



THE USE OF INTERTRIBAL RAIDING AS “SLAVERY” PROPAGANDA IN SUDAN

A STATEMENT OF
CONCERN TO
MRS MARY ROBINSON
THE UNITED NATIONS
HIGH COMMISSIONER
FOR HUMAN
RIGHTS

THE EUROPEAN-SUDANESE
PUBLIC AFFAIRS
COUNCIL

1 Northumberland Avenue
London WC2N 5BW

Telephone: 020 7872 5434
Telex: 020 7753 2848
E-mail: director@espac.org

March 2001

WORKING FOR PEACE IN SUDAN

THE USE OF INTERTRIBAL RAIDING AS ‘SLAVERY’ PROPAGANDA IN SUDAN

One of the continuing allegations made against the Sudanese government is that “slavery” exists in south-western and central Sudan. The Khartoum government’s position has been to state that there has historically been a problem with abduction and kidnapping within the context of inter-tribal violence between traditional ethnic rivals such as the nomadic Arabised Baggara communities and pastoralist Dinka tribes over access to grazing and water in parts of Bahr al-Ghazal and Kordofan. Such conflict has also been a fact of life between the Dinka and Nuer, and within other tribes in southern Sudan since the last century, if not earlier. There is also no doubt that these long-standing inter-tribal conflicts have become more intense as a result of the ongoing Sudanese civil war.

Inter-tribal raiding, which had been virtually dormant for decades was given a new lease of life as the Baggara and Dinka and Nuer were armed with modern, automatic weapons by opposite sides in the Sudanese conflict and encouraged to attack each other. Additionally, given the vastness of Sudan, and even without the dislocation of civil war, several large areas of the country have proved difficult to administer - just as they had been during British colonial times - providing ideal circumstances for abduction and kidnappings. The escalating conflict has also made inter-tribal reconciliation conferences, the traditional mechanism for agreeing water and grazing rights and the exchange of abductees, usually overseen by government officials, difficult.

These inter-tribal abductions have been a feature of contemporary conflict in several parts of southern Sudan. In addition to inter-tribal raiding in Bahr al-Ghazal, there have been similar activities between the Dinka and Nuer tribal groupings in both Western and Eastern Upper Nile. The United States government’s **Sudan Country Reports on Human Rights Practices - 2000** has reported:

There...were periodic reports of intertribal abductions of women and children in the south, primarily in the Eastern Upper Nile. The abductions are part of traditional warfare in which the victor takes women and children as a bounty and frequently tries to absorb them into their own tribe.²

In 2001, Human Rights Watch also provided clear evidence of inter-tribal raiding and abductions. It spoke of:

Dinka-Nuer cross-border raids. These raids involved thousands of civilian casualties, large-scale theft of cattle, abduction of women and children, and destruction of hundreds of villages.

³

What is disturbing is that the inter-tribal conflict between the Baggara and Dinka communities, and the resultant raiding, abductions and kidnappings within Bahr al-Ghazal and central Sudan has been presented by partisan groups such as Christian Solidarity International (CSI) as “slavery”. These claims portray “Arabised” northern tribesmen “enslaving” black “Christian” southern tribesmen, women and children. Groups like Christian Solidarity International have also made much of claims that they have been “buying” back such “slaves” from northerners. The “enslavement” of women and children particularly has highlighted by anti-Sudanese groups, as were what were presented as forced marriages between captors and captives. The eagerness of groups such as CSI to “buy” back “slaves” may have resulted in a vast increase in the number of tribes people being abducted specifically to be “redeemed” by Christian fundamentalist activists.

¹ This publication updates “**Slavery**” in Sudan: When is a “Slave” Not a “Slave”? An Examination of the 1999 Wunlit Accords, published by the British-Sudanese Public Affairs Council, London, 1999.

² **Sudan Country Reports on Human Rights Practices - 2000**, Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, U.S Department of State, Washington-DC, February 2001, Section 4, available at <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2000/af/index.cfm?docid=822>

³ Letter from Human Rights Watch to Secretary of State Colin Powell, Human Rights Watch, Washington-DC, 1 March 2001.

There is additionally considerable evidence that many “redemptions” have been staged.⁴ Vast amounts of money has been raised by these groups presenting the issue as “Christian” southerners being enslaved by Arab “slave traders” then being “redeemed” by groups such as CSI.

While it is clear that what has been increasingly presented as “slavery” by anti-Sudanese and anti-Islamic propagandists can in no way be compared to slavery as we understand it, this propaganda onslaught has clearly also taken root within the North American and European media. Such claims have also been taken up and encouraged by the United States government, complementing the American government’s repeated attempts to isolate and destabilise the government of Sudan.

Given the attempts by Christian fundamentalist groups such as Christian Solidarity International to redefine tribal abductions as “slavery”, it is particularly significant to note the details of the Dinka-Nuer West Bank Peace and Reconciliation Conference, held at Wunlit, in Bahr al-Ghazal, between 27 February and 8 March 1999.⁵ Dinka and Nuer chiefs and elders, church, civil and community leaders, women and youth met under the auspices of the New Sudan Council of Churches in an attempt to end years of bitter conflict between the Dinka and Nuer ethnic groups, both of them black southern tribes. A covenant and series of resolutions were agreed and adopted by the conference. The Wunlit Accords were hailed by several church groups, both within and outside of Sudan, as a very significant development in conflict resolution within southern Sudan. It should be noted that the Wunlit process has been supported by Christian Aid UK and DanChurch Aid of Denmark who funded and facilitated the meetings of the Peace Council.

