Uncivil

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Articles & Testimony

"Anyone who thinks Islam is a religion of peace has never been to the Sudan," said the county commissioner in Malual Kon, a small village nestled among farms and swampy grassland about ten miles from the front line of the country's civil war. There, where Christians and animists have spent almost 20 years resisting the Sudanese government's self-declared jihad, political correctness is in short supply. "They teach their children that killing a non-Muslim is a key to paradise," the Christian official explained further. "If you are too weak to kill, then you enslave."

In this corner of southern Sudan, farmers, merchants, rebel soldiers, and priests all expressed condolences for the World Trade Center attacks -- even though few had ever seen a building over one story, and none owned a television. Most people listened to the radio reports with disbelief. Not disbelief that the attacks had taken place -- after 18 years of nearly constant war the people of the South consider such things a fact of life -- but rather disbelief that the U.S. government would seek to bring the Sudanese government into its coalition against terror.

The United States has listed Sudan as a sponsor of terrorism since August 1993. At various times the country has been a safe haven and training center for the Abu Nidal organization, Lebanese Hezbollah, Palestine Islamic Jihad, Hamas, and Algeria's Islamic Salvation Front. It sheltered the assailants who tried to kill Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak in 1995. In April 1996 the State Department expelled a diplomat from Sudan's UN Mission who had links to conspirators planning to blow up the United Nations and the tunnels under the New York harbor. Osama bin Laden called Sudan home between 1991 and 1996; many of his followers still do. In response to all this the United Nations, in three different 1996 resolutions, slapped sanctions on Khartoum. And in a 1997 Executive Order, President Bill Clinton imposed even tougher commercial and financial penalties.

The United States has also blasted Omar el-Bashir's government for its violent repression and enslavement of Christians and animists at home. In June, after sustained lobbying by Christian and human rights groups, the House of Representatives passed, by a vote of 422 to 2, the Sudan Peace Act. The legislation censured Khartoum for prolonging the civil war -- which has cost two million lives and displaced twice that number -- and for actively supporting the slave trade, which is conducted largely by militias under the government's command. Under the terms of the act, companies (like Canada's Talisman) that invested in Sudan's oil industry would be banned from U.S. capital markets.

Then came the World Trade Center attacks. And in the diplomatic reshuffling that followed September 11, the Sudanese government has played its cards exceptionally well. Khartoum wasted no time condemning the attacks, issuing a statement reaffirming its "rejection of all kinds of violence." In return Secretary of State Colin Powell said the United States would enlist Sudan in the fight against "all forms of international terrorism." On September 19 the Bush administration quietly killed the Sudan Peace Act. And on September 28 Elfatih Mohammed Erwa, Sudan's ambassador to the United Nations, offered "genuine cooperation in combating terrorism." The same day, the United States abstained as the UN Security Council voted to lift sanctions on Sudan, effectively giving the diplomatic green light to the country's international rehabilitation.

But while Khartoum may have shifted its rhetoric, it does not seem to have changed its behavior. A former high-level government official in Aweil, an important government center in the southern part of the country, told me that last year he saw slave trains passing through town, guarded by the Popular Defense Forces -- the decidedly unpopular Sudanese army. And since September 11, Khartoum has neither emancipated its slaves nor chosen to abide by the May 1994 declaration of principles on which the regional states set an agenda for the peace process. (Khartoum objected to affirming the equality of religions under the law.) In sharp contrast, almost two weeks after the World Trade Center fell, the Sudanese government bombed the southern village of Kargoc, a civilian target miles away from the nearest military site. Hearing of the bombing on my first day in the Sudan, I hiked several miles to reach the village. The smell of TNT still lingered in the air; near one cluster of huts was a fresh bomb crater more than six feet deep. A quarter-mile away, another bomb had shredded trees near a church packed with children listening to a Sunday sermon. Lest the government's intentions be misunderstood, on October 4 Sudanese Vice President Ali Osman Taha told a brigade of mujahedin fighters being dispatched to southern Sudan, "The jihad is our way and we will not abandon it and will keep its banner high."

As for whether the Sudan continues to shelter terrorists, it depends whom you ask. U.S. officials told the Associated Press last week that Khartoum has arrested as many as 30 foreign terrorists since the attacks -- though given America's lack of diplomatic presence in Sudan, that information is of questionable reliability. In fact, Ibrahim Ahmed Omar, secretary-general of the government's ruling party, essentially contradicted the claim, declaring in a public statement that "[W]e have not handed over anybody to America, because we never have had any terrorist training camps in Sudan." (According to the State Department's Patterns of Global Terrorism, released in April 2001, Sudan "continued to be used as a safehaven by members of various groups.... Most groups used Sudan primarily as a secure base for assisting compatriots elsewhere.")

Many ordinary Sudanese laugh at their government's insistence that it harbors no terrorists. Nur, a well-connected Arab merchant recently returned from the capital, described to me in detail a training camp five kilometers from the bus station in Khartoum. The camp, operating under the guise of the African Islamic University (previously the African Islamic Center), reportedly hosts Palestinian, Iraqi, and Iranian "students." Other recent travelers to northern Sudan -- many of them Arab businessmen with ties to the Khartoum regime -- described Al Qaeda camps in Tokar on the Red Sea and Renk, a large town on the Nile. Several Sudanese also reported the relocation of operatives from larger camps in the North to out-of-the-way towns further south, far from foreign journalists.

And terrorist cells may not be the only things moving south. "If you want to find chemical weapons," one former member of the Sudanese army told me, "just go to the Juba airport." It's a frightening thought. And a plausible one, given that, according to numerous press reports, congressional testimony, and accounts from the field, the Sudanese military has employed chemical weapons against non-Muslims in the Nuba Mountains.

But don't expect the Bush administration to say much about these, or any other allegations of Sudanese misbehavior, any time soon. The administration's anti-terrorism coalition may help in the struggle against bin Laden, but if the Bushies are serious when they vow that the war will not end with Afghanistan, they may eventually find their current efforts more than a little self-defeating. For by allowing terrorism sponsors like Sudan to benefit from the September 11 attacks, the United States signals that sheltering terrorists does indeed pay. This may not be the message Foggy Bottom intends to send -- but it appears to be the one that's being received in Khartoum. ❖

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