



**THE NEW SUDAN
COUNCIL OF
CHURCHES:**

**CHRISTIAN VOICE,
OR MOUTHPIECE
FOR
WAR CRIMINALS**

**THE EUROPEAN-SUDANESE
PUBLIC AFFAIRS
COUNCIL**

**1 Northumberland Avenue,
London WC2N 5BW**

Telephone: 020 7872 5434

Telefax: 020 7753 2824

January 2000

WORKING FOR PEACE IN SUDAN

THE NEW SUDAN COUNCIL OF CHURCHES: CHRISTIAN VOICE, OR MOUTHPIECE FOR WAR CRIMINALS?

The New Sudan Council of Churches (NSCC), exists within areas of southern Sudan controlled by the rebel Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA). The NSCC was formed in February 1990 from Catholic and Episcopal churches in southern Sudan. It must be placed on record that despite a tendency by external observers to place weight on positions taken by the NSCC, the extent of its independence from the SPLA in southern Sudan was questionable from its very inception. As the respected human rights organisation, African Rights, has pointed out: "The NSCC could not have been created without the support of John Garang". African Rights further quoted "a leading churchman" as stating that: "The Movement was behind the formation of the NSCC." Garang himself, in addressing the NSCC General Assembly in Torit in 1992, stated that he saw the NSCC as the "spiritual wing of the Movement".¹

In order to assess the credibility of the New Sudan Council of Churches, one must examine the situation within those areas in which it exists. These are areas controlled by the SPLA. This organisation has been described by the **New York Times**, no friend of the Sudanese government, as "brutal and predatory" and "an occupying army, killing, raping and pillaging". SPLA leader John Garang has been described by the same newspaper as a "pre-eminent war criminal".² In December 1999, Human Rights Watch stated 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.

Human Rights Watch has pointed to summary executions, arbitrary arrests and food aid theft from civilians in famine areas by the SPLA.³ Established and respected humanitarian organisations such as CARE, Save the Children, World Vision, Church World Service and the American Refugee Committee have jointly stated that the SPLA is guilty of "the most serious human rights abuses".⁴ The SPLA's involvement in ethnic cleansing in parts of southern Sudan is also clear. Most recently, for example, the BBC has reported growing friction in SPLA-controlled areas of southern Sudan, specifically within Didinga areas:

The Didinga have accused the SPLA of becoming an army of occupation in the area.⁵

In addition, the Roman Catholic Church in southern Sudan has accused the SPLA rebel movement of stealing 65 percent of the food aid going into those parts of southern Sudan controlled by the SPLA.⁶ *Agence France Press* also reported that:

¹ **Great Expectations: The Civil Roles of the Churches in Southern Sudan**, Discussion Paper No.6, African Rights, London, April 1995, p.29.

² 'Misguided Relief to Sudan', Editorial, **The New York Times**, 6 December 1999.

³ 'Rights Group Warns US Against Feeding Sudan Rebels', News Article by Reuters on December 14, 1999 at 11:34:40.

⁴ 'Humanitarian Organizations Oppose Plan Providing Food to Sudanese Rebels', Press Release, InterAction, American Council for Voluntary International Action, Washington-DC, 30 November, 1999.

⁵ 'Growing Friction in Rebel-Held Southern Sudan', News Article by BBC Online, 9 June, 1999 Published at 16:36 GMT.

⁶ 'Aid for Sudan ending up with SPLA: Relief Workers', Article by *Agence France Press* on 21 July, 1998 at 08:23:48.

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.

This food aid was often quite literally taken out of the mouths of starving southern Sudanese men, women and children at the height of the 1998 famine.

While the New Sudan Council of Churches is publicly committed to speaking on behalf of southern Sudanese people, particularly in respect of political, civil and human rights, the NSCC is silent on all these and many other gross violations of human rights by the SPLA throughout southern Sudan. Leaving aside its politicised origins, it is only fair to note as African Rights has stated, that the NSCC exists "in a society which is dominated by armed... movements", and that its leaders are "personally vulnerable",

It is a matter of record, for example, that the chairman of the New Sudan Council of Churches, the Roman Catholic Bishop of Torit, Bishop Paride Taban, has, in the words of African Rights, been subjected to "vicious treatment". Bishop Taban was imprisoned and publicly humiliated by the SPLA. African Rights also reported that nuns under his care had been raped by John Garang's forces. Church property was looted or destroyed. Bishop Taban was again imprisoned and mistreated by SPLA gunmen in 1992. Church property was again stolen.⁷ Given this level of intimidation, it is perhaps unsurprising that any NSCC criticism of human rights abuses has been mostly directed at the government.

