

# **DOES RELIEF AID PROLONG CONFLICT**

## **THE SPLA AND FOOD AID DIVERSION IN THE SUDAN**

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# DOES RELIEF AID PROLONG CONFLICT? THE SPLA AND FOOD AID DIVERSION IN SUDAN

The Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) has long been associated with the systematic diversion of food aid in the course of the Sudanese civil war. The organisation presented by the SPLA as its 'humanitarian' wing, the Sudan Relief and Rehabilitation Association (SRRA), has been shown by several independent sources, including human rights groups such as African Rights, to be both controlled by the SPLA and to have been closely identified with the planned theft and diversion of emergency food aid intended for famine victims and refugees.

At the height of the 1998 famine crisis in southern Sudan, it was revealed that the SPLA was diverting international food aid away from starving communities in Bahr al-Ghazal and using it to sustain the rebel movement. An Agence France Presse report on 21 July 1998, entitled 'Aid for Sudan ending up with SPLA: relief workers', stated that:

Much of the relief food going to more than a million famine victims in rebel-held areas of southern Sudan is ending up in the hands of the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA), relief workers said Tuesday... Estimates start at 10 to 20 percent and range upwards, with the Roman Catholic bishop of the southern diocese of Rumbek, Caesar Mazzolari, putting it at 65 percent.<sup>1</sup>

The SPLA has repeatedly used food aid, and its denial, as a weapon in their war against the Sudanese government. In so doing it has been at least partly responsible for the famines that have resulted in the deaths of so many Sudanese civilians. In its premeditated efforts to deny food to those areas of southern Sudan administered by the Khartoum government, SPLA forces have shot down civilian airliners, threatened to shoot down airliners delivering food aid, and attacked both overland food convoys and relief barges coming down the Nile. Its deliberate 1986 downing of an airliner resulted in no food relief being delivered by air to any southern town except Juba for over two years. The SPLA regularly attacked trucks delivering emergency food aid by road. In September 1988, for example, SPLA gunmen killed 23 relief workers, drivers and assistants in one such attack.<sup>2</sup>

Dr Peter Nyaba, a prominent current member of the SPLA/M National Executive Committee, and a former SPLA military officer, is well positioned and candid enough to describe SPLA policy in respect of the diversion of food aid from civilians to the SPLA:

(S)ince humanitarian assistance is only provided for the needy civil population, the task of distribution of this assistance fell on specially selected SPLA officers and men who saw to it that the bulk of the supplies went to the army. Even in cases where the expatriate relief monitors were strict and only distributed relief supplies to the civilians by day, the SPLA would retrieve that food by night. The result of this practice led to the absolute marginalisation and brutalisation of the civilian population.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> 'Aid for Sudan ending up with SPLA: relief workers', News Article by AFP on July 21, 1998 at 08:23:48.

<sup>2</sup> *Denying "The Honor of Living": Sudan A Human Rights Disaster*, Africa Watch, New York, 1989, p.116.

<sup>3</sup> Peter Nyaba, *The Politics of Liberation in South Sudan: An Insider's View*, Fountain Publishers, Kampala, 1997, p.53.

In addition to denying food to communities associated with, or dominated by, the government of Sudan, the SPLA also diverted food aid and relief supplies from civilians under its control to sustain its own military operations. Respected human rights organisations such as African Rights have reported that:

On the whole, SPLA commanders and officials of the Sudan Relief and Rehabilitation Association (SRRA, its humanitarian wing), have seen relief flows as simple flows of material resources. The leadership has also used aid for diplomatic and propaganda purposes.<sup>4</sup>

African Rights further documented in relation to the SPLA that:

A large proportion of their consumption was food aid. Sudanese who were in Itang during that period later reported they routinely saw trucks being re-loaded with food at the camp stores: at times on a daily basis. Often they were just going to the nearby training camps, but relief supplies were also sometimes sold, or used on military operations in Eastern Equatoria and Upper Nile. The SPLA 'taxed' the supplies for the refugees, reselling substantial amounts of food on the market and earning millions of Ethiopian Birr. This income... was used to purchase vehicles and other equipment for the SPLA... Much relief was sold in Ethiopia: traded for cash, clothing, cattle and other items. By 1990, the Itang camp manager was even managing to raise enough revenue to buy vehicles for the SPLA, and was publicly commended by John Garang for doing so.<sup>5</sup>

The SPLA's capacity, in conjunction with the then Ethiopian authorities, for deception in relation to foreign aid within SPLA-controlled refugee camps in Ethiopia has also been placed on record by African Rights:

Huge refugee programmes were implemented with almost no assessment or monitoring. When relief workers or donors visited the camps, it was by appointment only and under tight government (and, more discreetly, SPLA) control. Former camp residents described how a visit would be prepared in advance. Weapons and other obvious signs of military presence would be hidden. Signs of relative prosperity... would also be concealed. Sometimes a few refugees would be specifically instructed to wear sack-cloth. No refugee was allowed to talk to a foreigner except in the presence of a fairly senior SPLA official. Then the conversation would be through a translator, who could distort and censor what was said.<sup>6</sup>

Donor countries' attempts to ascertain how their considerable aid was being used were constantly frustrated. In February 1991, for example, a senior-level Multi-Donor Technical Mission, which included two ambassadors, visited several SPLA-controlled refugee camps. It somewhat diplomatically reported that "due to the carefully orchestrated nature of the visit it was hard to gain candid comments". African Rights stated that the Mission "was aware that it was not getting at the truth."<sup>7</sup>

SPLA supporter Bona Malwal's 1991 article 'Questions the SPLA can no longer ignore' mentioned the SRRA's close identification with the SPLA:

It has become evident that the humanitarian wing of the SPLA, the Sudan Relief and Rehabilitation Association (SRRA) has failed to achieve much of its agenda primarily because of its close attachment to the military aspects of the SPLA.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> *Food and Power in Sudan*, African Rights, London, 1997, p.5.7.

<sup>5</sup> *Food and Power in Sudan*, African Rights, London, 1997, pp.72-73, 76-77.

<sup>6</sup> *Food and Power in Sudan*, African Rights, London, 1997, pp.74-75.

<sup>7</sup> *Food and Power in Sudan*, African Rights, London, 1997, p.75.

<sup>8</sup> Bona Malwal, *Sudan Democratic Gazette*, June 1991, pp.2, 4-5, 8.

African Rights made it clear that after the fall of Mengistu in Ethiopia and the relocation of refugee camps from that country, the SRRA:

naturally became part of the mechanism for controlling and manipulating information... And it had to conceal this. The basic techniques of deception were already well-practised; they were similar to those that had been used in the refugee camps in Ethiopia: exaggerate the numbers of accessible people in need; make up ambiguous and false distribution reports; strictly limit the movements of the foreigners; do not let them talk to anyone without security clearance; use interpreters to censor the information from innocent interviewees; punish SPLA officials who are indiscreet.<sup>9</sup>

American international development expert John Prendergast, a specialist with considerable Sudan experience, now serving as the director of East African affairs at the National Security Council, also touched on the SPLA abuse of aid and society in those areas it controls:

The human rights abuses of the SPLA are by now well-documented... What is less understood is the abuse and manipulation of humanitarian assistance, the undermining of commerce, and the authoritarian political structures which have stifled any efforts at local organizing or capacity building in the south. These are the elements which have characterized the first decade of the SPLA's existence.<sup>10</sup>

Prendergast was also able to document some of the systematic SPLA deception from his own knowledge of circumstances, confirming observations made by African Rights:

A late 1993 SRRA directive in Maridi and Mundri stated that visitors were forbidden to talk to local people, but rather must speak to the SRRA. The recent SRRA law reads more like a police directive... There are SRRA minders following wherever NGO representatives go. It is consequently very difficult to monitor and follow up on aid diversions.<sup>11</sup>

