

November 7, 1990

SUDAN

NATIONWIDE FAMINE

Culpable Negligence in the Management of Food Security, War, and the Use of Food as a Political Weapon

Many Sudanese are suffering famine today. Sudan is on the brink of a nationwide famine.

The Sudan government must bear primary responsibility for creating the situation in which the country is unable to feed itself, and in which the mechanisms for responding to the crisis are critically weakened. It has exported almost the entire grain reserve of the country, largely to obtain money to support the war effort, and it has undermined the government institutions and private organizations which had a specialist ability to prevent and ameliorate famine. The government has refused to declare a famine. Its priority is to ensure stability in the urban areas, by directing resources there, and removing displaced people living in shanty-towns.

The western aid donors, including governments and UN agencies, must also bear responsibility, for failing to respond to acute food needs in the past year, and for withholding a response to the current crisis for political reasons. The donors have attached stiff conditions to the delivery of relief: some of these are warranted and necessary, such as the requirement that relief reach the needy people. Other conditions are in reality propaganda and political posturing.

While Africa Watch has consistently campaigned for a change in government policies that lead to abuses of human rights, the action of withholding emergency famine relief in order to obtain such changes in government policy is both morally reprehensible and practically ineffective. The Sudanese government must give priority to attempts to relieve the enormous suffering of all its citizens, and the donors must give aid without delay.

There are in fact three famines in Sudan:

(1) Famine in the central region and the main towns. The main victims are wage earners and those without regular employment (including the displaced) who rely on buying food from the market, food they can no longer afford. According to calculations of the national food balance, there will be no overall nationwide scarcity until early 1991. Thus there is no shortage now. However, the price of food has already risen way beyond the reach of the poor. The poor are hungry now, the famine is today.

(2) Famine in the northern peripheries (Kordofan, Darfur and the Red Sea Province).

The main victims are smallholder farmers and herders stricken by two successive years drought, whose situation is rendered more severe by the economic crisis and growing lack of physical security, due to civil war and the proliferation of modern firearms. While regional governments have detailed their needs for assistance, central government has denied the accuracy of their reports.

(3) Famine in the South. In areas of the southern countryside controlled by the rebel Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA), many people are facing food shortages. The main victims are those with failed crops and few animals, returning migrants, and those directly affected by war. Meanwhile, there is also the prospect of famine in the besieged southern towns. Civilians in these towns are unable to leave and are reliant on uncertain supplies of relief food.

Twice in the past decade there have been severe famines in Sudan. The drought-famine of 1983-5 struck principally the western regions of Kordofan and Darfur and the north-eastern Red Sea Province. It approximated to a "typical" African famine in that the main victims were small farmers and herders in remote dryland areas. This famine is estimated to have killed about 250,000 people. The war-famine of 1986-9 struck the south, following war strategies by the army, pro-government militias and the SPLA, which deprived many civilians of their livelihoods and their access to food. This famine probably killed about 250,000. Both of these famines caught the aid donors by surprise, despite good evidence that they had been developing over the preceding years. The current famine threatens to be more extensive than either, and to kill Sudanese citizens in the hundreds of thousands, and once again the response will be too late to prevent needless tragedy.

Some of the causes of the current famine are depressingly familiar. Others are depressingly new.

The root causes are the impoverishment of Sudan over the last decade due to inappropriate economic policies, war and ecological degradation. While drought is the most obvious immediate cause of the famine, the weather is not the sole or even principal culprit. Droughts are common in Sudan, and food production is extremely variable.* For these reasons the government usually plans to hold a large strategic grain reserve. A year ago there was up to one million tones of grain in reserve, equivalent to four months' national consumption. The famine follows a year in which that reserve was exported to obtain hard currency, in part to pay for the war.** Much of the blame for the food crisis can therefore be laid at the door of gross mismanagement of national food policy, amounting to criminal negligence. Mismanagement of the economy in general, and antagonization of Sudan's major donors by public support for the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, have contributed to a crisis of confidence in the Sudanese Pound (LS). This crisis has led to hyperinflation and a rush to buy essential commodities.

* Sudanese national food production is among the most variable in the world for a country of such size.

** The budget announced in June allocated LS4.3 billion (officially US\$955 million, unofficially US\$200 million) to defence spending, not including military assistance from abroad (Libya and Iraq), the budget for the security forces, and the indirect costs of the war. (*Africa Economic Digest*, 16 July 1990.)

War and related human rights abuses have also played a role in the genesis of this crisis. War directly creates famine and the legacy of war leaves rural people vulnerable to famine even in the face of relatively mild climatic adversities that they would otherwise have been able to withstand.* In addition, the famine is likely to add another dangerous twist to the cycle of violence in rural Sudan, and this violence will in turn seriously aggravate the famine.

The lack of democratic institutions and a free press has also meant the absence of checks on the government, preventing the development without recognition or response. The strict censorship prevailing in Sudan today** and the banning of political parties and trade unions has undoubtedly contributed to the famine.

