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Notes on Sudan

KHARTOUM, Sudan

April 2000

By Marc Michaelson

Western media coverage of Sudan revolves around two themes — evil and hopelessness. The country is portrayed as an international pariah, unruly Islamic fundamentalists consorting with sordid characters like Osama Bin Laden, training terrorists, wreaking havoc and exporting destabilization. Internally, Sudan is wracked by intractable civil war and the region's other endemic woes: food insecurity, chronic poverty, violence and environmental degradation.

Since independence in 1956, Sudan's civil war has proceeded in on-again off-again fits-and-starts. The scale of human devastation is mind-boggling. More than two million Sudanese have died due to war-related causes; an estimated six million have been displaced. Under Lieutenant Colonel Omar Hassan al-Bashir, the government has imposed Shari'a law and declared jihad against the Christians and animists of the south. Repression is rife, the economy is in perpetual free-fall, and the civil war continues with no end in sight.

There is therefore partial truth to the nasty images depicted in the press. But that is only a piece of the picture. The Sudanese are a friendly, gentle people, considered the most hospitable in the region (some say, the world). The type of Islam traditionally practiced in Sudan is quite liberal and tolerant, far from fundamentalist. The government deserves much of the criticism it attracts, but it is hardly representative of Sudanese people or culture. As one friend put it: "The nicest people always get stuck with the worst governments."

I set out to discover this "other Sudan." I hoped to draw a personal picture to balance the negative imagery. I sought to avoid complicated discussions of the civil war. I planned to dodge the political and focus on the personal, friendlier side of Sudanese society. I failed in that mission. While I did taste Sudanese warmth and hospitality, political and economic gripes constantly burst to the surface. And despite my relatively benign research agenda, I couldn't avert confrontation with the notorious regime.

What follows is not a coherent or comprehensive essay on the state of Sudan. It is rather more a trip report — snapshots, observations and reflections from a two-week visit in April 2000.

THE FLIGHT

Just two years ago, no flights connected Addis Ababa to Khartoum. Ethiopia, Eritrea and Uganda were the "front-line states," undermining the Sudanese regime with the help of U.S. military aid. But when a border war broke out between Ethiopia and Eritrea in May 1998, both countries nestled closer to Khartoum and re-established diplomatic ties. As part of the renewed cooperation, direct flights between Ethiopia and Sudan resumed.

I choose Ethiopian Airlines rather than Sudan Airways (nicknamed *Inshallah*

Airlines). The flight from Addis to Khartoum is a quick one — a half-hour shot, and will continue on to Ndjamena, Chad. There is free-seating, the plane is packed and I end up next to a portly old woman wrapped in swathes of colorful cloth. A younger lady and her small baby are seated by the window and the baby starts screaming his lungs out as the cabin crew prepares for take-off.

Once the child falls asleep, the flight passes quickly. As the plane descends, several of my neighbors grab for their air sickness bags. One guy, sitting kitty-corner to me, makes all manner of obscene noises as he pukes, spits and phlegms into the bag. A red-and-white Arab wrap drapes his head and he leans forward in undisguised anguish. Sauntering up the aisle comes an attractive young Ethiopian flight attendant. She contorts her face and awkwardly ignores him as she passes by.

Having for the moment finished expelling bodily flu-

ids, the man's watery eyes dart about searching for a place to dispose of the half-full discomfort bag. Giving up, he puts it back into the pocket of the seat in front of him.

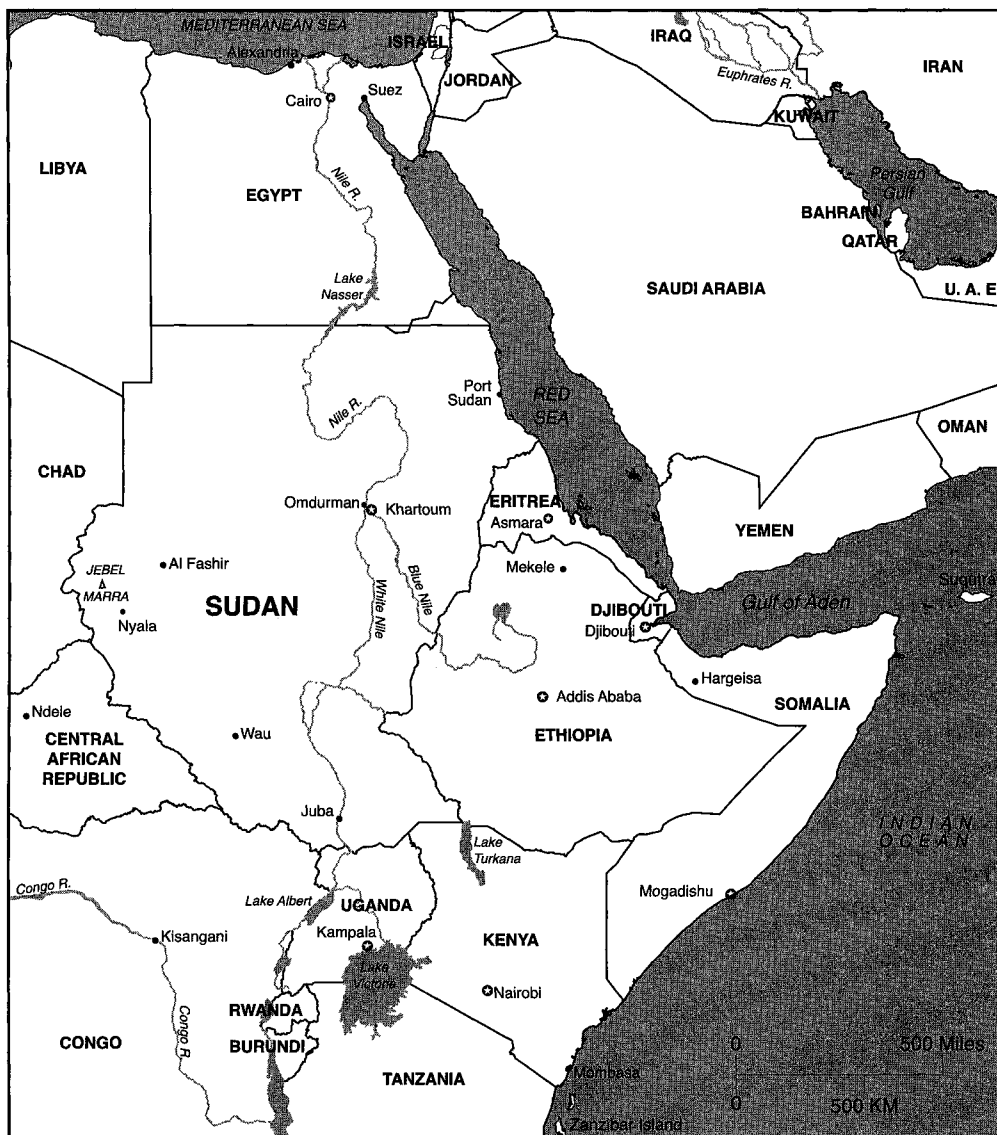
No sooner do the wheels touch down than another rotund woman, this one seated in front of me, gets up and runs for the bathroom.

