ARE THE SPLA THE KHMER ROUGE OF AFRICA?

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Introduction

The continuing Sudanese civil war has been highlighted over the past year or so by the ever present threat of famine in southern Sudan, an area which has seen the brunt of the conflict. The first phase of the Sudanese civil war began in 1955, shortly before independence, and was fought between the Khartoum government and armed southern rebels. This peace ended with the 1972 Addis Ababa agreement which granted autonomy to southern Sudan. In 1983 the conflict rekindled itself with the Sudan People’s Liberation Movement (SPLM) and its military wing the Sudan People’s Liberation Army (SPLA) becoming the focus for continued insurrection in parts of southern Sudan. Colonel John Garang came to head the SPLA and the war in the south has continued to this day.¹

Repeated attempts to resolve the Sudanese conflict peacefully have run up against the intransigence both of the SPLA, and the United States government, which has sought to use the SPLA as an instrument of policy in its opposition to the Islamic government of Sudan. A close study of the American involvement in Sudan, and similar patterns of involvement, reveals a stark comparison with American involvement in, and policy towards, Cambodia. It is against the backdrop of the civil wars which have devastated both Cambodia and Sudan that similarities also emerge in the behaviour and pattern of human rights abuse of both the SPLA in Sudan and the Khmer Rouge movement in Cambodia. It is behaviour that has also seemingly been encouraged by the United States government. Given this abuse and intransigence tough questions must be asked of the SPLA, and whether or not it is actually possible for the SPLA to sincerely enter any peace process in Sudan.

It is a matter of record that the SPLA has displayed a very similar pattern of abuse to that of the Khmer Rouge. In making this comparison we have drawn, ironically perhaps, from the country reports on human rights practices in Cambodia drawn up by the United States Department of State. The Khmer

¹ The SPLA is sometimes also referred to as the SPLM/A, a reference to the Sudan People’s Liberation Movement, ostensibly the political component of the organisation. As the SPLM has long since been absorbed into the SPLA, this study will refer to the organisation as the SPLA.
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*Rouge* was the movement which fought a bitter guerrilla war for several years against Cambodian governments, eventually coming to power in Cambodia in April 1975, following the collapse of the pro-Western Lon Nol administration. The *Khmer Rouge* were in power in Cambodia, engaging in unprecedented internal repression and external aggression, until they were ousted by Vietnamese intervention in January 1979. Since then they have continued to wage war against successive governments in Phnom Penh.

**Political origins and political intolerance**

The similarities between the SPLA and the *Khmer Rouge* are clear. One of the most obvious ones is that both organisations were rooted in Marxist ideology. Both movements engaged in an almost Orwellian use of words to describe themselves. The *Khmer Rouge*, literally the ‘Red Khmers’, was formally known in the 1970s as the Communist Party of Kampuchea, and then in the 1980s and 1990s as the Party of Democratic Kampuchea. It styled its military wing the ‘National Army of Democratic Kampuchea’. Similarly, the Sudan People’s Liberation Movement styled its military wing the ‘Sudan People’s Liberation Army’. While the *Khmer Rouge* at first looked towards China for political guidance, the SPLA’s political mentor from 1983 until the regime’s overthrow in 1991, was the doctrinaire Marxist *regime* led by Mengistu Haile Miriam.

The human rights organisation African Rights has touched on the SPLA’s close association with the ruthless Mengistu *regime*, and the close support it received from the Ethiopian state:

> The SPLA strategy was not to mobilise the people in pursuit of a political aim, so much as to capture state power, and then use that power to effect a radical transformation of Sudanese society. This reflected the state socialist (or, less kindly, ‘Afro-Stalinist’) approach of Mengistu. While Mengistu ruled Ethiopia, the SPLA used Ethiopian state power as part of its structures of control and transformation. In the Ethiopian refugee camps, the SPLA was a government. In rebel-held areas of Sudan it sought to recreate these conditions.²

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SPLA and Khmer Rouge: cults of authoritarianism

It was perhaps as a direct consequence of the SPLA’s close association with totalitarian politics that democracy and debate within the movement were clamped down upon very firmly. This intolerance mirrors that within the Khmer Rouge and dates back to the earliest days of the organisation. And just as this murderous intolerance was identified with Pol Pot within the Khmer Rouge, John Garang has been closely associated with equally ruthless authoritarianism within the SPLA. And just as any study of the Khmer Rouge reveals an organisation obsessed with “class enemies”, similar purges of “bourgeois” elements were for many years a hallmark of the SPLA.

Dr Peter Nyaba, a member of the SPLA national executive council, and a former SPLA military officer, provides further first-hand insight into the Sudan People’s Liberation Army and its militaristic nature:

The politicians who came to join the armed struggle found themselves ignored, marginalised and persecuted. They were branded ‘bourgeoisie’ and therefore ‘potential’ or ‘real’ enemies of the people…What unfortunately emerged was a militarist, putschist instrument, intolerant and averse to democratic principles and methods. The infant Movement was stifled from the start and differing political views were completely suppressed, and a campaign of vilification, marginalisation and alienation of the politicians and the intellectuals began in earnest.³

Just as Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge sought before and after seizing power to destroy any political rivals, John Garang has dealt equally ruthlessly with rival Southern opposition leaders. Dozens of prominent southern Sudanese intellectuals and politicians were murdered or incarcerated in appalling conditions from 1983 onwards. Even those who joined the SPLA were persecuted. African Rights records that:

³ Peter Nyaba, The Politics of Liberation in South Sudan: An Insider’s View, Fountain Publishers, Kampala, 1997, p.34.
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Southern intellectuals and politicians who wanted to join the SPLM were subordinated to the military...some of them were arrested and detained without trial...According to a liberal-democratic view, they were victims of human rights abuses because they challenged autocratic leadership. The shadow of these early violations still hangs over the Movement.4

There is every indication that this disturbing state of affairs within the SPLA exists to this day.