Class Famine in the Central Region and the Cities

"Starvation is the characteristic of some people not *having* enough food to eat. It is not the characteristic of their not *being* enough food to eat."***

There is probably enough food in Sudan to feed the entire population for eight months or more. However, during the last three months, the price of sorghum, the staple grain, has risen approximately fivefold. Most people simply cannot afford to buy it. Rich people may hold enough stocks to feed them for a year or longer, but this is of little solace to the poor who are faced with an acute inability to buy the food they need to survive. *The famine is occurring now.*

Most famines in Sudan over the past century have been "typical" African famines, in that the main victims have been impoverished rural people living in remote and dry areas. The mass of people in the more prosperous central areas of the country and in the cities have not suffered a severe famine since the nineteenth century****, though many suffered hardship during 1984-5. There is, however, a very large category of people in Khartoum, the Gezira, Blue and White Niles, Gedaref and Port Sudan who are extremely vulnerable to famine. A food security study in 1988 found that the highest concentration of "food insecure" people (1.32 million) was in and around the national capital, with very large numbers of "poor and vulnerable" in the adjoining Gezira Province.* A survey of child malnutrition in the twelve provinces of northern Sudan in 1986-7 found the second

* See Africa Watch, *Denying "The Honor of Living", Sudan: A Human Rights Disaster* (1990), chapter 4.

** See *News from Africa Watch*, "Sudan: Suppression of Information," (30 August 1990), and Article 19, *Starving in Silence: A Report on Famine and Censorship* (1990).

*** Amartya Sen, *Poverty and Famines: An Essay on Entitlement and Deprivation*, (Oxford, 1981), p. 1.

**** The famine of 1888-92, known as *Sanat Sita* ("Year Six" after the Islamic year 1306) was the last in which urban people suffered severely. High food prices caused great hardship in 1914 and 1919, causing the colonial government to introduce a set of Famine Regulations, which served to prevent such scarcities in the following years.

* S. Maxwell, "Food Insecurity in North Sudan," (Institute of Development Studies, Sussex, Discussion Paper No 262, June 1989), Appendix 4.

highest rate of malnutrition (16.1%) in Khartoum province.^{**} Since that date a further one million migrants have come to Khartoum, and the nutritional situation has become even more precarious. Recent surveys indicate a sharp increase in child malnutrition.

The vulnerable people include agricultural wage laborers, casual workers, low-level government employees, domestic servants, petty traders, female-headed households, and the displaced. These people do not grow their own food and do not own assets such as animals. The existence of a large class of such people sets Sudan apart from most other sub-Saharan African countries. The "class famine" that is now affecting these people is more characteristic of south Asia (e.g. Bangladesh) than of sub-Saharan Africa. This class of people buys its food on the market: if the price of food goes up on Sunday, they go hungry on Monday.

Food Prices

The price of food has risen sharply in recent months. The rise has been nationwide. In Gedaref, center of the largest grain producing region, the price was LS80 per sack of 90 kilograms in mid-1989. It has risen fast during 1990:

Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sept	Oct
168	217	229	242	280	330	429	750	1300	1350

Prices are higher in most other parts of the country. In Khartoum a sack of sorghum costs LS1800-2300 or more, and often there is none available in the market at all.

The government started rationing sorghum in September. Rationing is controlled by Popular Committees based in each neighborhood. All those with a ration card are entitled to buy sorghum at the controlled price (which varies from place to place and month to month, and is usually about LS 400 per sack), and 22 other commodities, notably sugar. In practice, very little grain - usually about half of what is needed - is available at these prices, and it is poor quality. In addition, many people do not hold ration cards, such as those living in unplanned settlements (mostly displaced people) and migrant laborers.

Most of the people vulnerable to famine work for wages. Wage rates have not risen and in some cases have even fallen. A farm laborer earns about LS20 per day, enough to buy about 1.4 kilograms of sorghum at LS1300 per sack - equivalent to an absolute minimum ration for four people, with no provision for any expenditure on other items of food, let alone transport, clothing, accommodation and medicines. As the harvest is so poor, work is short. The government has also

^{**} Sudan Emergency and Recovery Information and Surveillance System report 1987, cited in S. Maxwell, *op cit*, pp. 26-9.

recently dismissed 50,000 civil servants, without pension rights. As each salaried employee supports an extended family, this means that several hundred thousand people in urban areas have been deprived of their main source of income.

The Food Balance

The two main sources of supply of market food have been large mechanized agricultural schemes in Gedaref, and food aid bought from western donors (mainly the USA) on concessionary terms. Both these sources have been threatened recently. Fear of the two sources failing to provide sufficient food has led richer people to attempt to buy food for their own reserve stocks, thus driving up the price.

Sudan consumes about three million tones of food grains each year. In 1988 total production was a record 5.1 million tones, and there was 280,000 tones already in stock. In 1989 the harvest was a poor 2.1 million tones, below consumption needs but not as low as the nadir of 1.16 million tones marked in 1984. Last year's deficit was met by importing 318,000 tones of grain (principally wheat, which is the favored food in urban areas, bought on concessionary terms from western donors) and by drawing down reserves.

The size of this year's deficit is not known, but it will be larger. Three different estimates produced by the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the UN in July lie in the range of 300,000 to one million tones. Although no final assessments of the harvest have been made, the more pessimistic of those estimates appears to be the more accurate.

Drought in the Mechanized Production Areas

1990 has seen severe drought in the rainfed mechanized farming areas of eastern Sudan, in which the majority of the country's sorghum is grown. The rains started late and suffered a prolonged gap in August. Satellite imagery from the FAO indicates that vegetative growth in these areas was substantially below normal at the end of September (the end of the growing season). By mid-October Gedaref had received only 302 mm of rain, well below the average of 577 mm. Only the farms near ed Damazin on the Blue Nile appear to have escaped the drought.