Prendergast also quotes one aid official as saying: 'It is an inept framework for humanitarian activities... Its practicalities are abhorrent.'<sup>12</sup>

Douglas Johnson, an established commentator on Sudanese affairs, has said of the SRRA that:

Most of its field representatives had been selected not only from the military wing of the movement but from the security wing as well. Throughout OLS the SRRA often gave the impression that it was the procurement department for the SPLA, at least as far as food and medicines are concerned... Its representation of itself as the humanitarian wing of the SPLM was undermined by its subordination to the SPLA.<sup>13</sup>

African Rights reports that there was no evidence that funds made available to the SRRA from the money raised by Bob Geldof's Band Aid consortium ever resulted in relief being delivered. African Rights has also quoted a foreign aid donor as saying that its experience of supplying food relief to the SRRA was a negative one. The SRRA headquarters staff

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<sup>9</sup> *Food and Power in Sudan*, African Rights, London, 1997, pp.266-67.

<sup>10</sup> John Prendergast, *Crisis Response: Humanitarian Band-Aids in Sudan and Somalia*, Pluto Press, London, 1997, p.46.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p.59.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> Douglas Johnson, 'Destruction and Reconstruction in the Economy of Southern Sudan', unpublished memo, 1992, p.7, cited in Prendergast, p.62.

“just ate it... By that casual act of peculation they set back (the cause of their people) for years.”<sup>14</sup>

The SPLA is not only responsible for the theft and diversion of food aid inside Sudan. *Africa Analysis*, the British newsletter, recorded that in late 1997, at least 37 trucks of food and fuel, supplied in large part by USAID and the Norwegian Church Aid for displaced Sudanese refugees, disappeared while under SPLA control, near Gulu in northern Uganda. The food was said to have been sold in Gulu and other towns in the area.<sup>15</sup>

An additional aspect of food aid diversion was documented in May 1998. An independent consultancy commissioned by the Norwegian government to investigate Norwegian People's Aid, a channel for vast amounts of Norwegian government aid funds, concluded that Norwegian relief funds were being used to support SPLA soldiers, and thus prolonging the conflict. Norwegian People's Aid, which worked outside of the Operation Lifeline Sudan programme, was said to have allowed the SPLA to sell emergency aid destined for hungry and sick southern Sudanese in order to purchase weapons of war. Norwegian aid funds were also diverted to buy the SPLA food, houses and cars, and was also used to organise schooling for the children of SPLA officers.<sup>16</sup>

In June 1998 the British Secretary of State for International Development, Ms Clare Short, stated that her officials, who had returned from a visit to affected areas in southern Sudan, had informed her that SPLA gunmen were closely involved in controlling food aid even at the height of the acute humanitarian crisis in Bahr al-Ghazal. She stated that food aid was clearly “feeding the fighters”.<sup>17</sup>

## **Conclusion**

There is little or no doubt that the considerable amounts of emergency food and humanitarian aid that the SPLA has systematically diverted for its own use over the years has, together with other factors, artificially prolonged both the Sudanese civil war and the suffering of the southern Sudanese population for whom the aid was intended. Some of this humanitarian aid has been sold by the SPLA in order to purchase weapons of war, cars, houses and to provide for the schooling of the children of SPLA officers - as much has been admitted by the Norwegian government's investigation into the activities of one of its main aid agencies, Norwegian People's Aid.

There is also little doubt that the SPLA's policy of diverting food aid has resulted in, to use the revealing words of SPLA executive member Peter Nyaba, “the absolute marginalisation and brutalisation of the civilian population”.

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<sup>14</sup> *Food and Power in Sudan*, African Rights, London, 1997, pp.88-89.

<sup>15</sup> *Africa Analysis*, 21 October 1998.

<sup>16</sup> 'Aid money supported rebellion in Sudan', *Aktuelt*, Denmark, 20 May 1998.

<sup>17</sup> Ms Short was speaking during the *Dimbleby* Interview, on ITV, London, 7 June 1998.