The reality of life under Khmer Rouge and SPLA control

The reality of life under Khmer Rouge control, either during its four years as the government of Cambodia, or in areas it has militarily dominated as a guerrilla movement, has been extensively documented. The award-winning film, The Killing Fields, and books such as Elizabeth Becker’s masterly study of the Cambodian tragedy, When the War was Over: Cambodia’s Revolution and the Voices of its People documented Khmer Rouge behaviour while in government only too well. In the three years and eight months that it was in power in Cambodia, it is estimated that the Khmer Rouge were responsible for the deaths of between 1.5 and 1.7 million Cambodians through execution, disease, starvation and overwork. In making comparisons between the SPLA and Khmer Rouge, especially when the Khmer Rouge had returned to the Cambodian jungle to continue its guerrilla war, it is useful to draw further information from the country report on human rights practices for Cambodia drawn up by the United States Department of State.

This report stated in relation to the Khmer Rouge that:

Citizens living in areas controlled by the Khmer Rouge were denied virtually all political rights and were subject to serious human rights abuses by the KR leadership. KR forces committed numerous extrajudicial killings and were responsible for disappearances, forced labor, and restriction of freedom of

4 Food and Power in Sudan, African Rights, op. cit., p.68
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speech, the press, assembly, association, religion and movement.\(^5\)

A very similar pattern of abuse by the SPLA to that described in the above report has been documented by independent observers. John Prendergast is an well-known commentator on events within Sudan who has presented a clear picture of SPLA behaviour within those areas of Sudan under its control. He is presently the director of East African affairs at the National Security Council. Before going to work for the White House, he was a development expert and veteran analyst of north-east African affairs, and served as the director of the Horn of Africa project at the Center of Concern in Washington DC. He has a working knowledge of the SPLA. His 1997 book *Crisis Response: Humanitarian Band-Aids in Sudan and Somalia* describes the SPLA as having:

attained possession of adequate means of coercion and has terrorized the southern population into passive compliance. The predominant instruments of the movement since 1983 have been and still are coercion and corruption. It has not managed to integrate society around any positive values.

The movement has been able to persist only as long as it successfully coerces, and demoralises social groups in the region. Because the cooperation of the civil population is needed, at times, in order to carry out the liberation struggle, coercion has not been a successful strategy. Corruption, in various doses, might have worked for some time, but it demoralizes both the commanders and the people...Institutionalization of the top-down arrangements by the socialist group who initially established the SPLM/A has led to a permanent oppression of those persons in the area under the control of the movement.\(^6\)

The SPLA shared with the *Khmer Rouge* a ruthless attitude towards those civilians who sought to leave areas it controlled. Amnesty International has documented, for example, that in the Nuba mountains the SPLA imposed a


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“civilian exclusion zone” around areas it dominated in order to deter civilians leaving. Those leaving were murdered by the SPLA. Further similarities with the Khmer Rouge are revealed by African Rights:

All military training is, in a sense, dehumanising. It prepares people to kill others. But the SPLA took this to an extreme. It inculcated a callous attitude towards civilians…At times, the elevation of the military verged on a nihilistic attitude towards civilians and existing social structures.

An even more chilling account, which directly echoes that of African Rights, and is very reminiscent of the “security” structure within the Khmer Rouge, is provided by the former SPLA military officer Dr Peter Nyaba:

Independent and liberal political opinion was throttled by the security apparatus - the ‘Combat Intelligence’ - an equivalent of Nimeiri’s defunct ‘State Security Organ’…The ‘Combat Intelligence’, in its ruthless ‘anti-people’ mentality and instantaneous obedience to the SPLM/A leadership, created, in the Movement in general, and among the combatants in particular, an atmosphere of mutual distrust, suspicion, fear, indifference, apathy and outright demoralisation…This…attitude was manifest first in the training camps, and then in areas that fell under SPLA administration. The SPLA training camps themselves resembled concentration camps in which the recruits and prospective SPLA soldiers are brutalised, dehumanised and de-revolutionised…It was here that the SPLA officers and men internalised oppression and brutality. Once they were deployed at the war front, their first victims became civilians, whom they now terrorised, brutalised, raped, murdered and dehumanised.

Nyaba himself quotes a senior SPLA administrator as saying that the SPLA “looked down upon the people without arms like conquered people at their mercy”. Nyaba then goes on to record that:

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8 Food and Power in Sudan, op. cit., p.82.
9 Nyaba, op. cit., pp.49-50.
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(W)ithout sufficient justification, the SPLA turned their guns on the civilian population in many parts of the South. The consequence of this was that many communities turned against the SPLA and migrated *en masse* to the government garrison towns…As a consequence of all these factors, the SPLM/A…degenerated into an agent of plunder, pillage and destructive conquest…an SPLA soldier operating in any area different from his own home saw no difference between the civil population…and the enemy. The SPLA became like an army of occupation in the areas it controlled and from which the people were running away.¹⁰

