The U.N. Finds Slavery in the Sudan

by David Littman

Middle East Quarterly
September 1996, pp. 91-94


INTRODUCTION BY DAVID LITTMAN

A military regime espousing a fundamentalist Islamic orientation came to power in the Sudan on June 30, 1989. Since 1992, the U.N. General Assembly and its Geneva-based Commission on Human Rights have regularly adopted resolutions condemning the Sudanese government for its many human-rights violations. Of particular concern are the accusations against the Sudanese authorities not just of extrajudicial killings and torture but also of slavery and forced conversions to Islam.

Gáspár Bíró, a senior research fellow at the Institute for Central European Studies in Budapest, and the U.N.'s special rapporteur for the Sudan, has written six reports on the "Situation of human rights in the Sudan," covering the years 1993, 1994, and 1995. Although Khartoum banned Mr. Bíró from entering the country in February 1994, he has visited neighboring countries and received reliable enough reports for him to conclude in April 1996 that "we have reached a stage where the facts are no longer debatable."

The Sudanese authorities have responded very strongly to the Bíró reports. Religious leaders in Kordafan, "publicly supported at the highest government level," issued a fatwa in April 1992 against all those who oppose the government of Sudan. The government decried portions of the first report as "represent a vicious attack on the religion of Islam and contains [sic] a call for the abolition of its [Islamic] Penal Legislation." New Horizon, a government newspaper, published an article titled "The Satanic Report: From Salman Rushdie to the Bíró Case" that directly threatened Mr. Bíró: "His act will cost him dearly and will constitute the main subject of the decade."

After discussions with the U.S. delegation, the Sudanese government reversed its policy at the Commission on Human Rights on April 17, 1996, when its minister of justice, Mr. Abdel Aziz Shiddo, announced that Mr. Bíró could visit the country "and see for himself." This visit is confirmed for August 1996.

The extracts that follow are from the 1995 report of the special rapporteur (the paragraph numbers are those in the report). They follow extensive sections about
extrajudicial killings, disappearances, torture, and arbitrary arrest.

SLAVERY AND THE SLAVE TRADE

35. Reports were received from all over southern Sudan of the abduction of men, women and children by the Government of the Sudan army, the Popular Defence Forces (PDF), government armed local militias and groups of mujahidin fighting the war in southern Sudan on the Government's side. . . . The abduction of southern civilians, men, women and children, whether Muslims, Christians or of traditional African beliefs, regardless of their social status or ethnic belonging, has become a way of conducting the war. As was mentioned in a previous report in relation to the situation in the Nuba Mountains, "PDF and army units are given orders to collect civilians -- mainly women, children and elderly men -- and to take them to the Government of the Sudan-controlled peace villages" after fighting has taken place. . .

37. During April and May 1995, it was reported, a train proceeding from Babanusa to Wau was used to transport civilians abducted during raids in the area carried out by government forces. A.A. (aged 42), who left Gogrial Gazz 297 in July 1995, gave the following testimony to the Special Rapporteur. In mid-May, PDF troops left the train in Aweil 52 and raided Gogrial and the surrounding areas. Some of the locations targeted were Kuajok, no Karic and Manyok. PDF troops took thousands of cattle and abducted some 500 women and 150 children (between 5 and 12 years of age). Men were taken especially from Manyok. According to the testimony received:

Women and children were taken to Aweil. They had to walk first to Udhum, where they were loaded on the train. This happens only when the capture is big, because then relatives who work in Aweil could recognize them. Therefore, they have to bypass Aweil by foot. When there are only a few children, they are hidden on the train. Once in Babanusa, children are taken by Dawa Islamiyah, an Islamic non-governmental organization active in the field of education, while the Government claims that they are displaced children. Big boys are distributed as workers in Al-Dhein, Abu Gabra, Sibdu, Kareiga, Meiram and El Muglad. They work in the fields or as servants.