Government Policies

Government rhetoric has stressed "food security". In practice, however, this has been confined to a policy of attempted self-reliance, particularly in sugar and wheat (two of Sudan's most expensive imports), under the slogan "we eat what we grow". The areas planted with both these crops have been increased. This is however almost the only improvement. The National Economic Salvation Programme for 1990-93, published in June, made no mention of food security. It included drastic measures for privatizing government-run corporations, but no provisions for helping the poor with a "safety net".

Mismanagement of the Strategic Reserve

A single year's failure of this magnitude should not of itself be a problem. In recent decades the Agricultural Bank of Sudan (ABS) has had the task of buying government stocks of grain and maintaining a strategic grain reserve. After the excellent harvest of 1988, grain stocks reached 1.59 million tones, a record level and equivalent to nearly six months' consumption for the entire population of Sudan.

In early 1990 food stocks in Sudan remained healthy. The exact level of ABS stocks is confidential but was estimated at 200,000 tones. The ABS had export contracts for half of this, but was deferring them until after the 1990 harvest, so that the grain could be retained in Sudan if it was needed. Western donors concurred with the ABS in estimating that the minimum strategic stock required was 100,000 tones. 800,000 tones was estimated to be held privately, mostly by traders and Islamic banks.* Up to one half of these reserves were drawn down to meet the deficit for the 1989/90 season.

Holding a strategic grain reserve has been Sudanese government policy for decades. Even in 1984 the government held stocks of 90,000 tones. However, contrary to ABS policy and common sense risk avoidance, the government decided to export the entire reserve. ABS objections were overruled and from April the ABS played no part in managing the country's food policy.** The incoming Minister of Finance, Abdel Rahim Hamdi (previously head of the Baraka Islamic Bank in London and a founder member of the Faisal Islamic Bank in Khartoum), made a radical shift in policy. The Baraka and Faisal Islamic Banks were given a monopoly on marketing Sudan's agricultural produce (both domestically and internationally), and a monopoly on importing agricultural inputs such as tractors and fertilizers. The ABS strategic reserve was thus sold abroad by the two Islamic Banks.***

The precise quantity of grain exported during the first half of 1990 is not known for certain. The FAO conservatively estimated 300,000 tones. The Indian Ocean Newsletter**** doubled that estimate. Much was certainly sold to Iraq (before the invasion of Kuwait) and to Saudi Arabia, for use as animal feed. Since August, no more export contracts have been signed, but exports of grain on contracts already agreed continued during September. In March, the main ABS grain silo in Gedaref was full to capacity with 100,000 tones. Now it contains only 9,500 tones, much of it unfit

* Islamic banks follow the Koranic prohibition against charging interest. Instead, they earn money through "commissions" and profit-sharing. Islamic banks enjoy many economic privileges in Sudan such as tax exemptions. Most are closely connected to the fundamentalist Moslem Brotherhood.

** In September Mohamed Adam Jellabi, the Director of the ABS, was transferred. His successor, Badr el Din Taha, is a prominent Moslem Brother, well-known for having been "wired in" to a local mosque.

*** The Faisal Islamic Bank was the subject of an investigation after the famine of 1984-5 for allegedly hoarding large quantities of grain in order to benefit when the price rose, which is contrary to the commercial code. All charges were dropped at the instigation of the Attorney General, Hassan al Turabi (leader of the National Islamic Front) in 1988.

**** 15 September 1990.

for human consumption. Almost none of the strategic reserve now remains in the country in government hands.*

Sorghum is grown as an export crop in Sudan and it is quite legitimate for the government to export a proportion of the surplus that is harvested in a good year, and retain hard currency for importing food in a bad year. However, to export the entire reserve before the size of the forthcoming harvest is known, and to retain no foreign currency to import food, is highly irresponsible.

Up until this year, the ABS was also responsible for managing regional strategic grain reserves. The western regions relief operations of 1987/8 and 1989/90 all procured their grain from the ABS. After April this year, this responsibility was handed over to the Islamic banks - the two Saudi-based banks mentioned above and the Islamic Development Bank. The western relief operation was thus unable to obtain its full quota from the ABS. The ABS has obligations to donors including the EC amounting to almost 40,000 tons, which it cannot now meet. The alternative distributions made by the Islamic Development Bank have amounted to 506 tones - so small as to be called "a drop in the ocean" by local agricultural staff surveying needs in Darfur.**

Increase in the Money Supply and Devaluation

A related reason for the surge in grain prices in the summer of 1990 was the economic and fiscal crisis facing Sudan. The government has rapidly been increasing the money supply in order to pay for expenditure on the military. This has led to a fast-depreciating exchange rate with the US dollar. While the official exchange rate has been pegged to LS4.4 to one dollar, with a parallel rate for personal transactions of LS12, the unofficial rate has plummeted to LS30-35. Thus, when it became likely that Sudan would have to buy grain on the world market in order to meet its deficit, merchants knew that its price in Sudanese currency would be inflated in accordance with the unofficial exchange rate, i.e. equivalent to about LS5-600 per sack. Part of the grain price inflation can thus be explained as a rapid adjustment to the real devaluation of the Sudanese pound.

Impact of the Gulf Crisis

The Gulf crisis added a further element to the food problem. Sudan publicly sided with Iraq in its invasion of Kuwait. This angered the Saudi royal family. After the Arab League emergency summit in Cairo in late August, King Fahd is believed to have instructed his nephew Prince Mohamed el Faisal, head of the Faisal Islamic Bank, to withdraw his investments from Sudan. Neither the Faisal Islamic Bank nor the Baraka Islamic Bank (also Saudi-based) have actually

* At a press conference in London on 25 October 1990 Abdel Rahim Hamdi stated categorically that Sudan had exported no grain since December 1988, save sorghum-wheat barter deals. *Sudanow*, a government-controlled news magazine, said that LS41.7 million worth of grain was exported between July and September 1989 (September issue, 1990), and that cereal exports to Libya had occurred in 1990 ("Sudanese-Libyan integration: time for action", October 1990).