The SPLA, *Khmer Rouge* and human rights abuses

Just as the *Khmer Rouge* has been synonymous with an atrocious pattern of human rights abuse, the SPLA too has long been associated with systematic human rights abuses. Prendergast has stated that the SPLA “was responsible for egregious human rights violations in the territory it controlled”.¹¹ The 1995 Amnesty International report on Sudan stated:

(S)ince its inception in 1983 the SPLA’s approach to human rights issues has been characterized by ruthlessness, a lack of accountability and a complete disregard for the principles of humanitarian law…Deliberate attacks…have been…responsible…for the destruction of rural communities. Prominent internal dissidents have been detained and some have been deliberately killed. Prisoners have been tortured, in some cases to death. Prison conditions in SPLA jails have been harsh to the extent of cruelty. Military discipline is only loosely maintained.¹²

Dr Nyaba is also able to give a stark account of SPLA human rights abuses inside Sudan:

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¹⁰ Ibid., p.52.
¹¹ Prendergast, *op. cit.*, p 77.
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It was not uncommon to find an SPLA trail littered with serious and horrendous human rights abuses and violations: murder, rape, looting and irrational waste of resources, mainly grain and livestock. The arrogance and power of carrying an AKM rifle made them wasteful and brutal to the civilian population.

Nyaba described one incident in which SPLA forces were initially welcomed into a village, whose inhabitants “lavishly served the soldiers with beef, grain, sorghum beer, alcohol and tobacco”. The SPLA men then “went on a drunken looting and raping spree which resulted in several murders.” It is worth noting that Nyaba described this incident as representing

a common feature of the initial interaction between the SPLA and the civil population….This unfortunate incident repeated itself in many other places in South Sudan wherever the SPLA ventured to set foot, without being corrected or the perpetrators punished.\(^13\)

The UN Special Rapporteur for human rights in Sudan has also confirmed such SPLA activity. Following the Special Rapporteur’s September 1993 visit to the Nuba Mountains, he spoke of a “very dark picture” of gross violations of human rights by the SPLA. Local Nuba chiefs spoke of murders, torture, rape, kidnappings, abductions and the forced conscription of Nuba children, the destruction of homes and looting of property by the SPLA. The Special Rapporteur was given lists of hundreds of victims of SPLA terrorism.\(^14\) A Pux Christi delegation which also visited Sudan in late 1993, found that the “SPLA was involved in forced recruitment and in kidnapping and liquidating community leaders who refused to cooperate.”\(^15\)

The US Department of State’s *Country Report on Human Rights Practices for 1996* on Sudan has also stated that “the SPLM was responsible for extrajudicial killings, kidnappings, arbitrary detention, and forced conscription, and occasional arrest of foreign relief workers without charge.”

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\(^13\) Nyaba, *op. cit.*, p.36.


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The SPLA and terrorism in Sudan

The Khmer Rouge engaged in the widescale use of terrorism in its political and military efforts in Cambodia. The SPLA has also been closely identified with widespread use of terrorism in Sudan. This has included the widespread murder of men, women and children, indiscriminate mortaring and rocketing of urban areas in southern Sudan, resulting in hundreds of further civilian deaths, extensive pillaging and shooting of civilians along the Sudan-Ethiopian border, the torture and execution of opponents, the murder of international relief workers, and the laying of landmines. The SPLA has also admitted the shooting down of civilian airliners within Sudan, incidents involving considerable loss of civilian life. The SPLA also seems intent at present on the continued destruction of what little remains of the rural infrastructure in southern Sudan, and the murder, kidnapping and repression of civilians under its control at the moment.

While waging war against the Lon Nol administration in Cambodia in the early 1970s, before seizing power in 1975, the Khmer Rouge were responsible for the indiscriminate rocketing of Phnom Penh and other cities in Cambodia. These murderous attacks which claimed hundreds of civilian lives were well documented at the time. The SPLA have shown an equal indifference to the consequences of rocketing and shelling urban areas. United States Department of State 1990 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices reported that the SPLA “conducted indiscriminate mortar and rocket attacks on the southern city of Juba, killing more than 40 civilians and wounding many others. These attacks...seemed intended to terrorize the inhabitants”. The human rights report also stated that there had been “extensive pillaging and shooting of civilians by SPLA/M forces along the Sudan-Ethiopian border”. In November 1991 the SPLA again shelled Juba, killing 70 civilians.

Utter ruthlessness was a hallmark of Khmer Rouge violence towards civilians. The SPLA has demonstrated an equal callousness. In 1993, Amnesty International recorded, as but one example of SPLA terrorism, that Garang’s forces had lined up 32 women from the village of Pagau, 12 kilometres from Ayod in southern Sudan, and then shot each once in the head. Eighteen children were reported to have been locked in a hut which was then set on fire.

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Three children who attempted to escape were then shot. The rest burnt to death. In Paiyoi, an area north-east of Ayod, Amnesty International reported that 36 women were burnt to death in a cattle byre. Nine others were clubbed to death by Garang forces. 17

In his 1996 report, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on human rights in Sudan, documented an incident which had taken place on the evening of 30 July 1995. SPLA forces had attacked two villages in Ganyiel region in southern Sudan. SPLA gunmen 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 babies were all killed with pangas. A total of 1,987 households were reported destroyed and looted and 3,500 cattle were taken.18

It is a matter of record that in its 1994 report Civilian Devastation: Abuses by all Parties in the War in Southern Sudan, a 279-page study, Human Rights Watch/Africa devoted 169 pages to “SPLA Violations of the Rules of War”. Government violations were dealt with over 52 pages. Human Rights Watch/Africa reported that the SPLA was guilty of, amongst other things, indiscriminate attacks on civilians, abducting civilians, mainly women and children, torture, summary executions, the deliberate starvation of civilians, forced recruitment and forced labour, theft of civilian animals, food and grain, and the holding of long-term political prisoners in prolonged arbitrary detention.19