The United States’ government acknowledged the basis of the Wunlit accord:

In March 1999, at a grassroots peace conference in Wunlit, Bahr El Ghazal, representatives of the Nuer and Dinka tribes signed a peace covenant. The Dinka and the Nuer are the two largest tribes and had been on opposite sides of the war since 1991. The Wunlit accord provided concrete mechanisms for peace, including a cease-fire, an amnesty, the exchange of abducted women and children, and monitoring mechanism.

Even **Christianity Today** has conceded that

Recently, the NSCC [New Sudan Council of Churches] and humanitarian groups facilitated reconciliation talks between the warring Dinka and Nuer tribes in the south. One of the peace treaty requirements stipulated returning all people they had abducted.⁶

As both the American government and **Christianity Today** stated one of the major items discussed was the issue of those men, women and children abducted by either the Nuer or Dinka in the course of their inter-tribal raiding and fighting. Several of the main resolutions that central to the Accords specifically addressed this issue.

Resolution A of the conference, for example, states that:

Girls who have been abducted but are not yet married shall be repatriated to their parents/relatives as soon as they are identified.

Resolution B concerns “girls who have been married in captivity” and offered solutions for the repatriation of girls who have been abducted and were then married off to their abductors, stating that these girls can return to their own tribe if they so wish. Children from any such forced union can be “redeemed” by the father “according to Dinka/Nuer traditions”.

Resolution D (1) deals with “boys or men in captivity”, and states that:

⁴ See, for example, 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>, pp39-40.

⁵ ‘Sudan tribes agree ceasefire’, BBC World, BBC Online Network, Wednesday, March 10, 1999 Published as 23:38 GMT.

⁶ ‘Slave Redemption: Americans are becoming instant Abolitionists. But is the Movement Backfiring?’, **Christianity Today** magazine, 9 August 1999

in all cases boys and men who have been abducted and held in captivity shall be freed and repatriated to their natural parents or guardians as soon as they are discovered.

Resolution F deals with the creation of “abductee identification teams” made up of tribal chiefs who will visit both Dinka and Nuer areas searching for abducted men, women and children.

The conference also agreed that “border grazing lands and fishing grounds shall be available immediately as shared resources”.⁷ In October 1999, the New Sudan Council of Churches issued a report which followed up on the Wunlit Accord. It was reported that the Wunlit Accords “had born impressive fruit”.⁸

The Peace Council elected at the Wunlit Conference has produced several documents, one of which was entitled ‘Working Group 1: Return of Missing Persons, Abductees & Cattle’. This document reported that 148 abductees had been returned to their communities, and that five marriages between women captives and captors had been finalised. Appendix A of the report lists ‘Abductees returned between the Dinka of Rumbek County and the Nuer of Nyuong and Leer Provinces’, Appendix B “Abductees returned between the Dinka Atuot of Yirol County and the Nuer of Leer Province”, and Appendix C ‘Missing people from Nuer now in Rumbek County’, this latter listed dozens of children.

It was stated in the October report that the working groups had as an immediate and longer term plan the “establishment of a process for final resolution in the tracing of missing persons (and) the return of abducted people”.⁹

It is significant that groups such as Christian Solidarity International have deliberately chosen to present inter-tribal raiding and abduction between sections of the Dinka tribe and the Baggara nomads in northern Bahr al-Ghazal, conflict largely over grazing and watering rights, as slavery and Islamic holy war or *jihad*, while ignoring identical inter-tribal raiding and abduction between the Nuer and Dinka, two black southern tribes. This is one more example of the subjective, misleading and selective approach that CSI has taken to Sudanese issues, and inter-tribal abductions in particular. Fund-raising and propaganda is much easier if the issue is presented as a case of Christians persecuted and “enslaved” by Muslims.

The Wunlit Accords, together with the up-to-date statements made in the State Department human rights report and by Human Rights Watch, also clearly reinforces the Sudanese Government’s position, dismissed by some partisan groups, that what had been presented as “slavery” to naïve Western observers was infact raiding, abductions and kidnappings within ages-old inter-tribal conflict.

The Wunlit Conference and Accords, and the follow-up work being carried out by the Peace Council with regard to those abducted within inter-tribal raiding, clearly exposes the contradictions and selectivity with regard to the “slavery” issue of people such as Baroness Cox and Christian Solidarity International/Christian Solidarity Worldwide in the United Kingdom and Charles Jacobs and the Boston-based American Anti-Slavery Group.

The simple question which must be asked of these groups is when is a “slave” not a “slave” in Sudan? The obvious answer is that a “slave” is not a “slave” when such an allegation is of no propaganda or commercial value to Christian Solidarity International, the American Anti-Slavery Group or anyone else with an anti-Sudanese agenda. A “slave” is also not a “slave” when he or she has been abducted by the wrong tribal grouping, a tribal grouping that cannot be presented as pro-government Arab raiders deliberately targeting “Christian” settlements, in an area that cannot be presented as a fault line between Islam and Christianity.

⁷ ‘Wunlit Dinka-Nuer Covenant’, at Sudan Infonet Web Site, <http://members.tripod.com/SudanInfonet/>.

⁸ ‘Sudanese Communities Benefit From Church-Brokered Pact’, News Article by the All Africa News Agency, October 15, 1999.

⁹ ‘Peace Council Refuses to be Intimidated and Documents Remarkable Progress in People-to-People Process’, A Press Release by the New Sudan Council of Churches, October 4, 1999.