THE HEAT

"The heat is so great it stifles the appetite and induces a feeling of trance-like detachment in which monotony dissolves into a natural timelessness, visions take on the appearance of reality...."

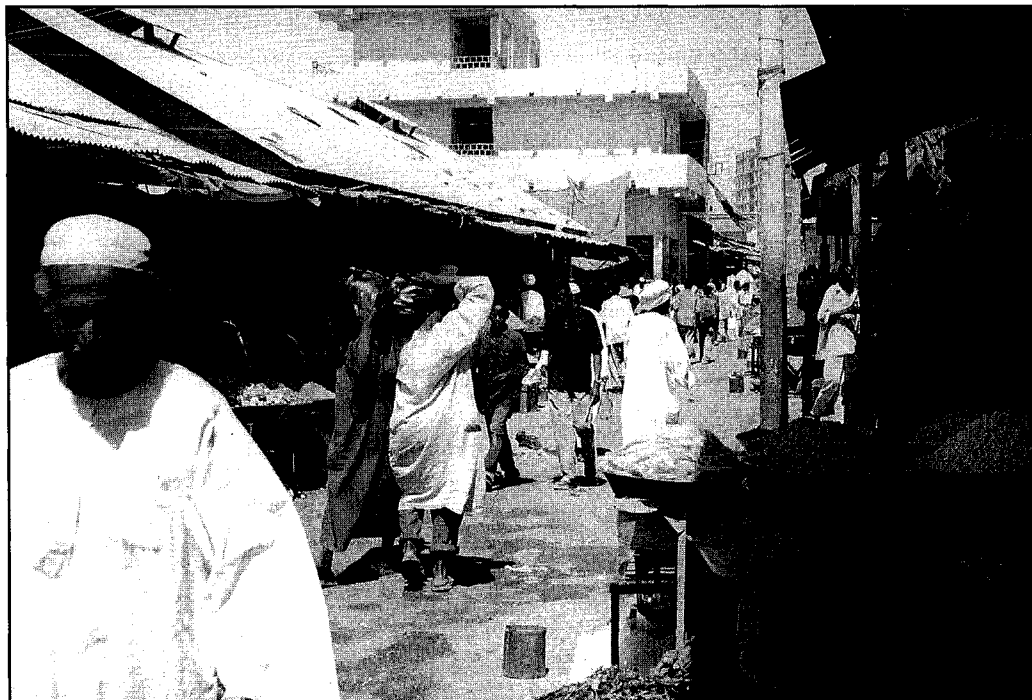
—Alan Moorehead¹

Exiting the plane is like walking into a dry oven. It's 45 degrees Celsius (about 120 degrees Fahrenheit) and the afternoon sun beats down relentlessly from a cloud-



¹ Alan Moorehead, *The White Nile*, New York: Harper and Brothers, 1960, p. 205.

*Omdurman
market scene*



less sky. A shiny new transit bus takes us to a deserted terminal. The crowd mills about, confused as to what to do next, until a policeman appears and hands out entry cards. Within 15 minutes I've cleared passport control, baggage claim and customs. The process is simple, friendly and efficient. Not the treatment I expected from an "evil empire."

My friend Rifaat meets me outside, we jump into a clunky old taxi and head for his house. I met Rifaat in January at the Save the Children office in Somaliland. He is a human rights lawyer and was in Hargeisa on a short-term consultancy, drafting legislation on child rights.

The scorching wind flowing through the window feels like a hair dryer blowing in my face. I struggle for breath. At the house I'm relieved to find an air conditioner in my room. Make no mistake — the airco doesn't make the room cool, but rather brings the temperature down into the more tolerable 80s.

Over the next few days I battle lethargy and sluggishness. This feels like one-part recovery from several sleepless nights in Addis and three-parts heat adjustment. I'm moving slowly, my energy level consistently teeters near empty. On day two I venture out for a stroll through the neighborhood and have to return drained and dehydrated after just a half-hour.

My Sudanese hosts are accustomed to life in the furnace. Lubna (my guide) plans our day without regard for the heat — a leisurely morning of meetings at the University and then a tour of Omdurman's historic outdoor market at 1 p.m. After a brief walk in the market, I

beg for a cold drink and again return home defeated. One day I keep score: after drinking 14 glasses of water, juice, tea and soft drinks I don't feel even the slightest inclination to urinate. The liquid leeches from my pores as quickly as I can drink it.

I'd been warned — summer begins in April, not the most pleasant time to visit Sudan. But I came anyway, so time to stop griping and get on with the trip.

A TALE OF TWO CITIES — TAWEDAT AND MANSHIR

Hajj-Yusuf is a curious settlement — part-suburb, part-displaced camp — some 25 kilometers east of Khartoum. Much of Khartoum's middle class lives in these distant suburbs where rents are cheaper and land more plentiful. One afternoon I join Carlo, a southerner from Juba, for a visit to the settlement for Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) of Tawadat (which means "Compensation") six kilometers off-road from Hajj-Yusuf.