17 Sudan: The Ravages of War: Political Killings and Humanitarian Disaster, op. cit., p.25.
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John Prendergast’s 1997 book *Crisis Response: Humanitarian Band-Aids in Sudan and Somalia* provided more evidence of SPLA abuse of human rights:

Perhaps one of the most telling signs of SPLA treatment of civilians resulted from an exercise in which children in UN High Commission for Refugees’ (UNHCR) camps in Uganda were asked to draw pictures depicting life in a refugee camp for International Refugee Day 1993. Most of the children drew harrowing pictures of pre-rape scenes, killings and lootings, with ‘SPLA’ written on top of many of the pictures.  

The *Khmer Rouge* and SPLA: genocidal tendencies?

Perhaps the most disturbing parallel between the SPLA and Khmer Rouge is the overtly aggressive racist tendencies seen in both. The *Khmer Rouge* sought to persecute several minorities within Cambodia. The ethnic Chinese, Thai and Cham communities were particularly targeted by the *Khmer Rouge*. Elizabeth Becker has documented the attacks on these ethnic groupings by a chauvinistic *Khmer Rouge*.  

Someone who has also documented these attempts at ethnic cleansing is Professor Ben Kiernan. He is the director of the Cambodian Genocide Program, and professor of Southeast Asian history at Yale University. His 1996 book, *The Pol Pot Regime: Race, Power, and Genocide under the Khmer Rouge, 1975-1979*, published by the Yale University Press, provides a very clear picture of the ethnocentric nature of the *Khmer Rouge*.

The SPLA’s close identification with ethnic cleansing within southern Sudan is similarly a matter of record. The Sudan People’s Liberation Army has since its inception been essentially based upon, and dominated by, one of southern Sudan’s many tribal groupings, relying heavily upon Dinka communities in Upper Nile, especially the Bor Dinka, and the Dinka in Bahr el Ghazal. It has certainly been dominated by people belonging to these Dinka communities. Dr Nyaba confirms the unambiguously ethnicist origins of the SPLA:

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Initially, political mobilisation for the SPLM/A in 1983/4 was along the lines that the Bor and the people of Kongor would have an opportunity to acquire weapons they needed to fight back, or revenge the cattle rustling practised against them by the Murle. This mobilisation that took more than ten thousand Bor youth to SPLA training camps in 1983 was not for the national agenda of liberation but to settle local scores with their neighbours, the Murles or the Nuers.\(^\text{22}\)

That the SPLA was racist from its earliest years, and had a capacity for ethnically-motivated blood-letting, was confirmed by human rights organisations. In September 1985, for instance, SPLA forces captured Terakeka, the main centre of the Mandari tribe. The Bor Dinka had had a long history of enmity with the Mandaris and this resulted in killings and abuse by SPLA soldiers of Mandaris.\(^\text{23}\) African Rights recorded that “Many Nuer had long felt themselves to be oppressed by the Dinka in the SPLA”.\(^\text{24}\) Nyaba also clearly describes how the SPLA is seen in parts of southern Sudan:

In Equatoria...the SPLA was perceived as a Nilotic or Dinka movement whose objective was to reverse the division of the southern region, and to destroy the ‘Equatoria Region’ and impose the Dinka hegemony.\(^\text{25}\)

Nyaba’s study also describes tribal tensions between the SPLA and the Shilluk, Mandari, Toposa, Murle and Nuer communities:

Many communities had been completely alienated by the action of some SPLA officers and men and, in fact, some of them decided to cross over and allied with the enemy. For instance, the Murles rebelled against the SPLA in 1989, the Mandari had done so as early as 1984, the Toposa and the Didinga also turned against the SPLA in 1986 and 1990, etc...the SPLA sometimes posed like an anti-people military machine.\(^\text{26}\)

\(^{22}\) Nyaba, \textit{op. cit.}, p.24.
\(^{24}\) \textit{Food and Power in Sudan, \textit{op. cit.}}, p.276.
\(^{26}\) \textit{Ibid.}, p.2.
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Amnesty International documented the August 1991 split in the old SPLA, when the SPLA divided into two and then three factions. These were known for a time as the Torit and then Mainstream faction, controlled by John Garang, the Nasir faction led by Dr Riek Machar, and the SPLA-Unity faction led by William Nyoun. Amnesty International recorded that “most SPLA-Torit support was drawn from Dinka”. The SPLA-Nasir faction was said to derive its support from the Nuer and Shilluk tribes of southern Sudan.

Following the 1991 split, Amnesty International stated that the two groups attacked each other and civilian groups “for ethnic reasons”. Amnesty International also stated that John Garang’s group victimised civilians belonging to ethnic groups suspected of supporting the other faction:

In the early part of 1993 SPLA-Torit began an operation which involved the destruction of villages thought to be sympathetic to the Unity group. In January, 17 Latuka villages around the Imatong and Dongotona mountain ranges were destroyed, displacing tens of thousands of people. In the same month Torit faction forces moved further north and attacked Pari villages around the densely populated area of Jebel Lafon, some 100 kilometres east of Juba. Scores of civilians remain unaccounted for and are alleged to have been killed.