** Agricultural Planning Unit and non-governmental organizations, Darfur, "Rapid Assessment Report on Food Security Situation, Darfur Region, September 1990."

divested to date, but the rumor that they might do so was enough to shake confidence in the Sudanese economy, which now relies almost exclusively on these banks for its foreign exchange.

The Saudi government has also provided food aid to Sudan on concessionary terms in the past, as well as financial assistance. It will not do so now.

Sudanese expatriates working in the Gulf numbered over 400,000 and were the country's largest source of foreign exchange. Those working in Iraq and Kuwait can no longer remit money to relatives in Sudan, and the government of Saudi Arabia has threatened to freeze the remittances of Sudanese working there. This cut-off in funds further shook confidence in the Sudanese economy.

The US Position

The Sudan government's stance on the Gulf crisis also angered the US government, one of the country's main suppliers of food at concessionary rates. In February, the US administration invoked the Brooke Amendment, which mandates the winding-down of all non-emergency aid to a country which is in arrears in repaying its debts to the US. Amendment 513 of the Foreign Assistance Act, which has similar requirements in the case of the military overthrowing a civilian government and not making moves to restore democracy, also came into effect. There was an outstanding contract for concessionary sales of wheat to Sudan (under Public Law 480, Title I) which continued, but no new contracts could be signed. Knowledge of this non-renewal, and fear of the premature cancellation of the existing food contracts also led to fear of shortages.

On 14 September, after the failure of protracted negotiations, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) declared Sudan "non-cooperative". Sudan is the world's largest debtor to the IMF and had not agreed to the Fund's suggested economic reforms. This declaration, which is the most extreme measure the Fund can take against a country, effectively ruled out the possibility of large-scale economic assistance from the major aid donors, especially the US. This contributed to the fear of Sudanese that they would have to face their crisis alone and unaided.

These fears were well-founded. In early October, the US blocked a consignment of 45,000 tones of food aid and indicated that the remaining 55,000 tones of food aid due to be delivered under existing contracts would be frozen, and in the same week rejected advances from the Sudanese government for new food aid contracts. In combination with other donors such as Britain's Overseas Development Administration (ODA), the US began to work towards establishing tough preconditions for the supply of food aid to Sudan.

A Crisis of Confidence

When people lose all confidence in a national economy and a national currency, the results can be catastrophic. Money loses its value. Those with resources rush to convert them from money into commodities that do not lose their value (further worsening the spiral of hyper-inflation). In Sudan, this has been combined with a shortage of staple food and lack of employment. The result is

famine.

Consequences for the Price of Food

The combined effects of a massive loss of confidence in the Sudanese Pound, poor rains and the knowledge that the government had exported all its sorghum and would be unable to procure additional food aid, led to a spree of panic buying. Any families with enough money to buy a year's stocks of food immediately did so. Others bought to speculate. The price thus doubled, and doubled again.

As a result, richer families in Sudan may have deep stocks of grain, enough to last them a year or even longer. The poor, however, have nothing.

It is relatively easy for a government with a well-planned food policy to prevent such speculative and panic-driven price rises. A policy of pre-emptive releases of reserve food onto the market can prevent such a rise. The Sudanese government however had no such policy. At the National Economic Salvation Conference, held one year ago, the government promised to make food security a priority, and to create a Supreme Council on Grain. The Supreme Council on Grain never materialized, and the food security policy consisted of encouraging wheat production (at the expense of other crops). In addition there was a great deal of rhetoric about "self-sufficiency" and "only eating what we produce". Meanwhile, the ABS, the only competent organization to manage a food security policy, was rendered powerless, and the strategic grain reserve was exported by the Islamic banks.

Once a panic-driven price rise is under way, it can only be controlled by extreme measures such as mass importation of food. Far more food is needed to bring the price down than would be needed to keep it down before it began to rise. It is now too late.

Government Response to the Crisis

The government's response to the unfolding food crisis has been characterized by confusion and panic. Measures to deal with the crisis have included attempting to enforce a fixed price of LS300 per sack, requisitioning traders' stocks at the controlled price (at gunpoint if necessary), banning the movement of grain across provincial boundaries (allegedly to prevent hoarding), the detention of traders for having grain in store, and the sentencing to death of three merchants accused of "smuggling" wheat flour. The Commodities Control Act of 1978, which stipulates the death penalty for smuggling, has been re-affirmed. These measures have mostly been ill-thought out, petty, and ineffective or counter-productive. For instance, with the price of grain as high as it is, it ought to be profitable for private traders to import grain to Sudan.* Government policy should try to encourage this, as it would go some way to solving the crisis.** If traders fear the compulsory

* Grain bought on the world market and sold freely in Sudan would fetch a price of about LS600 per sack - a third of the prevailing market price.

** The encouragement of commercial imports by waiving import duty and providing domestic subsidized transport

purchase of their stocks at below-market rates, or their trial and sentencing for "smuggling", this will not occur. Likewise, this measure deters traders from bringing stored grain on to the market. Thus, the manner in which the government has tried to use merchants "hoarding" as a scapegoat for the scarcity is counter-productive.

The introduction of sorghum rationing in September - in many ways a welcome response to the crisis - has been rendered much less effective by the exclusion of many people from the ration lists.