We sit on bolted-down wooden benches in the back of a converted pickup truck for the bumpy ride out to Tawadat. It's 5 p.m., but the sun still boils the air and I feel asthmatic. The glare of the white desert sand forces me to squint through my sunglasses.

Halfway there, Carlo gives me instructions: "The security will probably stop us as we enter the camp. Just keep quiet; I'll tell them you are coming to pray with us." This is not the first time I'll be disguised or mistaken for a priest from a distant parish. I nod nervously.

We soon pass a pock-marked moonscape of lumpy

hills and valleys, the previous IDP settlement. Last year the government bulldozed it and forcibly relocated the residents a few kilometers further out.

Just off the sandy track we see a group of 30 young men sitting and watching a police commander demonstrate marching technique. He turns on a point and strides formally, back perfectly erect, in the opposite direction. Later I learn that the trainees are displaced youths recruited as a local police force to monitor the settlement. Many of these young men are Christians, but before training begins, the authorities force them to perform Muslim ablutions and pray to Allah. In Tawedat, I ask Wani Jur why they agree. "If they refuse to pray, no training will be given and outsiders [northerners] will police us. That would be much worse. Our sons are sacrificing their religion to protect us."

Wani Jur is an articulate man in his fifties. He is dark-skinned, gray-bearded and packs a cutting sense of humor. We rest on a bench under a shade structure with ten of his friends gathered around in a semi-circle. Many of them understand English but none speak with the same relaxed fluency.

Wani comes from Juba and was educated in both missionary and government schools. He attended the University of Khartoum and earned a degree in accounting/business administration in 1983. Wani worked in government jobs from 1983 to 1992, when rebel-government clashes forced him to flee with his wife and five children.

A bucket half-filled with thick, light-brown local beer

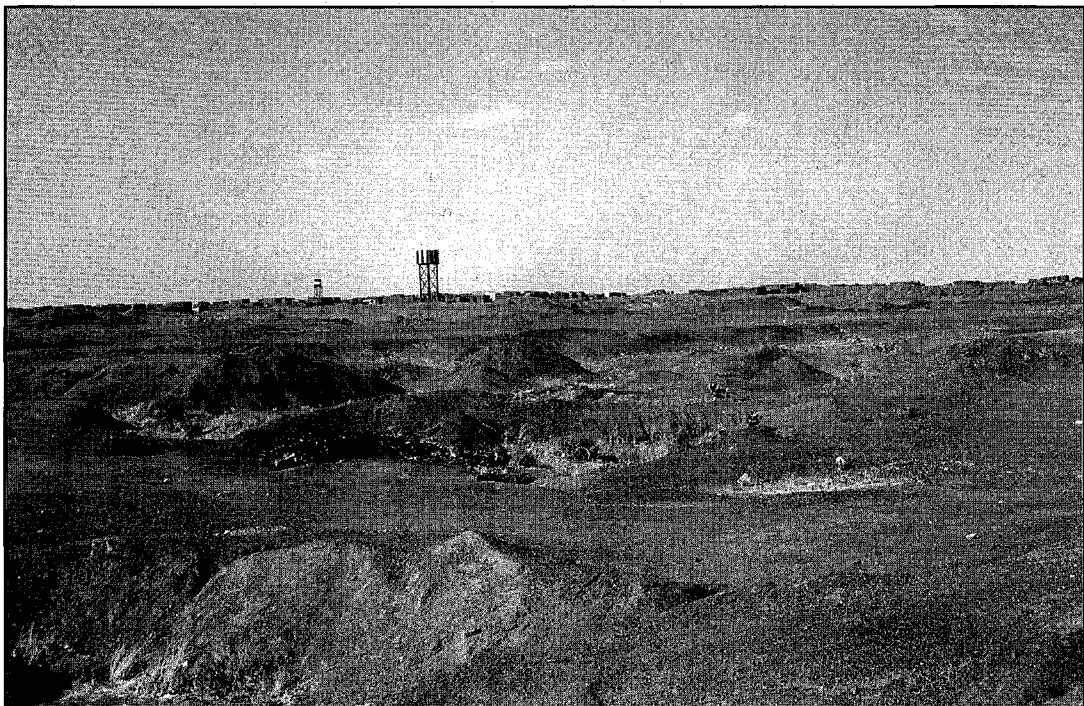
sits on the ground in front of us. One by one, each of the group gulps down a small gourd-full. Wani points to the beer: "You see, we have no work here, nothing to do. We sit around and drink this from morning until night..." Then he smiles devilishly, "You've heard about international aid; well, this is our local aid. Our women take pity on us and give us this beer to drink so we can forget about our situation."

Those living in the camps are neglected — the government ignores them and international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) provide but a smattering of services. Wani outlines the pressing need for water, health and schools in the settlement. Then he adds: "We are not just lacking development, but we are now facing danger. We are demanding rights and religious freedom."

