



THE NEW YORK TIMES AND SUDAN A STUDY IN POOR JOURNALISM

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WORKING FOR PEACE IN SUDAN

The New York Times and Sudan: A Study in Poor Journalism

On 13 January 2001, the 'New York Times' published an editorial on Sudan entitled 'Oil and War in Sudan'. The editorial sought to link the continuation and escalation of the Sudanese conflict to the advent of "lucrative oil exports". One would have expected considerably more journalistic professionalism and integrity from a newspaper of record such as the 'New York Times'. The editorial was selective and partisan - where not simply questionable - in the analysis it presented of the Sudanese conflict.

What Sustains the Sudanese Conflict?

The attempt by the 'New York Times' to claim that the Sudanese war was being sustained by oil revenues and that there was no "credible peace process" is disingenuous to say the least. One simple question being that given the pivotal role claimed for oil revenues in the war, how does the 'New York Times' explain the fact that the war has been fought for sixteen years without any such revenues? The reason for the continuation of the Sudanese conflict is much closer to home. It is clear that the outgoing Clinton Administration had been the single biggest obstacle to peace in Sudan. No less a commentator than former President Jimmy Carter was very candid about the Administration's attempts to prevent a peaceful resolution of the Sudanese conflict:

The people in Sudan want to resolve the conflict. The biggest obstacle is US government policy. The US is committed to overthrowing the government in Khartoum. Any sort of peace effort is aborted, basically by policies of the United States...Instead of working for peace in Sudan, the US government has basically promoted a continuation of the war.¹

This is not the Sudanese government speaking. It is a man respected the world over for his work towards peace in various conflicts. Former President Carter is also a man who knows Sudan, and the Sudanese situation well, having followed the issue for two decades or more.

If the United States would be reasonably objective in Sudan, I think that we at the Carter Center and the Africans who live in the area could bring peace to Sudan. But the United States government has a policy of trying to overthrow the government in Sudan. So whenever there's a peace initiative, unfortunately our government puts up whatever obstruction it can.²

It is not that there is no "credible peace process" in Sudan. There are at least two viable initiatives. The peace initiatives that exist have been handicapped by the fact that the American government has encouraged one side, the rebel Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA), to merely pay lip service to the search for a peaceful initiative whilst actively continuing the war.

The editorial glibly states that "Sudan's war...is by no means a purely local affair. Government forces and allied militias obtain weapons from China, Iran, Iraq, former Soviet republics and Bulgaria...". What the New York Times studiously ignores is the explicit American involvement in the same conflict. The Clinton Administration's military, diplomatic and political support for the SPLA has long been an open secret. In its programme of supporting the SPLA, tens of millions of dollars worth of covert American military assistance has been supplied to the rebels. This has included weapons, logistical assistance, and military training. On 17 November 1996, the London **Sunday Times** reported that:

More than \$20m of military equipment, including radios, uniforms and tents will be shipped to Eritrea, Ethiopia and Uganda in the next few weeks...much of it will be passed on to the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA), which is preparing an offensive against the government in Khartoum.

This was confirmed by the newsletter '**Africa Confidential**': "The United States pretends the aid is to help the governments concerned...to protect themselves from Sudan...It is clear the aid is for Sudan's armed opposition."³

Former President Carter bluntly stated that the Clinton Administration's US\$ 20 million grant in military aid referred to above was "a tacit demonstration of support for the overthrow of the Khartoum government". He also believed that this behaviour by Washington had a negative effect on the SPLA's interest in negotiating a political settlement: "I think Garang now feels he doesn't need to negotiate because he anticipates a victory brought about by

¹ 'Carter, Others Say US Has Faltered in Africa', **The Boston Globe**, 8 December 1999.

² 'CARE Seeks Political Fix in Sudan', **Atlanta Journal-Constitution**, 7 October 1999.

³ **Africa Confidential**, 15 November 1996. See, also, 'US Masterminds 3-Pronged War on Sudan', **Africa Analysis**, 7 February 1997.

increasing support from his immediate neighbors, and also from the United States and indirectly from other countries”.⁴

The editorial’s studied ignorance of what is really sustaining the Sudanese conflict is strange given the fact that the ‘New York Times’ has itself previously criticised the Clinton Administration’s close association with, and support for, the SPLA, describing the SPLA as “brutal and predatory”, stating that they “have behaved like an occupying army, killing, raping and pillaging” in southern Sudan, and calling SPLA leader John Garang one of Sudan’s “pre-eminent war criminals”.⁵

The ‘New York Times’ somewhat selective memory jars with good journalism.

