The Red Herring in the Sands of Sudan

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Recently, I have begun to question the reasons that led me to accept a job as a foreign aid worker in Sudan. Although I played a positive role in rebuilding East Timor as an aid worker, many people told me that I would be disheartened by the Machiavellian maneuvering of domestic and international players in Sudan. I doubted them. I was interested in aid, not politics. Yet they spoke the truth. Looking back, life in Sudan was surreal. Due to the longevity and sheer size of the humanitarian disaster, personal priorities and perspectives have become warped. We erected camps to house displaced persons forced to flee from camps built only a few months earlier. We provided medical relief only to see the same patients returning with new wounds. We distributed seeds and tools to a farming community unsure of who would control the land in the next harvesting season.

Despite forty-six years of on-again, off-again conflict since Sudan gained independence, influential domestic and international leaders refuse to recognize that peace is a prerequisite to alleviating human rights violations and humanitarian disasters and to freeing the people of Sudan to prosper in their own right. With each new government in Khartoum or Washington, confidence of imminent peace pervades the air. But like the governments before them, they deem the path toward establish-

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ing peace—littered with domestic obstacles—too tough to trek. As rapidly as the confidence wanes, bravado takes its place; calls to arms are supported by propaganda founded on righteousness. Thus, money continues to flow discreetly to belligerents year after year; misinformation and propaganda muddle reality, confusing the media and misleading policymakers. Peace, once again, is placed on the back burner. The result is an estimated 2 million deaths attributed to the conflict and the world's largest internally displaced population, over 4 million people.

The war that became all too familiar to me began in the 1880s with the rise to power of the self-proclaimed successor to the Prophet Muhammad, the Mahdi. British defeat at the hands of the Mahdi in 1885 signaled the first of many clashes between proxies of the two civilizations. In 1898, the British, together with the Egyptians, re-conquered Sudan and continued to rule until independence, which was hastily arranged for 1956. During the first half of the twentieth century, the British ruled using a "one country, two systems" approach. While the British acknowledged the local leadership of the north, the south was "protected" from Islamization and the northern Arab rulers. Many Sudanese told me that this distinction led to their current predicament. Their isolation and lack of development during the first half of the twentieth century placed them at a disadvantage when negotiations for independence began.

The civil war that tainted the nation's first sixteen years of independence began in 1955, a year before independence was achieved, and continued until 1972 when a promising but fragile peace was achieved through the Addis Ababa agreement. Peace lasted for just over a decade until the economic and political situation began to worsen. The government, fearing a coup, searched for support from opposition groups and eventually embraced the Islamic movement. A marriage was brokered; the bride's gift, Sharia law, was presented; and upon consummation the Addis Ababa agreement was lost, bringing about much resentment, concern, and fear. In early 1983, the 105th Battalion in Bor, having been ordered to transfer to the north, rebelled and formed the basis of what later became the largest of several opposition movements, the Sudanese People's Liberation Army (SPLA). Over the years, other groups emerged, including southern groups fighting for the government and northern groups fighting alongside the southerners.

I arrived in Sudan in late February of the eighteenth year of the civil war and quickly set about the tedious task of obtaining the obligatory entry visa, stay permit, work visa, and travel permit before traveling south to my posting. The dry season was reaching its peak, bore holes were parched, creeks lay in places where maps indicated rivers were supposed to flow, and few if any of the famous African flora and fauna were visible. Wau, capital of western Bahr-el-Ghazal state, became my home for the next several months. It was the largest and most secure of the three enclave towns in which my responsibilities lay; the other two, Raga and Aweil, were simply government outcrops within a sea of opposition territory. In 1998, Wau made international headlines when fighting displaced an estimated 70,000 people and mortality rates reached 300 per day. Since then, the situation has improved. Although many of the camps remain, the displaced population has decreased by half and the

problem that remains is one more of dependency than hunger or disease.

As a field coordinator, I was responsible for coordinating the International Rescue Committee's (IRC) programs in the field while simultaneously training the local staff to assume the management of the offices upon my departure. In late April, I visited our Raga office for the first time. Through the support of the Packard Foundation, we began the implementation of a greatly-needed reproductive health program in conjunction with the local ministry of health. The hospital had been without a doctor since the beginning of the year. Four of the five medical assistants working in the hospital had been brought out of retirement. There were few drugs, and the equipment was blunt or rusted, if available at all. This was an opportunity to build local capacity by working with the people; offering training, health, and family planning education; and providing drugs and equipment. I felt as if we were beginning something worthwhile. But regrettably, nothing is certain in Sudan.

During the middle of May, I was apprised of unusual SPLA troop movements as close as fifteen miles south and southwest of Raga. The news worried me, as I had developed an appreciation for the town and its people and was enthusiastic about my program, office, and staff in Raga. At the same time, rumors are just that—rumors.