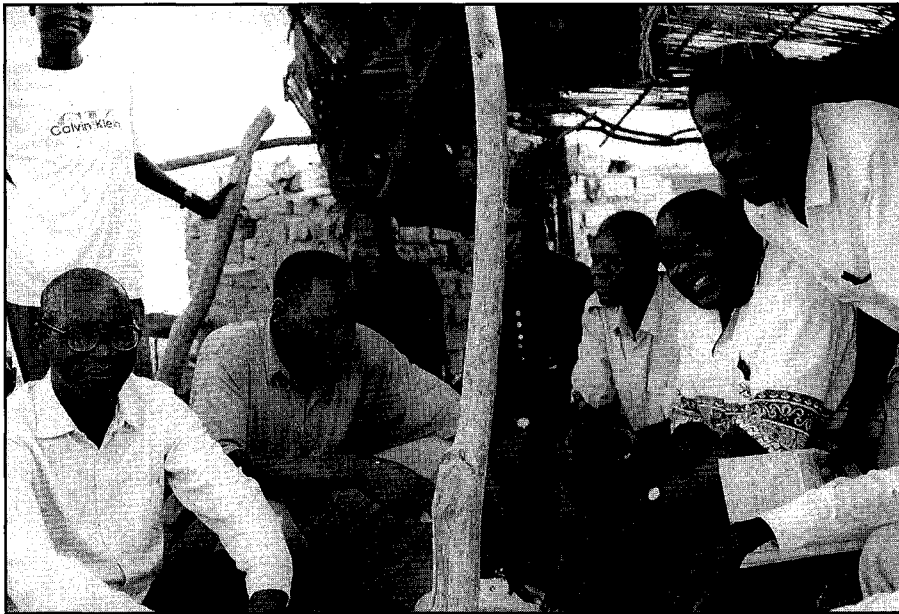
Even the most educated and skilled IDPs are prevented from working: "Most of us are farmers, some are intellectuals and could do office jobs. But we aren't allowed to get work. We are unwanted. We came from the wrong place and we don't have Islamic names. As soon as we fill out a [job] application, we are eliminated."

When I ask about their hopes for the future, the group turns silent; some smile awkwardly. I sense a blanket feeling of hopeless and resignation. The grim challenges of day-to-day survival render the distant future remote and irrelevant. After an awkward pause, one man breaks the silence: "We want to return to our homes in the south, but that demands peace."

And none of them see peace coming any time soon. Another man adds: "We have no power to influence those



Bull-dozed IDP settlement in front of Tawedat



Wani Jur (left), Carlo (second from right) and other displaced living in Tawedat

who are carrying out the war. We sympathize with the rebels, but we have no way out."

The target of their anger and frustration is not just the government but the broader population in the north. Wani says: "We cannot be together. Let the Arabs live on their land and us on ours." A third man echoes this separatist sentiment: "We are demoralized by northerners. We hope to have the country divided in two."

* * * *

Two days after visiting the displaced in Tawedat I find myself in the exclusive Khartoum neighborhood of Manshir, sitting in the lavish home of one of Sudan's most prominent religio-political leaders: Dr. Hassan A. al-Turabi. Dr. Turabi was ousted from his position as President of the Parliament in December 1999 when President al-Bashir decreed a state of emergency. By dissolving parliament, al-Bashir sought to contain Turabi's support base and consolidate his own power.

I've come to meet with Dr. Turabi's wife, Mrs. Wisal al-Mahdi, herself a prominent woman from Sudan's most famous politico-Islamist family.² We arrive slightly late for the 11 am appointment, our battered taxi having broken down for want of fuel. We are ushered into the cavernous first salon by uniformed security agents of the Muslim Brotherhood. My guide Lubna and I sink into overstuffed, ornately-carved, wooden chairs and await Mrs. Wisal. Several guards lounge in an outer room watching satel-

lite television. One ambles in and turns on the expensive air-conditioning system with a few casual clicks of a remote control. A maid serves sugary pineapple juice (generously chilled with large ice cubes) and we sit patiently.

Then comes a pleasant surprise, Dr. Turabi walks by, escorting "an old friend" (the Swiss Ambassador) out the door. On his return he pauses to tell us about the decorative black-and-gold, Arabic-script wall-hanging behind us. We are caught off guard, but thrilled that *the* Dr. Turabi has paused for a chat.

Dr. Turabi is a slight, elder gentleman with a flowing black-and-gray-peppered beard. He speaks eloquently in a confident but unaggressive tone. His voice is soft and calm — he hardly sounds the voice of radicalism, but he is among Sudan's most fiery fundamentalist politicians. His mellowed tone may be in part a result of the harsh political struggles of the last several months, but his demeanor seems reflective of a deeper, natural inner-peace. Others say Dr. Turabi has always been a mesmerizingly smooth operator, a personality all the more dangerous when combined with his radical politics.

Dr. Turabi glides effortlessly from topic to topic. We chat about the inappropriateness of the externally-imposed borders on the African continent and speculate on how life might have differed had Europeans left the continent alone. Then, the isolation, parochialism and linguistic ignorance of Americans that Turabi discovered during his first visit to the States during Ph.D. studies in France. On again to the potentially erosive effect of oil wealth on the Sudanese economy and culture — when wealth oozes from the earth, extracted by foreign companies with no domestic effort, people become lazy and lose their self-reliant spirit.

The discussion is scattered but enchanting and I'm more than a little disappointed when Mrs. Wisal pokes her head through the door, finally ready to meet us. Dr. Turabi wishes us well and slips out as swiftly as he had entered. Our discussion with Mrs. Wisal is less enthralling but she too is a charming woman. A leader in the Islamic Women's Movement since her youth, Mrs. Wisal

² Wisal's brother is Sadiq Al-Mahdi, elected Prime Minister of Sudan in 1986 and ousted by the National Islamic Front in a *coup d'états* in 1989. He currently lives in exile and is President of the Umma political party. Wisal and Sadiq are also the great-grandchildren of the Mahdi, the powerful leader who led an Islamic revolution in Sudan in the 1880s. In 1884, the Mahdi's forces ousted the British from Khartoum and killed their commander, General Charles George Gordon.

holds a law degree, but she's now reducing her public presence to attend more actively to her children and grandchildren.

We move from the outer salon to an equally well-appointed but smaller inner salon and chat for an hour. She insists we drink tea before leaving (she has hers with milk but no sugar) and another cold glass of pineapple. Then Lubna skillfully redirects the conversation to culture and custom, mentioning my interest in Sudanese traditions. Next thing I know, we are led into the private quarters of the house and are mulling over traditional marriage bracelets, smelling pungent home-made wedding perfume and carefully holding the Mahdi's (yes, the famous great-grandfather's) large clay coffee pot.