The security services have taken control of much of the government's policy with regard to grain. For instance, the decision to ban the movement of grain by private traders and non-governmental organizations was enforced by the security agencies. The Relief and Rehabilitation Commission (RRC), the government department with nominal responsibility for coordinating the activities of aid agencies, protested against the extension of the ban to grain held by aid agencies, but was overruled.

During the two months prior to 4 October, there were many instances of warehouses of relief food being forcibly closed by the security services. Grain belonging to USAID and private agencies such as CARE was affected in this manner. In addition, one instance of forcible commandeering of grain has been reliably reported. This consisted of the requisitioning of grain belonging to the Sudan Council of Churches in Kosti (Central Region), which was destined for the displaced. This was taken at gunpoint and sold in the nearby town of Um Ruwaba.

The food crisis has in fact revealed a deep paralysis in central government. Specialist departments and agencies are unable to operate in their normal capacity, as their roles have been taken over by security forces and private commercial companies. Thus many of the former responsibilities of the RRC are now taken on by the security agencies, and those of the ABS have been taken over by the Islamic banks. Regional governments which have publicized the famine and asked for assistance have been ignored.

In mid-October, the government formed a Food Security Council, with responsibility for Khartoum (alone). The Council is headed by Brig Mohamed Osman Sayed, Commissioner of Khartoum, known as "Rambo" for his attitude to the problems confronting him. Brig Mohamed has spearheaded a series of attempts to remove the displaced population encamped around the city to areas further away, and to deny them access to services such as water. This move indicated that the approach to the food problem in Khartoum would be "military". Immediately afterwards there was a series of attempts to remove several shanty towns, first by cutting off water, and then by the forcible relocation of 30,000 people from Hillat Shok (see below).

Actions against Private Relief Agencies

Similarly, the host of specialist voluntary agencies who used to be active in providing aid in Sudan have been greatly hampered by a welter of administrative measures, and frightened by a stream of

was a common government response to food shortages in Sudan up to the 1950s.

accusations and threats. Each foreign private aid agency has to "pair" with an indigenous one (usually an Islamic agency approved by the government), and work out programs in tandem. They were required to go through a lengthy process of re-registration earlier this year. Fuel and travel permission is very hard for them to obtain, and requires repeated and lengthy visits to numerous government and security offices. Radio sets - essential equipment for working in remote areas with no telephones - have been confiscated. All their vehicles are registered as government property, so that should they leave, the government will inherit them. Recently, all Christian aid organizations were expelled from southern Kordofan, ostensibly because of security problems. Agencies were compelled to exchange their foreign currency at an extremely unfavorable rate into Sudanese pounds: * Sudan is now one of the most expensive countries in the world for such organizations to work in. The Sudanese Red Crescent Society had its constitution dissolved by the government and all its senior staff dismissed.** Its new constitution and new staff (also government appointees) amount to the Red Crescent losing its status as an independent organization. By such measures the government has seriously impaired its ability to respond to the crisis.

Meanwhile, Islamic organizations such as the Islamic African Relief Agency and The Islamic Call have received the active promotion of the government. While Africa Watch is unable to comment on the professional competence of the Islamic relief agencies, we note that they remain small relative to the problems faced. In addition, some of their programs have required conversion to Islam as a precondition for receiving assistance. They also have links to the Moslem Brotherhood. The chairman of Islamic Call, General (ret'd) Abdel Rahman Suwar el Dahab, is also president of an organization known as the Committee for the Defence of Islam and the Nation, which has been actively promoting the role of militias in "defence" of fundamentalist Islamic values.

No Declaration of Famine

Since seizing power, slogans have taken the place of serious food security planning in Sudan. The most common government slogan is "we eat what we grow, we wear what we manufacture". The government has thereby made a virtue out of its defiant stand vis a vis foreign donors. This defiant sloganeering may cost Sudan the lives of thousands of its citizens.

Local government in several of the provinces of Sudan has been extremely frank about the nature and extent of the famine. The provincial governments in Kassala, Kordofan and Darfur have all produced estimates for food aid requirements (see below). The RRC "early warning system" has produced monthly bulletins which detail all the signs of an approaching famine:

Up to twelfth October, the cumulative total rainfall proved less or much less than normal almost everywhere in [northern] Sudan ... Various adverse indicators warn of a much lower mechanized production than last year's. Regional reports from

* Most agencies are required to exchange at LS4.4 to the dollar. Some are able to obtain a "preferential" rate of LS12.2. The unofficial market rate is over LS30.

** One was dismissed for admitting to journalists that there was a food crisis.

Greater Khartoum, Red Sea Province, North Kordofan, South Darfur and Northern Darfur are summarized. All warn of a disturbing contingency particularly in Northern Darfur and Kordofan where immediate action is called for to avert the repetition of the 1985 catastrophe. Updates on grain prices, livestock prices, wheat and wheat-flour supply, refugees, displaced population, and relief deliveries and stocks are included in the Bulletin.*

Despite the availability of this detailed information collected by a well-established and professional government department, senior members of the central government have appeared either singularly ill-informed about the famine, or anxious to deny its existence. The government has refused to declare famine, or make a formal appeal for assistance. The official view continues to be naively and aggressively optimistic. For example, a release by the Sudan Embassy in London, dated 9 October, reads:

The view of the government regarding aid is that relief work will be largely unnecessary in Sudan if the government's attempts to achieve self-sufficiency in food and to resettle the displaced people in suitable areas where they can support themselves are backed. Already the government, with little outside help, has managed to increase food production by 55% in some areas and achieve self-sufficiency in others. Those really interested in the welfare of the Sudanese people should support those efforts, instead of doling meager rations that only enhance dependency and loss of dignity. Those who are not should keep their peace and leave us alone.**

The Minister for Agriculture has also predicted a good harvest, and described accounts of an impending famines as "unfounded rumours" circulated by "some malicious circles to serve their own political objectives."*

The official media have consistently presented a rosy picture of the harvest prospects. Television has shown reports of rain throughout the country, even in places where none has fallen, and has shown pictures of excellent crops. Seeing these pictures, ostensibly of their own drought-stricken fields, farmers are reduced to bitter laughter.

