious that can be levelled at any government. Echoing sensationalistic allegations such as the use of chemical weapons against any target, and particularly civilians, carries with it a responsibility. Repeating second or third hand rumours about weapons of mass destruction in Sudan has to be approached with particular caution given the al-Shifa incident, an incident which was obviously the result of similarly unfounded allegations.

Ms Flint's reliance on SPLA sources for her claims should also be seen in the light of comments made by the SPLA executive member, Dr Nyaba. Nyaba placed what he termed the SPLA's "sub-culture of lies, misinformation, cheap propaganda and exhibitionism" very much on record:

Much of what filtered out of the SPLM/A propaganda machinery... was about 90% disinformation or things concerned with the military combat...¹⁷

Julie Flint's objectivity with regard to Sudan is questionable. She has been a frequent visitor to SPLA-controlled areas. **The Observer** should perhaps have chosen those who write articles on Sudan with a bit more caution. A succession of visitors to rebel areas have been misled by the SPLA. The Canadian government and American media have placed on record the SPLA's capacity for such deceit.¹⁸ For whatever reason this article by the **The Observer** has unquestioningly echoed rebel propaganda projections. This in turn makes it all the more difficult for the international community to assess the reality of the Sudanese situation, further distorting international perceptions of the conflict.

It has been frequently stated that the truth is also one of the first casualties of war. It behoves all journalists dealing with the sort of civil war that has been raging in Sudan since 1955 to approach the

¹¹ **Situation of Human Rights in the Sudan**, UN Special Rapporteur Gaspar Biro, E/CN.4/1996/62, 20 February 1996.

¹² **Denying "The Honor of Living": Sudan A Human Rights Disaster**, Africa Watch, London, 1989, p.116.

¹³ See, 'Sudan Aid Workers Executed', News Article by BBC World on 3 April, 1999 at 03:25 GMT.

¹⁴ See, for example, 'Clinton bombed civilians on purpose. American tests showed no trace of nerve gas at "deadly" Sudan plant. The President ordered the attack anyway', **The Observer**, August 23, 1998. (Front-page) and 'The Missiles, the Bungling Pentagon and the Nerve Gas Factory that never was', **The Observer**, London, August 30, 1998.

¹⁵ Note by the Spokesman of the United Nations Secretary-General handed to the Sudanese Ministry of External Relations by the UN Resident Coordinator in Sudan, Philippe Borel.

¹⁶ House of Lords **Official Report**, 16 March 2000, col. WA 230.

¹⁷ Peter Nyaba, **The Politics of Liberation in South Sudan: An Insider's View**, Fountain Publishers, Kampala, 1997, pp.55.

¹⁸ See, for example, John Harker, **Human Security in Sudan: The Report of a Canadian Assessment Mission**, Prepared for the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Ottawa, January 2000, available at <http://www.dfait-maeci.gc-foreignp-3110186-e.pdf>, and 'The False Hope of Slave Redemption', **The Atlantic Monthly**, July 1999.

partisan claims of either side with a degree of caution. Coverage of all civil wars, and particularly one as complex as the Sudanese conflict, should be accurate and objective. It is sadly all too obvious that **The Observer's** article was neither.