Mrs. Wisal has let her carefully-manicured public persona down and exposed trademark Sudanese hospitality. She is a warm, caring woman and treats us like dear personal guests. At this point I put my finger on a theme that has been lurking just out of reach — the divergence between actions and words. Throughout the week, I've been inundated by propaganda — some pro-government, some pro-rebel; pro-Christian or pro-Muslim; southern or northern — some of it sensible and accurate, but much of it loaded with prejudices, agendas and inaccuracies. Everyone in Sudan puts forward his or her party line — truth or nonsense.

But when the white noise quiets down the true colors of the Sudanese people reveal themselves. The divergences and flashpoints fade to the background and several commonalities emerge — pride, generosity, friendliness, incredible hospitality and warmth. Penetrate beyond officialdom, and the character of Sudan envelopes you like a warm embrace.

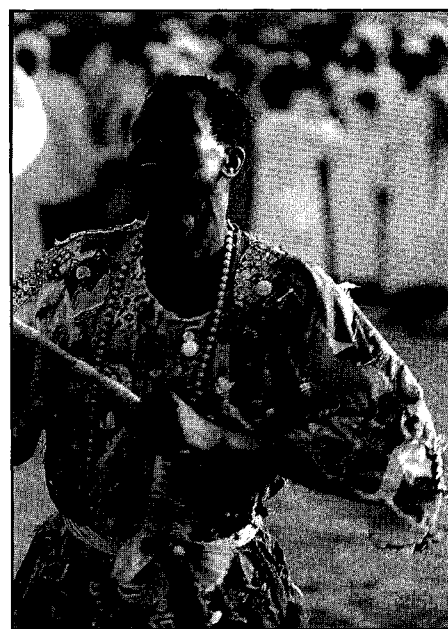
This is exactly what happened with Mrs. Wisal. I cared little for her Islamist propaganda and plain-wrong account of the condition of the southern displaced living on the outskirts of Khartoum. But that faded from mind when her charming personality kicked in. Talking of the political made us all a bit uncomfortable; when we left that for the less-loaded cultural, we all breathed sighs of relief.

Before we leave the Turabi estate, Mrs. Wisal invites us for lunch at a family garden in a green suburb of Khartoum next week. We depart happy and satisfied, and head down the dirt road to hail a taxi on the main thoroughfare. Two

doors down from the Turabi's, a construction team of black-skinned southerners, bodies glistening with sweat and dust, are building another expensive villa, undoubtedly for wealthy northerners. This snaps us out of our reverie; reality floods back in a rush. The visits of the last few days — to Wani Jur's shack and the Turabi villa — represent opposite ends of the Sudanese spectrum. The southerners on the construction site served as a potent reminder of how unjustly those two worlds are intertwined.

THE DUALITIES

Sudan lives in endless dualities. Nearly every feature of social existence entails two opposing worlds: north vs. south, Muslim vs. Christian, public vs. private, exterior vs. interior. The multiple realities of Sudan are inter-



*Whirling
dervishes in
Khartoum*



connected but incongruous, flip sides of the same conflicted coin.

Take Shari'a law. Strict Islamic law is entirely inappropriate for such a religion-diverse country as Sudan. Muslims, Christians and several varieties of animists share the nation. But Shari'a interferes even with the liberal customs and life styles of most Muslims in Sudan. That said, Muslims cannot publicly oppose any edict couched in Islamic terms. The government knows this well and uses it to justify legislation and manipulate public opinion.

By African or Middle Eastern standards, Sudanese women are liberated and well-educated. They hold high

a friend purchases *arekie* from local police officers (off-duty, of course). In Jebel Marra we drink local beer with Yusuf (a carpenter) and his friends. These twenty-somethings are all Muslims and say they drink up to three small buckets of the molasses-like brew each day.

Yusuf laments the intrusive treatment of the authorities: "Policemen come here and drink with the villagers. Sometimes when they leave, they walk around the block, come back in and arrest people for drinking alcohol." Bail is set at an exorbitant 300,000 Sudanese pounds (U.S.\$115). Yusuf and his friends express anger and frustration with the system, but feel powerless; they see no opportunities to press for change, no channels for protest or recourse.

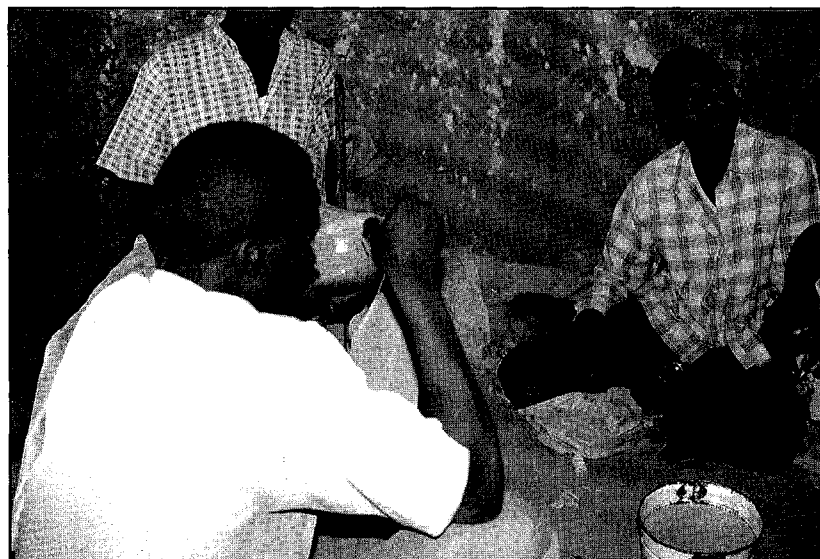
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Mrs. Wisal also illustrated the gap between actions and words. In our interview, she drew a picture of national harmony — everyone is connected to each other, they love one another, *but* they are forced apart by the evil Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA). Government supporters routinely compose fairy-tale realities with strained propaganda. Minutes later another Mrs. Wisal emerged — a kind, generous woman who displayed the type of hospitality she says exists (but doesn't) across the divides of this torn nation.