Civilian displacement

In its selective review of the Sudanese conflict, the editorial also claims, for example, that there had been massive government-led displacement of civilians from the oil-production areas of Sudan: “tens of thousands of people have been displaced in the last two years”. The reality is once again somewhat different. While that there is fighting in the oil-producing areas is clear, the ‘New York Times’ seemingly prefers to ignore the fact that there are two sides involved. In February 2000, for example, Reuters correspondent Rosalind Russell provided reliable, first-hand reporting of activity leading to the displacement of civilians. She personally witnessed: “a pillar of smoke rising from the besieged town of Mayom, subject to daily bombardments by rebels as they try to advance eastwards to the oil development.”⁶

The rebel bombardment of towns has indeed led to the displacement of thousands of civilians. In August 2000, Reuters reported thousands of civilians had fled the fighting initiated by the rebels, and had fled into Government-controlled areas such as Bentiu, in the heart of the oil areas:

An influx of displaced people into Bentiu, the capital of Unity state in war-torn southern Sudan, has greatly strained humanitarian and food aid in the town...World Food Programme (WFP) official Makena Walker told Reuters about 20,000 people displaced by recent fighting had reached Bentiu in the last three weeks.

In yet another example, in July 2000, the Roman Catholic bishop of the southern Sudanese diocese of Rumbek, Caesar Mazzolari, stated that thousands of civilians were fleeing the southern town of Wau. Bishop Mazzolari said that this massive human exodus was triggered by fears of a possible rebel attack.⁷

The ‘New York Times’ is either unaware of these publicly reported incidents of rebel-led displacement or it chose to ignore the SPLA’s deliberate displacement of thousands of civilians within oil-producing areas of Sudan. Simply put, it is either ill-informed about the issue it chose to pontificate upon, an example of poor journalism, or it deliberately chose to ignore simple facts, in which case it is guilty of rank hypocrisy. In whatever instance its glib moralising falls somewhat flat.

Oil Revenues and Military Expenditure

The ‘New York Times’ attempts, without producing any evidence, to link military expenditures in Sudan to oil revenues. The British Government has repeatedly been asked if there is any such evidence. In March 2000, the British Government, in a typical reply to a Parliamentary question about whether Khartoum had used oil revenues to purchase weapons, publicly stated that they did not “have any evidence of such expenditure at present”.⁸ It might also be noted that given its membership of the European Union, any British reply would have also incorporated information available to other European countries. Perhaps the ‘New York Times’ should have contacted the International Monetary Fund. Given that Sudan is adhering to a strict International Monetary Fund regime, the IMF will know exactly how these funds are dispersed.

The New York Times and Sudan

While the editorial chose to praise the Clinton Administration’s imposition of American sanctions on Sudan, it ignored the fact that these sanctions were because of Sudan’s alleged involvement in international terrorism. Yet it was the very same **New York Times** which had previously editorialised that:

⁴ ‘Ex-President Opposes Policy of Aiding Khartoum’s Foes’, **The Washington Times**, 25 September 1997.

⁵ ‘Misguided Relief to Sudan’, Editorial, **The New York Times**, 6 December, 1999.

⁶ ‘Rag-tag Rebels Fight for Sudan’s Oil Riches’, News Article by Reuters on 14 February 2000 at 14:24:21.

⁷ ‘Thousands Flee Sudanese Town Fearing Rebel Attack’, News Article by Agence France Presse on 7 July 2000.

⁸ House of Lords **Official Record**, Written Answer, 22 March 2000, column WA28; also see, **Official Record** Written Answers, 11 January 2000, WA97; and 23 March 2000, WA35.

the Central Intelligence Agency...recently concluded that reports that had appeared to document a clear link between the Sudanese Government and terrorist activities were fabricated and unreliable...The United States is entitled to use military force to protect itself against terrorism. But the case for every such action must be rigorously established. In the case of the Sudan, Washington has conspicuously failed to prove its case.⁹

The reports in question were over one hundred American intelligence reports. It was also the 'New York Times' which produced the outstanding reporting which tore apart the Clinton Administration's rationale for the 1998 cruise missile attack on the al-Shifa medicine factory in Khartoum.¹⁰ The simple fact is that the Clinton Administration's Sudan policy was questionable in its entirety.

