



FUELLING WAR IN SUDAN AND PREJUDICE IN CANADA?

**THE *CALGARY SUN*
AND SUDAN**

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WORKING FOR PEACE IN SUDAN

Fuelling War in Sudan and Prejudice in Canada?

The Calgary Sun and Sudan:

In 1997, the **Calgary Sun** published an eight-part special report entitled 'The Slave Trail'.¹ The articles were written by **Calgary Sun** columnist Linda Slobodian. Although written in 1997, the tone, nature and accuracy of these articles, and how they reflect on the **Calgary Sun's** journalistic professionalism, have a clear bearing on that paper's continuing coverage of Sudan.

The articles in question claimed that the Sudanese government were complicit in "slave raiding" in Sudan. The articles also claimed to have documented a large-scale "redemption" of southern Sudanese "slaves". As Ms Slobodian freely admits, her trip was arranged by Christian Solidarity International (CSI).

The **Calgary Sun** contributed US\$ 2000 "towards freeing the slaves".² It openly admitted to handing its money over to a Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) official for conversion into the "Sudanese pounds needed to buy slaves".³ The **Calgary Sun** then claimed that its money helped to "redeem 20 slaves".⁴ Ms Slobodian spoke of purchasing these "slaves" from "Arab slave traders".⁵ The whole process took place within an area of southern Sudan controlled by the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA).⁶ The paper also spoke of "the protection of the SPLA" for the "redemption process", and stated that after the "redemption" of the "slaves" that "[t]he SPLA will escort them home".⁷

It is now clear that it is very possible that the US\$ 2000 provided by the **Calgary Sun** for "redeeming slaves" went towards buying arms and ammunition for the Sudan People's Liberation Army, a southern Sudanese rebel organisation with an atrocious human rights record. The SPLA is headed by John Garang, a man the **New York Times** stated is one of Sudan's "pre-eminent war criminals".⁸ The **Calgary Sun's** money has thus helped sustain one of Africa's bloodiest conflicts. What may be of even more ethical concern is that the sort of lurid and sensationalistic claims the **Calgary Sun** made about "Arab slave traders" and government-sanctioned "slavery" in Sudan have been challenged by independent and reputable human rights activists.

The **Calgary Sun's** eight-part series, and the serious allegations made within it of large scale "slave redemption", can now be clearly assessed against an objective source, the report by John Harker into human rights abuses in Sudan, a report commissioned by the Canadian government.

The Harker report, **Human Security in Sudan: The Report of a Canadian Assessment Mission**, was published in February 2000. One of the two missions with which John Harker was tasked was to:

independently investigate human rights violations, specifically in reference to allegations of slavery and slavery-like practices in Sudan.⁹

While Harker was clearly critical of many human rights abuses in Sudan, he clearly questioned large scale redemption. He specifically touched on the credibility of Christian Solidarity International's claims of large-scale "slave redemption".

[R]eports, especially from CSI, about very large numbers were questioned, and frankly not accepted. Mention was also made to us of evidence that the SPLA were involved in "recycling" abductees...

¹ See 'The Slave Trail: An Eight-Part Special Report: Humanity For Sale', **Calgary Sun**, <http://www.canoe.ca/SlaveTrail/home.html>

² 'The Slave Trail: An Eight-Part Special Report: Humanity For Sale', **Calgary Sun**, <http://www.canoe.ca/SlaveTrail/home.html>

³ 'The Slave Trail: An Eight-Part Special Report: Mission Possible', **Calgary Sun**, <http://www.canoe.ca/SlaveTrail/part2.html>

⁴ 'The Slave Trail: An Eight-Part Special Report: Freedom', **Calgary Sun**, <http://www.canoe.ca/SlaveTrail/part3.html>

⁵ 'The Slave Trail: An Eight-Part Special Report: Mission Possible', **Calgary Sun**, <http://www.canoe.ca/SlaveTrail/part2.html>

⁶ 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. The **Economist** states that "the rebels have always, in theory, been a political movement as well as an army. In practice, the army was the movement" (March 1998). This publication refers to the organisation as the SPLA.