Nonetheless, the inability or disinclination of the New Sudan Council of Churches to speak out on the appalling human rights violations amongst their very own parishioners can only but detract from their objectivity and reliability as commentators and witnesses on Sudanese affairs.

The New Sudan Council of Churches' political orientation, forced or otherwise, has certainly followed a pro-Garang line. This was clearly manifested in the wake of the fragmentation of the SPLA in 1991 when several senior rebel commanders broke away from John Garang, accusing him of "war lordism", human rights abuses and using child soldiers. Commenting on this support for Garang, the SPLA-United grouping, one of the breakaway rebel factions, stated that the NSCC was not a neutral body. A SPLA-United leader, Dr Lam Akol, said that: "Most of the Church leaders happened to be in the area where Garang was, and could not resist the pressures of taking sides." The NSCC has also been accused of bias in its allocation of aid. African Rights quotes the leader of another rival grouping to the SPLA as saying that: "As a structure, NSCC is behind Garang. He was the one who started it, and they are still close to him. Their resources are almost all channelled to his areas."⁸

African Rights' study of churches in southern Sudan, **Great Expectations: The Civil Roles of the Churches in Southern Sudan**, placed on record the fatal limitations on the New Sudan Council of Churches:

Church leaders in the New Sudan recall the anti-church stand of the SPLA in its early days, and observe continuing repression against dissenters. Even the most courageous Church leaders have been selective in their criticisms, choosing not to name certain commanders responsible for abuses.⁹

Even currently serving SPLA national executive members such as Dr Peter Nyaba have described SPLA abuses, abuses seemingly ignored by the NSCC:

⁷ **Food and Power in Sudan**, African Rights, London, 1997, p.332.

⁸ Ibid, p.30.

⁹ Ibid, p.32.

(W)ithout sufficient justification, the SPLA turned their guns on the civilian population in many parts of the South... the SPLM/A... degenerated into an agent of plunder, pillage and destructive conquest... The SPLA became like an army of occupation in the areas it controlled and from which the people were running away.¹⁰

Given that African Rights also makes it clear that little if any attention is paid to complaints by the New Sudan Council of Churches, or individual churches, about allegations of SPLA murders, ethnic cleansing, armed robbery, rape, forced labour, food aid diversion, punishment beatings or theft, the effectiveness of the NSCC on the issue of human rights is unclear, save perhaps in its directed, “selective” and somewhat propagandistic use by the SPLA against the government of Sudan.

An example of this use were the comments made by Haruun Ruun, the executive director of the NSCC, to an American church group, when he described the SPLA as:

a guerilla movement of mostly Christian and animist Africans fighting for autonomy from the Arab Muslims based in the north. The reasons behind this movement are unequal opportunity in economics and education, racial and religious discrimination, and suppression of human rights, especially freedom of religion.¹¹

Ruun is conspicuously silent about the well-documented pattern of human rights abuse and suppression of human rights and civil liberties in the parts of southern Sudan in which the NSCC is itself active, choosing instead to echo SPLA positions.

Despite the fact that it is clearly compromised, the New Sudan Council of Churches is presented to, and accepted by, many outsiders as an independent body in southern Sudan. An all too typical example was the presentation of Ruun, and the NSCC program director, Emmanuel Lowila, by World Relief, the humanitarian arm of the National Association of Evangelicals, as Sudanese church leaders who were to “provide perspective on critical Sudan issues at consultation for U.S. Church Leaders”, and that Ruun and Lowila would share “their hopes and goals” and would help “their American counterparts work through their questions and concerns” about Sudan. Sudan Church Leaders.¹² There can be little surprise that so many American and Canadian perspectives on Sudan have been flawed with groups such as the NSCC providing a skewed and demonstrably “selective” reading of events within Sudan.

This state of affairs is not a healthy one. Given its political affinity with the SPLA, and a marked reluctance to criticise the SPLA to any meaningful extent, for international observers to unreservedly accept NSCC perspectives on human rights, political developments and peace in Sudan can only but serve to further distort an already muddied picture. At best the NSCC serves as an apologist for the SPLA, and at worst a propagandist. Considerable caution must be exercised in assessing statements and claims made by the New Sudan Council of Churches.

¹⁰ Peter Nyaba, **The Politics of Liberation in South Sudan: An Insider's View**, Fountain Publishers, Kampala, 1997, p.52.

¹¹ 'Sudan', **1999 Mission Yearbook for Prayer and Study**, Presbyterian Church (USA), 18 February, 1999 at Website <http://pda.pcusa.org/mip/Feb/18.html>

¹² **Sudan Church Leaders to Provide Perspective on Critical Sudan Issues at Consultation for U.S. Church Leaders**, Press Release, World Relief, 11 March, 1999, available on Website <http://www.wr.org/news/1999/mar11.html>