On 25 October the government made an estimate for immediate food needs, amounting to 75,000 tones, for the immediate period preceding the harvest in December. It proposed that most of the food be sold or distributed on a food-for-work basis. Government spokesmen stressed that this estimate of need did not amount to a declaration of famine or a request for aid; merely the recognition of a short-term "food gap". President Omer al Bashir has repeatedly denied the existence of a famine, denouncing reports of famine as the work of Sudan's enemies. Col Salah el

* RRC, Early Warning System Bulletin, Vol 5 No 10, 15 October 1990, p. 1.

** Sudan Update, 19 October 1990.

* "No imminent famine in Sudan", letter, Daily Nation (Nairobi), 15 October 1990; SUNA 12 October 1990.

Din Karrar, chairman of the Economic Affairs Committee, said "we will never accept any food assistance, even if famine is declared."^{**} On 30 October Col Pio Yukwan, head of the government Relief Committee, also requested aid for "three million" Ethiopian refugees.^{***}

No formal declaration of a famine emergency has been made. This makes it impossible for UN agencies to respond to the crisis, and difficult for private agencies and bilateral donors to do so. However, there are signs that the government will endorse the harvest estimate due to be made by the FAO this month, which will amount to an implicit recognition of the famine.

Vulnerability of the Displaced

The displaced are particularly vulnerable. According to RRC figures in August, there were 1.8 million displaced people in and around Khartoum, mostly from the south and west. Most have no regular source of income, and no ration cards. They are also subject to discrimination and harassment by the authorities, including the Khartoum Commissioner, Commissioner for the Displaced, police and security agencies.^{****}

Discrimination against the displaced has included the denial of permission for relief agencies to assist them, the denial of services such as water, sanitation, and health, and a crackdown on people earning an income in the informal sector. The displaced have no ration cards, and hence no access to the small amounts of subsidized food that are available. Most alarming has been the prospect of forcible removals (known as *kasha*). These include the movement of displaced people from shanty towns close to the city to areas further away (where there are fewer opportunities for earning an income), and threats of removal to labor camps in "productive areas" (i.e. where there are large commercial farms) or back to the south and west. Through a mixture of bullying, impoverishment, and hope for a better life, about 60,000 displaced people have left Khartoum to return to southern Sudan so far this year.

Actions against the displaced were stepped up in October. Following the cutting-off of water supplies to several camps, the police and security forces moved in to a shanty town known as Hillat Shok. Between 20 and 24 October the rudimentary houses were bulldozed and burned, and an estimated 30,000 people forcibly removed. There are unconfirmed reports of three deaths. The people, who originate from the South, were taken in trucks to a site near to Jebel Aulia, 25 miles south of Khartoum. Despite government assurances to the contrary, this site contains no water facilities. To travel to work in Khartoum, the people must use expensive private transport and pass through several road blocks.

^{**} AP, 29 October 1990.

^{***} The Sudan government Commission of Refugees estimates the total number of refugees in the country at 950,299, of whom about three quarters are from Ethiopia. (RRC, Early Warning System Bulletin, October 1990, p. 11). UN figures are marginally lower.

^{****} See US Committee for Refugees, "Khartoum's Displaced Persons: A Decade of Despair" (1990) for a detailed account of the recent history of the displaced.

Other towns such as el Obeid, Kosti, and Port Sudan also have large migrant populations.

Refugees are also particularly vulnerable. Sudan hosts about 900,000 refugees, mostly from Ethiopia. They are reliant on a mixture of farming, agricultural labor, casual work, and foreign assistance. Relief supplies to newly-arrived refugees in the reception center of Wad Sherifei, near Kassala, were held up for two months during the summer, due to disagreements between the donor agencies and the government. Malnutrition rates shot up to about 30% of young children as a result.

There are increasing tensions between the government and refugees. A refugee journalist who wrote an article for a British-based refugee newsletter detailing the disruptions to food supplies destined for refugee settlements was threatened and harassed. Members of the government have also blamed the general food shortage on international agencies buying food to give as rations to the refugees.*

Prospects

The harvest, to be gathered in over the coming two months, will be poor. It is likely that the government will requisition stocks from mechanized farmers and distribute the grain through the urban rationing system. This food will be enough to assist long-term urban residents in the first months of 1991, and may cause a slight fall in the price of grain. It will not solve the two main problems underlying the class famine of the central region and the cities. These problems are the loss of confidence in the Sudanese Pound, and the extreme vulnerability of a large class of people on account of high food prices, shortage of employment, and lack of ration cards. The displaced are likely to suffer most, especially if further punitive actions are taken against them by the government. The famine will be intense for many months to come.