"No credible peace process"

The editorial also stated that "unfortunately, no credible peace process is currently under way". This claim once again illustrates the selectivity characterising the editorial. Not only has Khartoum engaged in peace talks with rebels, but the biggest Sudanese opposition party, the Umma party, led by former Prime Minister Sadiq al-Mahdi, the mainstay of the rebel coalition has left the opposition alliance, and entered into domestic politics within Sudan. The former Prime Minister, Sadiq al-Mahdi, himself ousted in 1989 by the present government, and a pivotal rebel leader, has declared that: "There are now circumstances and developments which could favour an agreement on a comprehensive political solution."¹¹

Once again, these developments have been widely covered by the international news media, with titles such as 'Opposition Leader Predicts Solution to Sudan's Conflict', 'Sudanese Rebel Group to Enter Khartoum Politics', and 'Mahdi's Withdrawal Dents Opposition Alliance'.¹² These appear to have escaped the attention of editorialists at the 'New York Times'.

And as part of its peace negotiations with the rebels, Khartoum has since 1997 offered an internationally-supervised referendum whereby the people of southern Sudan would be able - for the first time since independence - to chose their destiny, either within a united Sudan or as a separate state. This offer was incorporated into Sudan's new 1998 constitution and has been repeated on several occasions.¹³ It is an offer that has also been acknowledged, but not taken up, by the SPLA - encouraged as they have been by the American government to continue with the war.

Perhaps those who write editorials at the 'New York Times' should engage in some real journalism from time to time. At the very least one would expect that they should occasionally read wire service reports about subjects they chose to write upon.

The 'New York Times' and the Horn of Africa: A Poor Track Record

It should also be remembered that the 'New York Times' has produced similarly naïve editorials on other African nations. One may remember the 1 December 1992 'New York Times' editorial which strongly advocated President Bush to deploy thousands of American soldiers in Somalia stating: "The realities there are ghastly and the choices limited...there is no alternative to the threat or use of force if food is to reach those trapped in the chaotic clan war." And, less than a year later, on 6 October 1993, the 'New York Times' editorialised that "it's time to come home", followed by a 8 October 1993 editorial entitled 'Somalia. Time to Get Out'. In the meantime there had been the fiasco of American military and political intervention, dozens of dead American servicemen, hundreds of Somali civilians killed by American servicemen, an ignominious departure for the United States and a disaster for American foreign policy in Africa. The recent 'Oil and War in Sudan' editorial by the 'New York Times' shows a very similar misreading of another African conflict.

Conclusion

In its more lucid reporting on Sudan, the 'New York Times' has been very critical of some of Washington's Sudan policies. Despite failures in many areas, however, the Clinton Administration did succeed in preventing a peaceful resolution of the Sudanese conflict. As former President Carter pointed out, Washington is the biggest obstacle to a negotiated peace in Sudan. American encouragement of southern rebels to pay lip service to peace talks while

⁹ 'Dubious Decisions on the Sudan', Editorial, **The New York Times**, 23 September 1998.

¹⁰ See, for example, 'Doubts Surround U.S. Explanation for Attacking Sudan Factory', **The New York Times**, 31 August 1998 and 'Experts Find No Arms Chemicals at Bombed Sudan Plant', **The New York Times**, 9 February 1999.

¹¹ 'Developments in Sudan Favour National Reconciliation: Mahdi', News Article by Agence France Presse on 25 December 1999 at 12:38:20.

¹² See, for example, 'Opposition Leader Predicts Solution to Sudan's Conflict', News Article by PANA on 27 March 2000; 'Sudanese Rebel Group to Enter Khartoum Politics', News Article by Agence France Presse on 20 March 2000 at 15:03:57 EST; and 'Mahdi's Withdrawal Dents Opposition Alliance', News Article by PANA on 25 March, 2000 at 00:40:27 EST.

¹³ See, 'Sudan offers South secession', News Article by BBC, 22 February 1999 at 00:16:14 GMT; 'Southern secession better than more war: Sudan's president', News Article by Agence France Presse, 22 February 1999, at 10:04:31; 'Referendum agreed at Sudan peace talks', News Article by BBC World, 7 May 1998, at 11:06 GMT; 'Sudan Says Happy for South to secede', News Article by Reuters, 7 May 1998.

continuing with an unwinnable war against Khartoum is virtually all that keeps the conflict going. It is disappointing that poor journalism, or prejudice, on the part of the 'New York Times' prevents it from recognising the simple fact that it is American policy rather than Sudanese oil that fuels the war in Sudan.