Amnesty reported that in April 1993, Garang’s forces “massacred about 200 Nuer villagers, many of them children, in villages around the town of Ayod. Some of the victims were shut in huts and burnt to death. Others were shot.”

Prendergast’s *Crisis Response: Humanitarian Band-Aids in Sudan and Somalia* also documented SPLA tactics aimed at destroying civilian centres in areas not controlled by the Garang faction. The SPLA sought to “weaken the subsistence base upon which (opposing groups) depend, utilizing village burning, cattle and crop stealing and destruction, denial of food aid”. Distinct ethnic motives were also placed on record by Prendergast, who stated that there


28Ibid, p.24

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had been strained relations between the largely Dinka SPLA and the Nuer tribe as well as communities in Equatoria ever since the SPLA came into being in 1983, with the SPLA showing an “absolute disregard for their human rights”\(^{30}\)

Prendergast also cited one observer as saying “The overwhelmingly ‘Nilotic’ character of the early SPLA was...enough to alienate many Equatorians” and personally states that the SPLA is seen in Equatoria as “an army of occupation.”\(^{31}\) It is as well to note that this all too clear tension between the Nilotic and Equatorian communities in Sudan starkly mirrors the murderous relationship that exists between the Nilotic Tutsi and non-Nilotic Hutu communities in the Great Lakes area.

The SPLA’s tribalist and racist excesses were not just limited to Sudan. In 1990, for example, Africa Watch reported that the SPLA was responsible for human rights abuses within those parts of Ethiopia in which it was then based. In one instance, SPLA units were involved in the massacre of over 500 Ethiopian civilians in the lower Omo valley of south-west Ethiopia. The SPLA had previously been involved in cattle-raiding activities in the area.\(^{32}\)

The Khmer Rouge and SPLA use of child soldiers

One of the most chilling characteristics of the Khmer Rouge movement, both while it was in power and during its periods of insurgency, was the deliberate use of heavily indoctrinated child soldiers. Elizabeth Becker’s *When the War was Over: Cambodia’s Revolution and the Voices of its People*, also described the deliberate use of children as soldiers by the Khmer Rouge during its guerrilla war:

> These were the soldiers who left their families and villages when they were as young as twelve years old and never returned. They were raised and indoctrinated by the party. And they took on the one-dimensional cruelty of adolescents outside civility that was best described in William Golding’s *Lord of the Flies*. Many Cambodians compared the young cadre or soldiers to trained guard dogs. A word of command would send them off to commit

\(^{30}\) Prendergast, *op. cit.*, p.57.
\(^{32}\) Denying “*The Honor of Living*”: *Sudan A Human Rights Disaster*, *op. cit.*, p.158.
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violent crimes or to run straight into machine-gun fire without a second thought, or so it appeared. They were the vanguard, the young elite who devoted their energies and talent to the narrow ideology of the Khmer Rouge.33

Many people may recall The Killing Fields. This film was based on a book of the same name and was a harrowing personal account of the Khmer Rouge regime, and documented some of the human rights abuses which followed the Khmer Rouge take over in Cambodia in 1975. The book also refers to the use of children:

These five to nine year-olds are the blank sheets of paper on which the Khmer Rouge write their terrible instructions: to regard (the Khmer Rouge) as their mother and father; to rid themselves of all human emotions not directed towards (the Khmer Rouge).34

Dith Pran, whose suffering under the Khmer Rouge is documented in the film and book, stated:

Every thirty yards he passes a young Khmer Rouge soldier with an AK-47 standing guard. It is the young ones he fears most, the guards aged between twelve and fifteen. They seem to have no emotions except loyalty to the (Khmer Rouge). They are as disciplined as machines, killing machines. Only in killing are they allowed to find pleasure.35

The SPLA has also long been identified with a similar deliberate policy of using child soldiers. The SPLA’s direct role in abducting more than ten thousand young southern Sudanese boys and holding them against their will in abysmal conditions has been well-documented. The 1991 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices placed on record that the SPLA had “forcibly conscripted at least 10 000 male minors”36.

33 Becker, op., cit., p.266.
35 Ibid., p.197.
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Human Rights Watch/Africa and the Children’s Rights Project published *Sudan: The Lost Boys* which described the removal of young boys from southern Sudan by the SPLA in what has been described as the “warehousing” of children for subsequent use in the war.\(^37\)

The deliberate abduction and isolation of children by both the *Khmer Rouge* and the SPLA can be seen as a corrupted and less sophisticated version of the Nazi use of youngsters for political and military ends. The result in Sudan was the creation of a grouping of child soldiers within the SPLA known as the “Red Army”. The SPLA’s abduction and gathering of children, and their subsequent treatment, is dealt with over almost thirty pages in *Civilian Devastation: Abuses by All Parties in the War in Southern Sudan*.\(^38\) In a separate study, Human Rights Watch/Africa concluded that:

> The primary purpose, however, of luring and keeping thousands of boys away from their families and in separate boys-only camps was, in the judgement of Human Rights Watch, a military purpose. This resulted in the training and recruitment of thousands of underage soldiers who were thrust into battle in southern Sudan and briefly in Ethiopia.\(^39\)

Ian Lethbridge, head of the United Nations Commissioner for Refugees office in Lokichokio, Kenya, stated that in 1992 that 12,500 “unaccompanied minors” were then in Kenya and a further 18,000 boys were in SPLA-held parts of southern Sudan.\(^40\)

Human Rights Watch/Africa returned to this issue in September 1995. In a press release it stated that:

> The rebel SPLA has long had a policy of separating boys from their homes and families for military training...Thousands of boys went to the Ethiopian refugee camps hoping for an education and received mostly military training in segregated facilities for “unaccompanied boys.” The SPLA inducted boys as

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\(^{38}\) *Civilian Devastation: Abuses by All Parties in the War in Southern Sudan*, op. cit., pp.195-224.