⁷ 'The Slave Trail: An Eight-Part Special Report: Freedom', **Calgary Sun**, <http://www.canoe.ca/SlaveTrail/part3.html>

⁸ 'Misguided Relief to Sudan', Editorial, **New York Times**, 6 December, 1999.

⁹ John Harker, **Human Security in Sudan: The Report of a Canadian Assessment Mission**, Prepared for the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Ottawa, January 2000, available at <http://www.dfait-maeci.gc-foreignp-3110186-e.pdf>, p. 1.

Serious anti-abduction activists... cannot relate the claimed redemptions to what they know of the reality. For example we were told that it would be hard not to notice how passive these “slave” children are when they are liberated or to realize how implausible it is to gather together so many people from so many locations so quickly - and there were always just the right number to match redemption funds available!

The Harker Report also detailed how fraudulent “slave redemptions” were being used to raise money for the SPLA, money which he also stated is used to purchase arms and ammunition:

Several informants reported various scenarios involving staged redemptions. In some cases, SPLM officials are allegedly involved in arranging these exchanges, dressing up as Arab slave traders, with profits being used to support the SPLM/A, buy weapons and ammunition...

The Harker Report documented the deliberate fraudulent nature of many “slave redemptions”:

Sometimes a “redeeming group” may be innocently misled, but other groups may be actively committed to fundraising for the SPLM/A & deliberately use “slave redemption” as a successful tactic for attracting Western donors.

We did speak with an eyewitness who can confirm observing a staged redemption and this testimony conformed with other reports we had from a variety of credible sources. The “redeeming group” knew they were buying back children who had not been abducted or enslaved. The exchange was conducted in the presence of armed SPLA guards. The “Arab” middle man/trader delivering the children for “redemption” was recognized as a member of the local community even though he was dressed up in traditional Arab costume for the event.¹⁰

It is a matter of record that the “slave redemption” exercise that Linda Slobodian and the **Calgary Sun** were party to saw US\$ 20,750 handed over to SPLA officials.¹¹ While the Calgary Sun provided US\$ 2000, the bulk of this payment came from the Canadian Crossroads Christian organisation.

In a July 1999 article entitled ‘The False Promise of Slave Redemption’, published by **The Atlantic Monthly**, American journalist Richard Minitier, a vigorous critic of Khartoum, provided unambiguous first hand evidence that there was fraud and corruption in the process of “slave redemption” in Sudan.¹² Minitier documented that SPLA officials are involved in fraud with regard to “slave redemption”:

[They] set themselves up as bankers and insist that redeemers exchange their dollars for Sudanese pounds, a nearly worthless currency... The officials arrange by radio to have some villages play slaves and some play slave-sellers, and when the redeemers arrive, the Sudanese pounds are used to free the slaves. When the redeemers are gone, the pounds are turned back over to the corrupt officials, who hand out a few dollars in return. Most of the dollars stay with the officials, who now also have the Sudanese pounds with which to play banker again.

In May 1999, the **Christian Science Monitor** also clearly stated:

There are increasingly numerous reports that significant numbers of those ‘redeemed’ were never slaves in the first place. Rather, they were simply elements of the local populations, often children, available to be herded together when cash-bearing redeemers appeared.¹³

The **Calgary Sun** articles claimed that “slavery” was a government policy and that CSI had bought “slaves” from “Arab slave traders”. There are neutral sources against which one can assess such claims. Anti-Slavery International is the world’s oldest human rights organisation. In a submission to the United Nations Commission on Human Rights in Geneva, Anti-Slavery International stated:

There is a danger that wrangling over slavery can distract us from abuses which are actually part of government policy - which we do not believe slavery to be. Unless accurately reported, the

¹⁰ Ibid., pp.39-40.

¹¹ ‘The Slave Trail: An Eight-Part Special Report: Sellers of Souls’, **Calgary Sun**, <http://www.canoe.ca/SlaveTrail/part5.html>

¹² The article was published in two parts in **The Atlantic Monthly** and is also available online in two parts. Part one is available at <http://www.theatlantic.com/issues/99jul/9907sudanslaves.htm> and part two at <http://www.theatlantic.com/issues/99jul/9907sudanslaves2.htm>.