It wasn't long, though, before rebel activity in the area was confirmed. In late May, the SPLA attacked and seized Daeim Zubeir, a town ninety kilometers from Raga and 190 kilometers from Wau. Over the next two weeks, one town after another fell along the road between Daeim Zubeir and Raga. Fearing being caught in the crossfire or falling victim to tribal genocide, most women and children fled northward toward South Darfur state, choosing to remain within government territory. Most men stayed, believing that an attack was unlikely or wanting to protect their property and ward off the aggressors.

Raga at the time was already home to thousands of internally displaced people who had fled their homes due to fighting or drought. Of these people, there was one group estimated at 6,000 displaced Sudanese from South Darfur who mainly hailed from the Rezigat tribe—a people who had reason to fear the approaching SPLA because of their tribal association with the Murahaliin.[1] This group, including women, children, and infants, had arrived only a few months earlier, after having fled south on foot for a month. I had met these people during my visit to Raga. They had arrived hungry and sick, with few items in hand. I was saddened that these people, who had just begun to establish themselves in Raga, were again forced to flee. This time, though, I doubted that they would survive the return journey.[2]

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On June 2, the longest-running civil war in Africa came to Raga. One of our staff described the event:

> In the morning, the SPLA overcame the government's outer defenses and moved their artillery to the airport runway lying about a kilometer and a half from the military barracks and separated by a river. At about nine o'clock in the morning the shelling began, the grain mill next to our office was hit; the mango tree that I lay under during the heat of the afternoon was felled by machine gun fire.

The SPLA, according to the residents of Raga, was equipped to an unprecedented level. Rocket-propelled grenade launchers were common, every soldier wore a fresh uniform, and new jeeps with mounted multi-barrel rocket-propelled grenade launchers were prominent. Among the attackers were some *khawaja* (a word referring to white-skinned foreigners). It's unclear who the foreigners were; they could have been war interns (during the war in the Balkans, the Croatian armies had an entire battalion that consisted of foreigners), mercenaries, or military advisors who came with the new hardware.

The SPLA quickly moved into Raga, overwhelming the mere 800 soldiers and the ad hoc Sudanese government militia. Only a few weeks earlier, I had met with the same military leaders of Raga who now fled west. During our meeting, we discussed the possibility of broadening our human rights training program in Wau. The program consisted of four three-day seminars covering AIDS prevention and treatment, gender rights, child rights, and basic rights and freedoms. The positive reception to this pilot program in Wau was unexpected. The upper echelons of the targeted groups—the military, police and prison officers, and community leaders—were enthusiastic and always sent a full retinue of high-ranking officials. There was also a genuine interest among attendees to participate, listen, and learn. The Raga military leadership's reaction to the idea was similarly positive. I was even asked to send a copy of the Geneva Convention in Arabic. Unfortunately, circumstances did not permit me to do so.

During the day of the attack, those remaining of the approximately 25,000 residents of Raga fled the town. The women and children who had left earlier were separated from the men. It was not until a month later that some of these families were reunited in the internally displaced persons' (IDP) camps of El Fardos, Um Herona, and Gemezah, in South Darfur State, 400 kilometers to the north.

The increased fighting in western Bahr-el-Ghazal state led all expatriate and Khartoum-based staff in Wau to leave the area. Once safely back in Khartoum, we established an emergency response team to assess the need for an intervention to fill the gaps in the humanitarian relief operation already underway. Our team set out from Khartoum on an arduous 2,500 kilometer, three day driving tour of Sudan. Along the route, provincial leaders offered us lodging in their houses and provided us with food and drink. Communities throughout Sudan mobilized to help the people of Raga. Drugs were being sent, clothes collected, and money raised. Upon arrival at El Fardos, a small town of less than 5,000 people and the location of the only government sanctioned camp at the time, we found that the host community was providing food and water to the new arrivals already numbering in the thousands. Basic human compassion

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Immediately, we began to search for our staff and friends. It was not long before we found a few of our colleagues. Their composure when we discussed the preceding events left me bewildered. They had not a tear in their eyes or a quiver in their voices; it was as if it had happened so many times before. A sad realization dawned upon me—they had lost the anger and fear associated with what they had gone through. Why? Because this is what it meant to live in southern Sudan.

The often forgotten result of such a military success by the western backed "liberation" movement, such as the one described above, is population displacement. In this instance, 30,000 people lost their homes and ran in fear for their lives. The question that stuck in my mind after meeting with these people was, "If the SPLA represents a 'liberation' army, why did practically the entire population of Raga, Daeim Zubeir, and other towns run in fear?" During World War II, when Paris was liberated from the Nazis, the streets were lined with cheering Parisians. When the Americans landed in Kuwait, people began to return. Why were Raga's streets empty when the SPLA moved in? The question undermines all the notions I held before I arrived; it contradicts the arguments of Washington lobbyists who portray the war to congressmen, senators, and the media as a conflict between Black and Arab, Christian and Muslim, north and south, or good and evil. If the reality continues to be ignored and interventions based on false perceptions remain unchallenged, there will be little hope for change.