\(^{39}\) *Children of Sudan*, op. cit., p. 75.

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young as eleven into its ranks. The separation of unaccompanied boys from their families continued when the refugees fled back into Sudan in 1991…boys in ‘unaccompanied minors’ schools in Eastern Equatoria were called up in 1994 and 1995, while the SPLA continued to recruit minors, a practice it denies. The ‘unaccompanied boys’ under its control now number about 4,500.

Just as the Khmer Rouge ruthlessly deployed child soldiers in Cambodia, Human Rights Watch/Africa recorded the almost wanton way in which these boys are used by the SPLA. The ‘Red Army’ mentioned above was described by a SPLA officer as:

Young people, ages fourteen to sixteen…(when) the Red Army fought…(it) was always massacred…They were not good soldiers because they were too young.\(^{41}\)

The SPLA continues to use child soldiers, abducting young boys to this day.

Khmer Rouge and SPLA use of forced labour

The United States government’s 1996 report on human rights practices for Cambodia stated that the Khmer Rouge “were responsible” for “forced labor”\(^ {42}\). Forced labour has also been a characteristic of SPLA human rights abuses. The 1990 United States State Department’s Country Reports on Human Rights Practices, for example, stated that the “SPLA/M often forced southern men to work as laborers or porters or forcibly conscripted them into SPLA ranks. In disputed territories this practice was implemented through raids”.

In its 1994 report Civilian Devastation: Abuses by All Parties in the War in Southern Sudan, Human Rights Watch/Africa documented the SPLA’s use of “forced unpaid farm labor on SPLA-organized farms”. Human Rights Watch/Africa also reported that “The SPLA has conducted forcible recruitment…since at least the mid-1980s” and that “Forcing civilians to porter

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supplies for the SPLA is a chronic abuse. The abduction of civilians by the SPLA and their enforced use as porters continues to this day. As was the case with the Khmer Rouge use of forced labour, SPLA forced labourers are often moved outside of their home areas.

The murder and kidnapping of foreigners by the Khmer Rouge and SPLA

Both the Khmer Rouge and the SPLA have cold-bloodedly murdered foreign aid workers. In September 1992, for example, the SPLA murdered four foreigners, near Pageri in southern Sudan. Those murdered were Myint Maung, a Burmese employee of UNICEF, Wilma Gomez, a Filipino nurse working for the InterAid relief organisation, Frances Ngure, a Kenyan driver for the UN, and Helge Hummelvoll, a Norwegian journalist. The SPLA denied any involvement but Richard Venegoni, the international relief director for World Vision, stated: “I think that’s nonsense... All these incidents make it pretty difficult to continue to be sympathetic and work in the Garang-held areas.” He said that the SPLA had been responsible for the murders.

Several other foreigners, including missionaries, were detained or abducted by the SPLA in the 1990s. In August 1998 an Australian agricultural expert was kidnapped by the SPLA during an attack in the Abu Kami areas of eastern Sudan. Several thousand dollars worth of local currency was also stolen from local banks.

The Khmer Rouge showed similar callousness towards foreigners. In 1994 the Khmer Rouge kidnapped and then murdered three foreigners in Cambodia. Australian David Wilson, Briton Mark Slater and Jean-Michel Braquet, from France, were held by the Khmer Rouge and then brutally murdered in early September 1994. In 1994, the Khmer Rouge murdered three other Westerners. In March 1996, the Khmer Rouge kidnapped Christopher Howes, a 36-year old British engineer involved in clearing landmines working for the humanitarian non-governmental organisation, the Mines Advisory Group. Both Howes and his Cambodian translator were killed by the Khmer Rouge one week after they were captured.

43 Civilian Devastation, op. cit., pp. 174, 189, 192.
44 The Christian Science Monitor, 8 April 1998.
46 The Sydney Morning Herald, 6 March 1998.
47 Time magazine, April 20 1998, Volume 151, Number 15.
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The Khmer Rouge and SPLA control of food and food aid diversion

One of the features of the Khmer Rouge movement, both as a government and as a guerrilla group, was its strict control of food and the means of food production. Elizabeth Becker provides an insight into this attitude in her study.\(^{48}\) This continued after the removal of the Khmer Rouge from power in 1979. According to Linda Mason and Roger Brown, aid specialists who studied the relief operations for Cambodian refugees in Thailand:

> relief organizations supplied the Khmer Rouge resistance movement with food and medicines...In the Fall of 1979 the Khmer Rouge were the most desperate of all the refugees who came to the Thai-Kampuchean border. Throughout 1980, however, their health rapidly improved, and relief organizations began questioning the legitimacy of feeding them. The Khmer Rouge...having regained strength...had begun actively fighting the Vietnamese. The relief organizations considered supporting the Khmer Rouge inconsistent with their humanitarian goals...Yet Thailand, the country that hosted the relief operation, and the U.S. government, which funded the bulk of the relief operations, insisted that the Khmer Rouge be fed.\(^{49}\)

It is a matter of fact that just as the United States government insisted on the Khmer Rouge receiving large quantities of food and humanitarian aid from international non-government organisations on the Thai-Cambodian border, the Clinton Administration has ensured that the SPLA receives millions of dollars worth of food and other emergency assistance, in addition to that which the SPLA diverts from the UN Operation Lifeline Sudan mechanism. This United States government has routed millions of dollars in assistance to the SPLA through organisations such as Norwegian People’s Aid.