North-south relations are horribly troubled. The Sudan is massive (2.5 million square kilometers) and extremely diverse (with more than 200 ethno-linguistic groups). Out of this diversity flows Sudan's eminent richness and the source of its deepest sorrows. Many elder northerners wistfully remember attending school with their southern counterparts, building deep friendships, working alongside one another. The latest round of civil war (1989 to present) has all but eliminated positive north-south associations.

Southerners rarely talk of a harmonious past, so immersed are they in a tormented present. Southerners living in the Khartoum area are displaced, refugees in their own country. Every day they face harsh exigencies of survival. They are outcasts — discriminated against, poorly cared for, denied basic freedoms and prevented from earning their own livelihoods. No wonder they are vigorously distrustful of northerners.

Sudan is haunted by both the glorified selective memory of northerners and the emotional over-vilification of southerners. Sour relations have become so firmly entrenched that both groups are blind to the fact that they have a common foe — the govern-



Yusuf and friends drinking local beer in Jebel Marra

offices (lawyers, judges, doctors, engineers, accountants) and participate actively in the nation's social life. Now they are being urged to stay at home, and are being discriminated away from the high professions they once held. Their traditional dress (colorful, flowing wraps called *tobes*) is being criticized by conservative forces who prefer the rigid modesty of veils and black gowns. Women who wear trousers are subject to arrest and flogging (20 lashes). Adultery is punishable by death.

* * * *

As in many Muslim countries, alcohol is forbidden. But the Sudanese love to drink. *Arekie*, a home-made fire-water distilled from sugar or dates, is consumed discreetly in homes all around Khartoum. They hide it, but can't be prevented from drinking it. Some northerners even visit the displaced camps on the fringe of Khartoum where southern women brew local beer. The public image and ideal of sobriety fails to jibe with private cultural practices.

Alcohol is equally popular in the provinces. In Nyala,

ment. They also fail to see that the best route forward (and the most promising way of dispensing with the government) is not to fight, but to cooperate.

The personalization of the civil war and the skillful drawing of religious and geographical lines by the al-Bashir regime pits groups against each other, fractionalizing the country. Only by transcending this manufactured hatred and mistrust can Sudan move forward. It may be too early to reach agreement on what Sudan's political landscape *should* look like when this is all over. But most Sudanese (north and south) agree on the fundamentals: the need for democracy, tolerance of diversity, separation of religion and state. The details could certainly be worked out if the more destructive actors — government and SPLA — were removed from the scene.

THE INTERNATIONAL CONTEXT

If the disastrous Ethiopian-Eritrean border war can be said to have winners, Sudan is certainly one. Opportunistic regional politics have shifted alliances and overshadowed Sudan's brutish reputation.

Throughout the 1990s, the primary objective of U.S. foreign policy in the Horn of Africa was the isolation of Sudan. By supporting the SPLA in its quest to oust al-Bashir's government, the U.S. sought to stem the tide of Islamic fundamentalism.

Now that foreign policy lay in tatters. All three front-line states (Ethiopia, Eritrea, Uganda) are consumed with conflicts of their own and have reconciled with Khartoum. After the pharmaceutical-factory bombing debacle in Khartoum (officially a response to the Embassy bombings in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam), the U.S. has also quietly begun exploring closer relations with Sudan.

U.S. support for southern rebels has been counterproductive, a hindrance to peace. The Sudanese government propagandizes U.S. assistance to the SPLA, evidence that America opposes Islam around the world. By taking sides, the U.S. is inadvertently prolonging the war. And the SPLA is no valiant liberation force. It is brutal, predatory and oppressive just like the regime it is fighting in the north. Horrific human rights violations have been documented on both sides.

Even if the SPLA were to win the war (a remote possibility), what next? The organization has shown no inclination toward democratic governance, the provision of social services or development. It has extracted from and terrorized its subjects. An SPLA government would not likely prove substantially better than the current government.

A more productive engagement would nurture forces of peace and democracy throughout the entire country.

The U.S. should encourage reform on both sides, and support civic education. A durable, progressive political transition in Sudan is much more likely to emerge from forces within civil society than by a nasty clique of gun-toting insurgents.

The peace process itself has once again stalled. The weak, sub-regional IGAD (Inter-Governmental Authority on Development) succeeded in convincing the government and SPLA to sign a Declaration of Principles, but negotiations on implementation have stalemated. The situation on the ground has become further complicated since the signing — southern rebels have split into a multitude of factions and a coalition National Democratic Alliance (NDA) has brought several northern and southern rebel groups under one umbrella.

Those with whom I spoke expressed little-to-no confidence in the peace process. There is neither faith that an agreement will be reached, nor (in the unlikely event that it were), that it would be implemented. Past agreements have always unraveled during implementation. The Sudanese people are tired of intransigent, predatory politics and failed promises.

Here the negative experiences of Somalia may be instructive. A series of international peace conferences have legitimized southern Somali warlords, treating them like diplomats rather than the thugs they are. These warlords have signed several agreements, but never implemented a single one. They are the beneficiaries of continued conflict — for them war represents a source of profit and a mechanism for maintaining power. Just because the warlords are the problem doesn't mean they are the solution.

Similar dynamics seem to be at work in Sudan. Relying solely on war-constituencies to make peace is naive and illogical. Unfortunately, the world remains stuck in the anachronistic Westphalian system and its track-one diplomatic approach to peacemaking. The focus is on governments and (in their absence) rebel groups. Perhaps the inclusion of civil society actors — elders, women's leaders, businesspeople, intellectuals — could catalyze peace processes in Sudan and elsewhere in the region. In today's complex, intractable civil wars, broader constituencies are needed to push the peace agenda forward, to act as a check on self-serving, repressive authorities, and to voice common people's war fatigue and peace aspirations. Peace is far too important to be left to politicians, especially the lousy leaders on this continent.