. . . In several instances, United Nations relief trains distributing food in the area during stopovers have been followed a few weeks later by military convoys; people who approach the militarily guarded trains anticipating the distribution of food have become easy victims for the captors.

39. All the reports and information received indicate the direct and general involvement of the government army, PDF, government armed militias and mujahidin groups, backed by the Government of the Sudan and fighting beside the army and the paramilitary units, in the abduction and deportation of civilians from the conflict zones to northern Sudan. The places where those captured are temporarily detained before reaching their final destinations are also operated by army, PDF, and/or mujahidin units. In the light of this information, the Special Rapporteur concludes that the total passivity of the Government after having received information for years regarding this situation can only be interpreted as tacit political approval and support of the institution of slavery and the slave trade. Repeated reports have indicated the involvement of local wealthy civilians, often well known for their close relations with the Government. It should be noted that all these practices have a pronounced racial aspect, as the victims are exclusively
southerners and persons belonging to the indigenous tribes of the Nuba Mountains. Among the latter group, even Muslims are enslaved.\textsuperscript{8}

**FORCED CONVERSION**

41. Reports of the destruction of mosques in the Nuba Mountains reached the Special Rapporteur during 1995. The mosques were reportedly desecrated, looted and burnt down, allegedly because of the officially expressed claim that the central Government "knows better Islam" than the indigenous Nubans. It was reported that during 1995 the mosques in the following locations in the Nuba mountains were desecrated, looted or burnt: Kumu, Toror, Um Derdu, Tajura, Kuchama, Kodi and Kauda.

42. Reports continue to be received of enforced Islamization in the government-controlled areas in the conflict zones and among displaced southerners in northern Sudan. Food and relief, including medicines and clothes, are among the means used to force people to convert to the Islamic religion. The displaced persons who reject Islam are refused shelter and relief.

43. Alarming reports were received of cases in southern Sudan where those who refused to convert and to send their children to a khalwa [Qur'anic school], were killed. During his recent mission, the Special Rapporteur received testimonies, including an eyewitness account, of the summary execution of 12 civilians, men, women and children, at Lobonok on 3 May 1995, at noon. At the end of April 1995, following fighting which reportedly had lasted almost three months, government troops entered Lobonok. The local population was forced to convert to Islam, children were dressed in white jellaba\textsuperscript{9} and given Arabic names. Although some adults did convert to receive food, the group mentioned above was executed because they refused to convert and to send their children to the khalwa.

**ABDUCTION OF CHILDREN**

49. [T]he Special Rapporteur continues to receive reports of the practice of arbitrarily rounding up children from the streets of the major towns of northern Sudan, including the capital city, and of sending them to special camps where: (a) they are subjected to cruel and inhuman treatment; (b) they are ideologically indoctrinated; (c) non-Muslims are forcibly converted to Islam and have their identity changed by being given Arabic names; and (d) in some cases, they are trained by the military in order to be sent to southern Sudan to fight the war.

50. [T]he The Special Rapporteur concludes that the existence of a centrally coordinated government policy is at the origin of most of the violations and abuses of the rights of the child.

52. Since the overwhelming majority of the victims are children belonging to southern tribes or tribes from the Nuba Mountains and the Ingassema Hills, the racial aspect of the violations cannot be disregarded. The Special Rapporteur believes that the racial dimension of the violations and abuses against children living in northern Sudan, or, in the case of children in southern Sudan, those who are abducted and sold into slavery constitutes a particularly grave and alarming circumstance, which should be of particular concern from a human rights perspective.