In May 1998, an independent consultancy commissioned by the Norwegian government investigated Norwegian People’s Aid, which had also received considerable amounts of Norwegian government aid funds, concluded that

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\(^{48}\) Becker, op., cit., p.257.

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Norwegian relief funds were being used to support SPLA soldiers, and thus prolonging the conflict. Norwegian People’s Aid, which works 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 to was pay for the schooling of the children of SPLA officers.\(^\text{50}\)

The SPLA has also attempted to control food production and distribution within those parts of southern Sudan it militarily dominates. In Sudan this has involved the diversion of food aid coming into southern Sudan by way of international non-governmental assistance. The Roman Catholic Bishop of the famine-affected diocese of Rumbek, Caesar Mazzolari, publicly stated in July 1998, for example, that the SPLA is stealing 65 percent of the food aid going into rebel-held areas of southern Sudan. Agence France Press has this to say in July 1998:

> 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.\(^\text{51}\)

These attempts to control and manipulate food aid coming into southern Sudan have had the direst of consequences. Human Rights Watch/Africa has placed on record as one amongst several causes of the 1998 Bahr al-Ghazal famine the following:

> SPLA looting of civilians and relief agencies, manipulation and diversion of relief food, and continued siege policy of using landmines and ambushes to prevent all overland traffic in southern Sudan. This interdiction of land and river transport - along with other factors such as on-going military operations, seasonal floods, and difficult terrain - has increased the cost of

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\(^{50}\) ‘Aid money supported rebellion in Sudan’, Aktuelt, Denmark, 20 May 1998.

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OLS operations in southern Sudan by requiring airdrops of relief food, the most expensive delivery system.\textsuperscript{52}

African Rights has 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.\textsuperscript{53}

SPLA activity in refugee camps on the Sudanese-Ethiopian border mirrored \textit{Khmer Rouge} behaviour on the Thai-Cambodian border. African Rights stated in relation to the refugee camps in Ethiopia controlled by the SPLA in the 1980s, for example, 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.\textsuperscript{54}

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

\textsuperscript{53} Food and Power in Sudan, \textit{op. cit.}, pp.5,7.
\textsuperscript{54} \textit{Ibid.}, pp.72-73, 76-77.
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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”.55

The SPLA and Khmer Rouge use of landmines

It is well known that Cambodia is one of the countries in the world worst affected by the deliberate and indiscriminate use of landmines. Thousands of Cambodians are maimed every year by landmines. The Khmer Rouge has made extensive use of landmines in Cambodia, especially in the rural areas. It has also murdered foreign aid workers involved in attempting to demine parts of Cambodia. The SPLA has also callously and indiscriminately used landmines within civilian areas. The US Department of State’s Sudan Country Report on Human Rights Practices for 1996, for example, documented that rebel forces “indiscriminately laid land mines on roads and paths, which killed and maimed…civilians.”56 A 1990 Africa Watch report stated that SPLA “land mines are planted at well-heads, on roads, near marketplaces, and close to injured people, so that would-be rescuers are blown up.”57 The chairman of the Peasants Union in Kassalla, Ahmad al-Ati, reported that rebel forces had used landmines in farming areas of eastern Sudan. 25 farmers had been killed and another 200 wounded in landmine incidents. He stated that the agricultural season was in jeopardy as most farmers were apprehensive about going into their fields.58

What are the Khmer Rouge and SPLA fighting for in 1999?

The Khmer Rouge has continued to wage war against successive governments in Phnom Penh since it itself was overthrown in 1979. At the insistence of the United States, the Khmer Rouge was brought into the United Nations supervised peace process in Cambodia. This two year process, supervised by the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia culminated in an internationally-recognised election held from 23-28 May 1993. The Khmer

55 Ms Short was speaking during the Dimbleby Interview, on ITV, London, 7 June 1998.
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*Rouge* ultimately refused to take part in the elections and the civil war in Cambodia restarted. It is unclear what the *Khmer Rouge* continues to fight for, short of continuing the war for war’s sake.

Similarly, it is unclear what John Garang and the SPLA are fighting to achieve. They would appear to be out of step with a considerable number of southern Sudanese politicians in that they have refused to come into the internal Sudanese peace process. Several of Garang’s former colleagues and other southern leaders are now parties to the Peace Agreement signed between them and the government of Sudan in April 1997, an agreement which built upon several political charters signed in 1996. They include Dr Riek Machar and the South Sudan Independence Movement (SSIM/A), the SPLM/A (Bahr el-Ghazal Group), the late Arok Thon Arok and the SPLM/A Bor Group, Commander Mohammed Haroun Kafi and the Nuba Mountains United SPLM/A, Dr Theophilus Ochang Lotti and the Equatoria Defence Force, Samuel Aru Bol and the Union of Sudanese African Parties (USAP), as well as Dr Lam Akol and the SPLA-United group.

The distant origins of the Sudanese conflict stemmed from unease at a political dispensation, itself inherited from the British colonial authorities, which saw much of the political power in Sudan held by the north. These concerns appear to have been comprehensively addressed, up to and including the issue of possible secession. It is a matter of record that the 1997 Peace Agreement guarantees an internationally-supervised referendum whereby for the first time ever the people of southern Sudan will be able to choose whether they wish to remain as part of a united Sudan or whether they wish to opt for an independent South. Southern Sudan has also been exempt from Islamic *sharia* law since 1991, and a federal system has meant that the ten southern states are governed by southerners themselves.