The famine is likely to see instability in urban areas. There have already been food riots in towns including el Fasher, Um Ruwaba and Port Sudan. The government's priority will be to minimize such instability, by ensuring that the urban rationing system works as well as possible, and by preventing rural people coming to the towns and removing those that are already there. In the situation of triage facing the government, its choice is clear: feed the towns and the soldiers, and keep the remainder from causing trouble.

A dramatic gesture, such as the commitment of several hundred thousand tonnes of food by western donors, might be enough to break the present run on the market. Confidence that food will be available in the near future should allow traders and others with stocks of grain to release it onto the market. The price would thus fall and the immediate famine problem be much ameliorated. At the time of writing, such commitments remain unlikely.

* The EC and the UN High Commission for Refugees have funds to purchase 13,000 tonnes of food for refugees but have been unable to obtain the food required in Sudan. Food bought in Chad for 20,000 refugees in Darfur has been impounded by the government.

Rural Famine in the West and East

These people are the proven experts at surviving famines.*

Famine in the rural areas of Kordofan, Darfur, and Kassala follows two successive years in which the rains have failed. This is a "typical" African famine in that the main victims are smallholder farmers and herders who have been stricken by drought, and whose reserves of grain and "survival strategies" will be progressively exhausted over the coming months. The rural people of these provinces have repeatedly surprised outsiders with their ability to withstand severe droughts and food shortages. Their ingenuity, tenacity and capacity to endure hunger should not be underestimated. But the year 1990/91 will tax these qualities to the utmost.

The Drought of 1989 in the West

In the summer of 1989 the rains were poor. National grain production was low, at 2.1 million tonnes. In the north, the worst affected areas were the provinces of Northern Kordofan and Northern Darfur, which lie in the semi-arid zone.

When widespread crop failures became evident in these provinces, the regional governments of Kordofan and Darfur appealed for relief. Darfur asked for 66,000 tonnes and Kordofan for 95,000. Although General al Bashir visited Darfur in September 1989 and grandly promised 50,000 tonnes, in practice neither central government nor the donors appeared to consider these requests seriously.

In February the World Food Program (WFP) of the UN sent a mission to the regions, which assessed the needs at 3500 tonnes for Darfur and 13,000 tonnes for Kordofan.* The RRC made higher estimates of need: 17,000 tonnes for Darfur and 45,000 tonnes for Kordofan. These are exactly the figures delivered by the "Western Relief Operation" of 1987-8, when both regions were also affected by drought. A review of that operation concluded "very small quantities were delivered far behind schedule."** The fact that central government should decide on these figures indicates that it was prepared to make no additional effort to assist the hungry in the west.

The European Community (EC) was the donor given responsibility for Darfur. It made a commitment of 3750 tonnes of sorghum (to be procured from the ABS), of which it managed to distribute none at all. 620 tonnes was transported to the "priority" area of Kutum, where 17,000 displaced people had congregated, but was not distributed due to a dispute between the EC and the regional government as to who was to pay for transport. Up to 400 tonnes reached Nyala in southern

* A. de Waal, *Famine that Kills: Darfur, Sudan, 1984-1985*. (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1989), p.2.

* The WFP mission was in Darfur for one day. Its high-speed estimate was preferred by government and donors to the detailed investigations done by the regional Ministry of Agriculture.

** M. Buchanan-Smith, "Food Security Planning in the Wake of an Emergency Relief Operation: The Case of Darfur, Western Sudan," (Institute of Development Studies, Sussex, Discussion Paper No. 278, July 1990).

Darfur but remained in storage for similar reasons. The remainder never reached the drought-stricken region, in part due to the ABS running out of stocks. The only relief distributed came from the regional government strategic reserve, which was set up in 1989. 2000 tones was sold at a "subsidized" rate of LS250 per sack.***

USAID was given responsibility for Kordofan. Here matters were somewhat better. 13,000 tones were committed by several donors, almost all of which was transported and distributed by the regional government Food Aid Administration.

The government's chosen alternative for food distribution in the west, the Islamic Development Bank, was able to provide only 506 tones of food relief. In one of the few places to receive such assistance, the ration was enough to feed people for at most two days.

Red Sea Province also suffered drought. 555 tones of grain were sold at a subsidized rate.

The overall national food deficit for 1989/90 was estimated at 460,000 tones. The western donors committed 312,000 tones to cover much of this (both for free relief and subsidized sale). 146,000 tones was received.

The overwhelming impression of the donor response to the relief needs of 1989-90 in western Sudan is one of indifference and complacency. The donors took a gamble that the harvest of 1990 would be adequate, and that the failures of relief would therefore be forgotten. It was a gamble that has not paid off. It was an attitude in every way as callous and irresponsible as that of the government.

The fact that 1989/90 saw no severe famine in Kordofan and Darfur does not reflect an adequate response from the donors. It reflects the ability of rural people to withstand hardship through their ability to follow a range of survival strategies, including eating wild foods, selling animals, migrating for labor, and a host of other activities.*

The Drought of 1990

Rainfall has been even lower in 1990 than in 1989. El Fasher received only 111 milimetres of rain by the end of September, 47 mm less than 1989. El Obeid had received 161 mm and Kassala 67 mm. A minimum of 200 mm is needed to grow a crop of millet. Southern Darfur has, however, been near to normal.

Production in 1990 is likely to be no better than 1989, and possibly much worse. A survey done jointly by the regional government and relief agencies in northern Darfur estimated a harvest

*** Market prices for sorghum in el Fasher, regional capital of Darfur, were in the range LS200-300 per sack between January and June, so the extent of the subsidy was minimal.

