

Sudan Hides Its Regime of Terror behind a Mask of Diplomacy

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Articles & Testimony

For five years, Osama bin Laden made his home in Sudan. Five years on, the country remains a safe haven not only for the al-Qa'eda organisation, but also for Islamic Jihad, Hamas and the Egyptian terrorist organisation al-Gama'a al-Islamiyya.

Yet, Sudan has played its diplomatic cards exceptionally well since September 11. While Iran sent mixed messages, Khartoum wasted no time in rushing to condemn terrorism. In response, the US secretary of state, Colin Powell, said America would enlist Sudan in the fight against all forms of international terror. On Sept 28, America diplomatically abstained when the United Nations Security Council voted to lift sanctions on Sudan, thus giving the green light to the country's international rehabilitation.

Back in Washington, the Bush administration quietly killed off the Sudan Peace Act, passed overwhelmingly by the House of Representatives, which called for a war crimes investigation into the Sudanese government's treatment of its non-Muslim citizens.

Full marks to Sudan. But does its enthusiastic rhetoric in support of the fight against terrorism add up to anything more than a diplomatic game?

I spent the last week of September in Sudan, which I had entered illegally in order to talk to the Sudanese without being subject to government minders.

I spoke not only to Christians and animists in the non-Arab portions of southern Sudan, but also to Arab traders and merchants.

An Arab businessman who had recently returned from Khartoum drew a map showing where a terrorist training camp lay, only three miles from the city centre. Other training camps, I was told by others, operate under the cover of the secretive African Centre for Islamic Studies, which trains numerous Palestinian, Iranian, and Iraqi students.

In the wake of the World Trade Centre attacks, operatives from larger camps in northern Sudan have relocated to towns further south, away from the eyes of foreign journalists.

Terrorist cells are not the only thing moving south. If you want to find chemical weapons, one former member of the Sudanese army told me, take a look in Juba airport.

Should we be reassured that -- unlike Saddam Hussein -- the Sudanese president, Omar el-Bashir, has employed chemical weapons only sparingly -- and only against non-Muslims in the Nuba Mountains? Should we mind that Sudan still refuses to hand over terrorists from the group that tried to assassinate President Mubarak of Egypt in 1995?

Lest anyone mistake Khartoum's true intentions, the Sudanese military bombed a small village, miles from the nearest opposition military base, barely a month ago. I hiked through a swamp to reach this isolated site, and saw the devastation that had been wrought.

Bombing farms and churches is hardly the action of a government that has repudiated its terrorist past.

While the debate continues in the international community over how best to free the slaves in Sudan, no one there denies the existence of slavery. I interviewed former slaves who bore scars from burning, slashing and, in some cases, amputations of fingers.

Most of the women and girls spoke of gang rapes at the hands of Sudanese soldiers. Almost everyone described witnessing executions, usually of Christians and animists who refused to convert to Islam.

There can be no doubt: the Sudanese government remains a host to terrorists, and continues to engage in the brutal ethnic cleansing of non-Arab Sudanese.

Coalitions are important, but London and Washington should judge states by their actions, and not by their rhetoric.

Osama bin Laden has won if the West's headlong rush for a broad coalition simply becomes cover for the rehabilitation of the sponsors of terrorism. ❖

Daily Telegraph (London)

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