Although the war began partially as a response to the Muslim Brotherhood's increased influence within the government, it subsequently developed a life of its own. Tribal wars between southern groups caused more deaths during the 1990s than did confrontations with the government. Fiefdoms emerged, run by warlords fighting for the highest bidder. Oil corrupted the cause of both sides and undermined any moral high ground that might have previously existed. Factionalism and fear in the north forced three of the four main Sudanese political players of the past quarter century—Dr. Hasan al-Turabi, two-time president Sadeq al-Mahdi, and Ahmad al-Mirghani—into prison, exile, and cooperation with the SPLA, respectively.

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The attack on Raga was perpetrated for military goals, but for what specific ends, it is difficult to speculate. Some suggest that the recent activity was directed at surrounding the oil field producing areas in Unity state to the northeast of Raga; others propose that the intent was to secure areas in Bahr-el-Ghazal where other precious resources have been found. Still others speculate that it was a feint designed to draw troops and forces away from an attack on Wau. The residents of Raga, though, believed that the move was driven by historical tribal tensions, and the government propaganda machine was quick to manipulate

these fears for their own ends. People described the attack upon Raga as the Dinka, the largest of southern Sudan's tribes and the main source of recruits for the SPLA, attacking the homeland of a former tribal enemy, the Fertit tribe. For most of the residents with whom I spoke, this perception was reason enough to flee. Nearly 30,000 of the estimated 35,000 residents of Raga and Daeim Zubeir, the two largest towns taken by the "liberation" forces of the SPLA, fled toward government held areas of South Darfur, Wau, and Aweil.

The misunderstanding and misrepresentation of a war that is tribal at its roots has resulted in the loss of countless opportunities to initiate peace through mediation. The most prominent international responses concentrate on eradicating abductions of women and children, the enlistment of child soldiers, and arbitrary imprisonment or famine. Such efforts ignore the strong causal links between the war itself and these problems. Never has there been a war without human rights violations and humanitarian disasters. Without recognizing this and acknowledging that, first and foremost, peace needs to be brought to Sudan, all other interventions are mere red herrings, distracting attention from the reality on the ground.

At this juncture, there is little reason to hope that a substantial reassessment of the lopsided intervention strategy will occur. Foreign governments appear intent to continue their support for either the rebel movement or the Sudanese government through a variety of means, from the openly biased supply of arms, to the more subtle, but equally important, organizational capacity-building. These same international actors, however, designate money to humanitarian agencies for food relief and displacement camps to aid civilians on the other side. These actions leave aid workers like myself wondering what motivates the conflicting policies. By providing aid, are politicians in Washington, Brussels, and Riyadh helping to end the humanitarian crisis or simply fueling the war?

In early October, I left Sudan, passing the management of the IRC's Sudanese field offices to the capable hands of the Sudanese. At the time, neither side of the conflict had used the attack upon the World Trade Center as a rallying call for their domestic causes. Nevertheless, lines in the sand were being drawn. Fundamentalists were exhorting their followers to prepare for a war against the nonbelievers, while the Khartoum government, determined to avoid a return to its pariah status of the early- to mid-nineties, was sending zero-tolerance messages. Within the first week after the attacks, deadly clashes erupted on the streets of Khartoum. The Public Order Police prevailed in the first confrontation, but at a high price: a number of anti-American protesters were killed. The outcome of this internal struggle will undoubtedly influence the future direction of Africa's longest-running civil war, as will U.S. actions toward Sudan in the coming months.

At the present time, when governments and people throughout the world, including those of Sudan, are attempting to look beyond their previous differences and are reaching out to offer their condolences and friendship, a unique opportunity has arisen. The situation is ripe for a change in policy. The hope of military victory must be supplanted by a desire to embrace diplomacy. Otherwise, the people of Sudan—regardless of race, religion, or color—will continue to suffer. Victo-

ries on the battlefield are cause for celebration for some, but to others, they are only occasions to mourn, as each soldier's step forward further entrenches hatred, misunderstanding, and distrust among the people of Sudan. There will be little respite for the Sudanese until, first and foremost, peace is brought to their land.

NOTES

1 The Murahaliin are government mercenaries known to attack southern villages on horseback wielding machine guns and raping, killing, and pillaging everything before them, often taking away women and children in the process.

2 After visiting all of the areas within government-held territory to which the Internally Displaced Persons had fled and not having seen them or heard of their fortune, I fear that these people were killed during or after the attack.