THE SECURITY APPARATUS

In Khartoum, I arrange meetings and move about unhindered and unharassed. If security agents are following me, they do so with commendable stealth. More likely, I slip through the cracks. The Sudanese government has bigger fish to fry than an inquisitive ICWA fel-

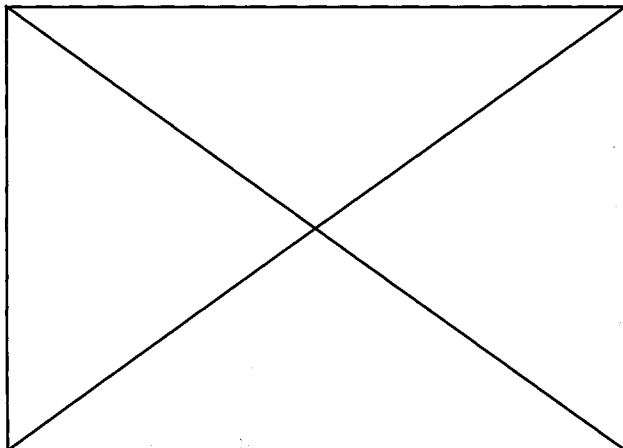
low bopping around town and talking with anyone who will give him the time.

Not so in Nyala, the capital of South Darfur Province. Just minutes after our plane lands, I find myself registering with the police, trying to explain my mission to a morose security agent. My travel authorization letter from the Immigration Department in Khartoum holds little weight out here. The open-ended, general nature of my research sounds dubious. Being American certainly doesn't help. Sudanese civilians love Americans, but Sudanese government officials do not. America is a thorn in the Sudanese government's side. What good could come from an infidel researcher nosing around town?

After claiming our luggage, Rifaat and I are taken by a tall, thin security agent down to headquarters. Actually, he doesn't take us, we take him. We've arranged a ride into town with Oxfam. The security guy has no transport, so he squeezes in with us, slightly smug in anticipation of a promotion for having bagged a live, trouble-making American.

Rifaat has had plenty of experience with security operatives. He's been imprisoned three times, interrogated and tortured. He views security with disdain. In the spartan outer office of the security compound, Rifaat immediately begins quarreling with the agents, scolding them for their inhospitable welcome of a foreign guest. Insulted, one agent summons Rifaat into the inner sanctum. After nearly an hour, Rifaat emerges in a foul mood and delivers my instructions in uncharacteristic monotone: "You are not to meet anyone and not to take any photos in town. Tomorrow at 8 am you must return here to meet the security supervisor."

That first afternoon turns out to be our best in Nyala. We walk around the market, buy colorful baskets and rent bicycles for a jaunt through town. Next morning we



CENSORED! Sudanese security agents prevented me from taking photos in Nyala

report to the security office and receive my final restrictions: no photos, no meetings with "southerners" or "displaced" people, no talking about "negative" or "sensitive" topics.

Such censorship poses an impassable roadblock. In Khartoum, I made a concerted effort to steer clear of politics. Still, nearly every interview digressed into a passionate purging of complaints — how hard life is, why the government is so bad, how and why the civil war continues. Efforts to side-step controversy proved to be in vain; my respondents had pressing issues on their mind and wanted to voice them.

I assume Nyala would be similar. And if security is this concerned, they'll undoubtedly be keeping a close eye on me. Worried that my interviewees would later be interrogated and possibly endangered, I decide to reject security's restrictive terms and leave town. Rifaat and I quickly revise our itinerary — we will head for the mountains of Jebel Marra this very day.

After lengthy negotiations for a Landcruiser, we finally depart Nyala at 5 p.m. Just five kilometers outside town we stop at a way-station of bloated bureaucracy. A security agent peruses my documents and sends us back to Nyala to get my permission note from the security supervisor officially stamped. Back in town, the supervisor sends us to make a photocopy of the document before he will stamp it. When we return, we find he doesn't even possess a stamp, so he just writes another permission note to validate the first. The process would be comical if it weren't so grating.

Back to the roadblock. It's now approaching 6 p.m. and we must rush if we hope to arrive in Jebel Marra before dark. The security agent spends another ten minutes scanning my passport (he's holding it upside down, which can't help). Next we walk over to a team of Immigration officers. They tell me I should again return to Nyala to register with immigration. But these guys are friendly, and in a rare moment of lenience they let us pass, instructing me to register immediately upon return. Next it's on to the Transportation Police who check our driver's documents (license, permission paper). As we walk back to the car, I ask Rifaat if we should show our permission papers to the adolescent girls selling felafel under the tree.

Finally we are off to Jebel Marra. What else could possibly go wrong? Thirty-five kilometers down the road we limp off the road with a flat tire. At every minor village along the way the driver pulls over near a big blue-and-yellow "P" sign. This doesn't stand for Parking, but rather for the Transportation Police that must review permission documents repeatedly en route. The roads and villages of Sudan are carefully micro-managed by a neurotic government bureaucracy. It's difficult to understand the purpose of all this, but it seems an attempt at



Fixing the inevitable flat tire en route to Jebel Marra

total control of everything and everybody. We arrive in Jebel Marra well after dark.

In Jebel Marra we encounter no further bureaucratic obstacles. We manage to leave the stresses behind and pass a few relaxing days touring mountains, waterfalls, streams and hiking paths. This mountain oasis looks as if plucked from the sleepy backroads of New England. It feels nothing like northern Sudan, an arid desert landscape largely devoid of vegetation. Central and southern Sudan, however, boast similarly lush topographies.

Upon returning to Nyala, we repeat the entire rig-

marole at the checkpoint outside town. An immigration officer accompanies us to town and registers me for 14,000 Sudanese pounds (\$6): "Sorry, no receipts today, you'll have to come back tomorrow." Then, before checking in to the hotel, we report to security for the umpteenth time.

I'm thoroughly worn out, beaten down by the system. Rifaat and others had earlier explained this method of control. The government makes you jump through hoops until you just don't care anymore. And I had it relatively easy. Many Sudanese are arrested, brought to the security office and forced to sit and wait all day long.