**United States military support for the Khmer Rouge and the SPLA**

At least part of the reason for the intransigence of both the *Khmer Rouge* and SPLA with respect to seriously negotiating a peaceful solution to the situations in their countries can be explained by American encouragement to continue with their violence. Given even the above brief outline of *Khmer Rouge* and SPLA policies and behaviour it is deeply disturbing to find that American governments have militarily assisted both of these organisations. In 1997, the
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British-based journalist John Pilger reported that the American government had:

actively supported the (Khmer Rouge), politically and financially. By January 1980, the US was secretly funding Pol Pot’s exiled forces on the Thai border. The extent of this support - $ 85 million from 1980 to 1986 - was revealed six years later in correspondence between congressional lawyer Jonathan Winer, then counsel to Sen. John Kerry (D-Ma) of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, and the Vietnam Veterans of America Foundation. Winer said that the information had come from the Congressional Research Service.59

Pilger revealed that much of the American assistance to the Khmer Rouge was channelled through the Kampuchean Emergency Group, and its successor, the Kampuchea Working Group, organisations led by American intelligence officers operating out of the United States embassy in Bangkok and on the Thai-Cambodian border. British academic Dr David Roberts confirmed that it was these groups “which established links with the Khmer Rouge and other groups and helped funnel information, aid, cash, and weapons.60

It has been said that American support for the Khmer Rouge was part of Washington’s policy of maintaining pressure on Vietnam, whose armies had intervened and ousted the Khmer Rouge regime in 1979. In order to keep pressure on Vietnam, the United States did everything in its power to preserve and maintain the Khmer Rouge as a guerrilla movement. In encouraging the Khmer Rouge to continue its war of attrition against the Vietnamese-installed government in Phnom Penh, the Americans were deliberately fuelling the Cambodian civil war and assisted the Khmer Rouge in once again asserting itself in upwards of one third of Cambodia.

Elizabeth Becker has documented that Zbigniew Brzezinski, when National Security Adviser, played a crucial role in encouraging Chinese support for the Khmer Rouge:

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Brzezinski himself claims that he concocted the idea of persuading Thailand to cooperate fully with China in efforts to rebuild the Khmer Rouge…Brzezinski said, ‘I encouraged the Chinese to support Pol Pot. I encouraged the Thai to help the DK (Democratic Kampuchea)’.  

American military assistance took the form of both covert and overt “non-lethal” and “humanitarian” aid, and ran into tens of millions of dollars. Even political allies of the Khmer Rouge, such as Prince Norodom Sihanouk, admitted that the CIA were present in Khmer Rouge camps. Speaking in late 1989, Sihanouk stated that “Just one month ago, I received intelligence informing me that there were U.S. advisers in the Khmer Rouge camps in Thailand, notably in Site B camp.”  

Asked about American policy in Cambodia during an interview in 1990, US Congressman Chester Atkins characterised it as a “policy of hatred”.  

Very similar American military assistance to the SPLA, for many of the same reasons, has been documented. The London Sunday Times of 17 November 1996 reported that:

The Clinton administration has launched a covert campaign to destabilise the government of Sudan...More than $20 million of military equipment...will be shipped to Eritrea, Ethiopia and Uganda...much of it will be passed on to the Sudan People’s Liberation Army (SPLA).

On 15 November 1996, the British newsletter Africa Confidential stated that “It is clear the aid is for Sudan’s armed opposition.” It further reported that the SPLA “has already received US help via Uganda” and that United States special forces are on “open-ended deployment” with the rebels. US training camps also exist in Eritrea.

Additionally, mirroring American assistance in obtaining the support of neighbouring countries such as Thailand for Khmer Rouge activities, the

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61 Becker, op. cit., p.440.
63 ABC News Special, 26 April 1990.
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United States has carefully ensured that the SPLA is able to operate from neighbouring states to Sudan such as Uganda, Eritrea and Ethiopia. In the case of Sudan, American assistance to the SPLA, despite its horrendous human rights record, is aimed at destabilising a country administered by an Islamic government, a government economically and politically independent of the United States.

Conclusion

It is a sad reality that the SPLA has followed a pattern of human rights abuse and murderous ruthlessness which mirrors the activities and behaviour of the Khmer Rouge during the Cambodian civil war, a war which has lasted almost as long as the Sudanese conflict. It is also clear that both the SPLA and Khmer Rouge have received considerable encouragement over the years from the United States government to continue waging war within their countries. This American encouragement has taken the form of diplomatic, political, financial and military assistance. The resultant continuation of conflict within both Sudan and Cambodia has clearly suited American foreign policy objectives.

The American desire to continue destabilising Sudan is a very dangerous policy indeed. The dangers of ethnic carnage on the scale of the Great Lakes tragedy of the early 1990s are already all too apparent, fuelled by the arrogance, unaccountability and capacity for violence clearly shown by the SPLA. American military assistance and encouragement for the SPLA can only but fuel such violence. One need not speculate as to the nature of any regime that might be established in southern Sudan should the SPLA seize power. It is all too obvious from the pattern of human rights abuse that has characterised those parts of southern Sudan militarily dominated by the SPLA at the moment, and in the past.

One must ask if the American government not learnt anything from its own appalling record in the Horn of Africa and Great Lakes area, or even its post-1979 support for the Khmer Rouge?