¹³ “Slave ‘Redemption’ Won’t Save Sudan”, **Christian Science Monitor**, 26 May 1999.

issue can become a tool for indiscriminate and wholly undeserved prejudice against Arabs and Muslims. *[We] are worried that some media reports of “slave markets”, stocked by Arab slave traders - which [we] consider distort reality - fuel such prejudice.*¹⁴ (emphasis added)

Anti-Slavery International has also stated that: “the charge that government troops engage in raids for the purpose of seizing slaves is not backed by the evidence”.¹⁵ Additionally, the respected human rights expert, and Sudan specialist, Alex de Waal, while co-director of the human rights group African Rights, has stated with regard to allegations of slavery that:

(O)vereager or misinformed human rights advocates in Europe and the US have played upon lazy assumptions to raise public outrage. Christian Solidarity International, for instance, claims that “Government troops and Government-backed Arab militias regularly raid black African communities for slaves and other forms of booty”. The organization repeatedly uses the term “slave raids”, implying that taking captives is the aim of government policy. This despite the fact that there is no evidence for centrally-organized, government-directed slave raiding or slave trade.¹⁶

Anti-Slavery International would seem to believe that talk of “Arab slave traders”, as unreservedly carried in the **Calgary Sun**, distort reality and fuel prejudice against Arabs and Muslims. African Rights would seem to question the **Calgary Sun**’s use of terms such as “slave raids”. It is clear that “overeager and misinformed” also applies to the **Calgary Sun**’s 1997 claims of “slavery” and “slave redemption” in the Sudan.

For a newspaper as interested as it claimed to be about human rights in Sudan, the **Calgary Sun** was remarkably selective about those abuses that were of interest to it and its journalist. The SPLA, to whom the paper gave two thousand dollars, and with whom its reporter seemed very at ease, is a systemic abuser of human rights. Human Rights Watch, no friend of the Sudanese government has 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.¹⁷

The **Economist** also summed up the general image of the SPLA when it stated that:

[The SPLA] has... been little more than an armed gang of Dinkas... killing, looting and raping. Its indifference, almost animosity, towards the people it was supposed to be “liberating” was all too clear.¹⁸

THE CALGARY SUN AND SUDAN: SOME QUESTIONS THAT MUST BE ANSWERED

- Can the **Calgary Sun** categorically state that the US\$ 2000 it gave towards “slave redemption” was not used by the SPLA to purchase arms and ammunition to help continue the war in Sudan? What is the **Calgary Sun**’s position with regard to SPLA “war crimes”?
- Can the **Calgary Sun** categorically state the “slave redemption” it claimed to have been party to was not one of the “staged redemptions” as outlined in the Harker Report?
- Was Linda Slobodian “misled” in believing that she was witnessing a “slave redemption”? If so, does her gullibility not bring her professionalism as a journalist into question? Given that she has self-evidently been “overeager or misinformed” in her claims on Sudan and has been guilty of “lazy assumptions” with regard to the country, why is she still reporting on Sudanese affairs?
- Does the **Calgary Sun** really think that questionable articles such as ‘The Slave Trail’ really help to explain to Canadians what is happening in Sudan?

¹⁴ The reference number of this submission to the United Nations Commission on Human Rights is TS/S/4/97, and is available to view on the Anti-Slavery International web-site at <http://www.charitynet.org/asi/submit5.htm>

¹⁵ **Slavery in Sudan**, Anti-Slavery International and Sudan Update, London, May 1997, p.20.

¹⁶ Alex de Waal, ‘Sudan: Social Engineering, Slavery and War’, in **Covert Action Quarterly**, Spring 1997.

¹⁷ ‘Rights Group Warns US Against Feeding Sudan Rebels’, News Article by Reuters on 14 December, 1999 at 11:34:40.

¹⁸ **The Economist**, March 1998.