59. In 1994, a camp for boys aged between 6 and 16 years was set up in Damazin province, south of the town of Damazin. In December 1994, approximately 1,000 boys were in that camp, all belonging to the indigenous Ingassema Hills population.
The children were brought to the camp by the police because, according to testimony received by the Special Rapporteur from an individual who had visited the camp twice, "they walk naked and are non-believers." Islamic education is being provided under the control of the local State government. The Special Rapporteur was told that collecting children and bringing them into the camp was an ongoing operation; in January 1995, the number of inmates had increased to approximately 4,000.10

4 The fatwa was signed by six sheikhs Musa Abdel Majid, Mushava Juma, Muhammad Saleh Abdel Bagi, Qurashi Muhammad al-Nur, Nayer Ahmed al-Habib, and Ishmael al-Said Abdallah and its text reads, in part: The rebels in the south Kordofan and southern Sudan started their rebellion against the State and declared war against the Muslims. Their main aims are: killing the Muslims, desecrating mosques, burning and defiling the Koran, and raping Muslim women. In so doing, they are encouraged by the enemies of Islam and Muslims: these foes are the Zionists, the Christians and the arrogant people who provide them with provisions and arms. Therefore,"An insurgent who was previously a Muslim is now an apostate; and a non-Muslim is a non-believer standing as a bulwark against the spread of Islam, and Islam has granted the freedom of killing both of them." For the full text, see Bíró’s reports for 1993 ECOSOC: E/CN.4/48/1994, para. 78 and 1995 E/CN.4/1996/62, para. 97(a).
5 Delegation of the Sudan, "Attack on Islam!" Feb. 17, 1994 (a text distributed at the Commission on Human Rights); it specifically objected to Paragraphs 59, 60, 61, and 133(a).
8 Slavery is a cause of these wars as well as their consequence: an academic expert on Sudanese slavery recently concluded that "the current ethnic and regional conflicts stemmed, in part, from the country's servile past." See Ahmad Alawad Sikainga, Slaves into Workers: Emancipation and Labor in Colonial Sudan (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996), p. xi. For the nineteenth century background, see Rudolf C. Slatin, Fire and Sword in the Sudan: A Personal Narrative of Fighting and Serving the Dervishes, 1879-1895, trans. Francis Reginald Wingate (London and New York: Edward Arnold, 1896), pp. 470-72, 554-58.
9 A men's robe worn by Muslims.
10 On Mar. 13, 1996, Bíró informed the U.S. House of Representatives' Subcommittee
on International Operations and Human Rights of a reliable report he had recently received indicating that in Nov.-Dec. 1995, twenty displaced camps in southern Kordafan contained as many as 9,034 children who are "subjected to [an] Islamization process."

Related Topics: Slavery | David Littman | September 1996 MEO

RECEIVE THE LATEST BY EMAIL: SUBSCRIBE TO THE FREE MEF MAILING LIST

This text may be reposted or forwarded so long as it is presented as an integral whole with complete and accurate information provided about its author, date, place of publication, and original URL.
Human Rights Watch has long denounced slavery in Sudan in the context of the nineteen-year civil war. In this contemporary form of slavery, government-backed and armed militia of the Baggara tribes raid to capture children and women who are then held in conditions of slavery in western Sudan and elsewhere. They are forced to work for free in homes and in fields, punished when they refuse, and abused physically and sometimes sexually. Raids are directed mostly at the civilian Dinka population of the southern region of Bahr El Ghazal. The government arms and Slavery in Sudan began in ancient times, and has continued to the present day. During the Arab slave trade, many Black-Sudanese were purchased as slaves and brought for work in the Middle East.[1]. Southern Sudan.[3]. The Sudanese government has claimed that the slavery is the product of inter-tribal warfare, over which it had no control. Human Rights Watch, rejects this and states that the government is involved in backing and arming numerous militias in the country. It has also found the government has failed to enforce Sudanese laws against kidnapping, assault and forced labor. Police rarely help victims' families in locating their children. Slavery has been endemic in Sudan for thousands of years. Today the Sudanese slave trade persists as a complex network of buyers, sellers, and middlemen that operates most actively when times are favorable to the practice. As Jok Madut Jok argues, the present day is one such time, as the Sudanese civil war that resumed in 1983 rages on between the Arab north and the black south. Permitted and even encouraged by the Arab-dominated Khartoum government, the state military has captured countless women and children from the south and sold them into slavery in the north to become concubines, domestics.