At 4 p.m., they are sent home and instructed to report first thing next morning. This can go on for weeks at a time without charges filed or a word of questioning. Such power-plays are simple intimidation (punishment by boredom). Others have it much worse still: interrogation, torture, imprisonment or disappearance.

I'm eager to return to Khartoum, but naturally our flight is cancelled and we are forced to stay an extra day. This is the nightmare trip that never seems to end. We buy a deck of cards and I teach Rifaat how to play gin rummy and poker. Our hotel room contains a flask of *arekie* (alcohol), and I suggest to Rifaat that if we want to ensure death by



The author amid the greenery in Jebel Marra

stoning we should also solicit a couple of prostitutes. The joke is in bad taste, but my cheeky sense of humor is one coping mechanism the security spooks can't take away.

The next day we finally leave. The two-hour flight takes eight hours due to delays, but I'm numb, I could hardly care less. When we arrive in Khartoum and find our luggage has been lost, I shrug my shoulders. It's a fitting end to the journey.

A PLACE OF HOPE

PLACE stands for the People's Legal Aid Center, an organization started by Rifaat and several other lawyers. Just two years old, PLACE provides free legal services to displaced people who otherwise have no legal protection.

PLACE's legal work simultaneously cites and challenges current Sudanese law. PLACE believes Shari'a law to be unjust and inappropriate for governing non-Muslims. John Yugu, PLACE's soft-spoken chairman from



John Yugu of PLACE

Nimule (near the Ugandan border) says: "We have a different culture in the south. For important events — the arrival of a guest, a marriage or a death, alcohol is served. The government's Public Order Laws prohibit drinking of alcohol. The culture of the south doesn't fit the law of the north."

Many IDPs have been imprisoned for violating laws they simply don't know or can not uphold. For example, southerners are held to northern standards of dress, which differ from their own traditions. Also, many marriages in the south are arranged traditionally, without legal documents. Internally displaced couples living near Khartoum are often required to present marriage documents or risk charges of fornication or adultery.

John briefly outlines a few current cases. The first involves a woman named Faisah Hassen Musa. She fled her home in the war-torn Nuba Mountains and came to

Khartoum where she earned a living selling tea. Faisah began a consensual relationship and later gave birth to a baby boy. The father was taking care of her and the baby, but an outraged neighbor reported her to the police. Both were convicted of adultery and sentenced to death by stoning. PLACE took the case in the appeal period and citing procedural violations was able to get the sentence reduced to 80 lashes and three months in prison. The couple will be released in May 2000 and plan to marry soon after.

Another case involves eight-year-old Norma Joseph. Norma was sent to Omdurman on an errand. She lost her way and was later picked up by a policeman in Soba. He interrogated her and allegedly raped her. The girl was unconscious, so the policeman took her to the hospital, claiming he found her sick with malaria. When she was examined, medical attendants discovered she had been raped.

The Norma Joseph case is pending, but has already caused quite a stir. While Rifaat and I explored the hills of Jebel Marra, John was taken into custody. Security picked him up in the middle of the night on Thursday, April 20th. They questioned him about the case: Why did he publicize it on the internet? Why does he want to make Sudan look bad in the eyes of the world? The security accused him of being a "fifth-column" Khartoum-based supporter of the SPLA. This is the standard charge levied against "troublemaking" southerners.

John refuted the accusations. He did not publicize the case (and doesn't know who did), and he's not a member of the SPLA. These questions were launched at him over and over, as if the truth could be altered through repetition. Later that day, John was moved to another facility. He was not tortured, but the interrogation was in-your-face aggressive. Someone would come in, rifle a few questions, and leave. A few minutes later the process would be repeated. Again and again and again for three days.

The following week, three other PLACE staff members were questioned, and later Rifaat was summoned. Norma, her father and the nurse who discovered the rape have been required to report to police headquarters every day for more than a month. John has been called in a few times each week. And this is likely just the beginning. The harassment will continue and intensify if the government considers this case (and PLACE generally) a hazard. Rifaat intends to prosecute Norma's case aggressively and he has submitted a harassment complaint to the Sudanese Bar Association.

More threatening than PLACE's specific legal challenges is its organizational composition. The civil war is carefully maintained through both subtle and forced mechanisms of separation. PLACE is staffed by a diverse cross-section of society — northerners and southerners, Muslims and Christians and a broad range of ethnic groups. It is a model of cooperation, showing the



Rifaat

Sudanese people and the world that 'we are one, we can all get along, we can all work and live together peacefully.' Such collaboration across the rifts of Sudan's multi-layered conflicts are rare.

PLACE's mascot is a turtle, reflecting the agency's long-term vision and expectation that transformation of Sudanese society will come slowly. PLACE's activists seem prepared to make major sacrifices along the way; they know they must be diligent and persistent. Many indicate willingness to go to jail, to be tortured, and even killed in their non-violent struggle. They will not bow down to government injustice. They will speak the truth and suffer whatever consequences may come.

This is not just big talk. It is real commitment. When we chat about starting a family, Rifaat says he doesn't plan to have children: "I wouldn't want them to worry about a father in prison, or leave them alone if something worse happens." Carlo expresses similar resolve: "If I get killed, someone will come after me. I am expendable." The members of PLACE have discussed contin-

gency plans. They've set aside money to care for their families should they be imprisoned, or worse. They are also establishing international contacts to pressure the government and protect them from retribution.

This is serious business, and even day-to-day operations are not easy. Internal organizational dynamics are sometimes tense as PLACE activists confront their own personal ghosts. Prejudices inculcated from childhood do not die easy, nor does deep-seated mistrust. But it is to the credit of PLACE's members that they try to talk through their problems. They are confronting their prejudices and in the process feelings are sometimes hurt, egos bruised. A few lawyers have left the group, but most have persevered.

PLACE's members know they are a microcosm of their homeland. They are building a model for a future peaceful Sudan. Their struggles show just how difficult it will be to chop down the barriers dividing their society. But their hope is that slowly but surely the turtle gets where it is going. □

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