* See de Waal, *op cit*, for an analysis of these strategies in 1984-5.

shortfall of 80%, and total relief needs of 144,000 tones. Many families were already living off wild foods (berries, leaves) in September. In addition, the poor rains have resulted in a lack of grazing, so that many animals will die.

Food prices have shot up in the western provinces. In el Fasher market, millet, the local staple, rose from LS380 per 100kg sack in June to LS950 in September. Elsewhere the prices were higher, reaching a maximum of LS2000 in Malha in the far north.

Equally serious is the decline in the prices of animals. Many rural people depend on selling animals in order to buy grain. They are caught in a "price scissors" effect as the price of grain rises and the prices of animals fall, on account of a flood of animals coming on to the market and their declining quality. During the last four months, animal prices have more than halved. This means that whereas in June the sale of a goat would have bought between one and 1.7 sacks of millet, by September it would have bought between 0.1 and 0.29 sacks - an adverse shift of six times in the terms of trade. In addition, many rural people work on farms in order to earn money. With the poor harvest, work will be hard to find and wage rates will fall. The grain prices alone thus understate the hardships suffered by the poor.

Rural people have already begun to abandon their villages and move to urban centers such as Port Sudan, el Obeid and Omdurman.

Regional response

In contrast to the central government, at least some of the regional governments in Sudan have announced that their localities face famine, and have begun to take measures to relieve the situation.

The first regional government to announce publicly that it faced food shortages was Kassala, which, on 12 September met with relief agencies to express its concern about impending famine and plan relief strategies.

The Regional Government of Kordofan publicly announced the famine on 6 October, and immediately began using some of its own resources for relief. 2000 tones of grain were acquired from ABS stocks for relief in northern Kordofan, and the Assistant Governor attempted to obtain more from Gedaref.

In Darfur the Regional Ministry of Agriculture collaborated with non-governmental organizations on a survey of needs in September. This produced an estimate for relief needs in the coming year of 144,000 tones.

In the Red Sea Province there has as yet been no official announcements of food shortages or famine. This is because of the political leadership of this province, which consists of recent government appointees. However, the situation is extremely grave. The rainfall in Red Sea

Province has been exceptionally low, and food prices have soared while livestock prices have plummeted. The WFP and USAID have both indicated their willingness to commit relief to the province, but the provincial government has yet to ask for it. In Central Region (especially along the White Nile near Kosti) food prices were among the first to rise to famine levels (though Blue Nile Province is much less affected). Regional government here has also not declared a food shortage.

All major decisions have to be made at central government level. No regional government can make an independent appeal for food aid to international donors. Regional governments have been purged extensively in the last fifteen months, so that few officials are prepared to make controversial decisions or announcements for fear of losing their jobs.

Central Response

Central government has not acceded to the regional governments' demands for an admission of the scale of the problem or for a request for food aid. In the absence of central government cooperation, it would not be possible to clear food aid shipments through Port Sudan or arrange for onward transport to the regions.

Role of Violence

Violence has three main impacts on rural society which make it vulnerable to famine. One is the direct destruction of life, property, animals, food and crops. These have all occurred in parts of central and northern Darfur and the Nuba Mountains area of southern Kordofan. Earlier this year, around Kutum in northern Darfur, Chadian forces burned more than ten villages and briefly displaced 17,000 people to Kutum town. In central Darfur, raiders have burned villages with their grain stocks and stolen animals. The last two months have seen a resurgence of such violence as the scarcity has intensified, and well-armed camel nomads have penetrated south into settled areas in search of food and grazing. In the Nuba Mountains, SPLA activity and counter-insurgency tactics by the army and militias have burned many villages and led to the loss of much livestock. About 60,000 people were displaced to the provincial capital, Kadugli.

The second effect of violence is the abandonment of land and other productive resources. The wars in the areas described have meant that much land has been left unplanted. This is particularly damaging as the areas affected (Nuba Mountains, and Kebkabiya and Wadi Saleh areas in Darfur) normally produce a surplus which helps sustain not only the local population but others as well.

The third effect of violence is the disruption of commerce and free movement. This is important and particularly insidious. The economy of rural Sudan is very dependent on trade (people sell animals to buy food, and engage in petty trading to earn a supplementary source of income) and mobility (there is large scale migrant labor in search of work in towns and on farms, and people must move to obtain charity, to search of famine foods in the forests, and herders must migrate with their herds to seasonal pastures and wells). With the threat of violence, much of this trade and

migration ceases. As a result, poor people cannot find work and cannot sell their assets, and food cannot be brought to them. They are trapped in areas which cannot support them and cut off from markets and assistance. This situation prevails in some parts of northern Darfur and southern Kordofan, and may become more intense and widespread as the famine intensifies.

Violence is not a primary immediate cause of the famine in the provinces. But it is an important secondary cause, and may seriously aggravate the famine in 1991 and even 1992.

Prospects

The prospects for the Sudanese provinces, especially Kordofan and Darfur, look bleak in the extreme. There is a dire shortage of food, compounded by shortages of fuel and spare parts for trucks, chronic and growing insecurity, and governmental paralysis. Survival strategies will soon be reaching their limits.

There is no prospect of a relief operation on the scale that is needed being mounted in time. Observers have compared the famine with that of 1984/85. In some respects this year is not so serious: national production is higher, and there are more pockets of self-sufficiency in the west. But in most respects the situation is much worse. The food shortage is much more intense in the central regions, the infrastructure has deteriorated, the response is even later, and the rural areas contain many more guns.

The famine will undoubtedly add a new twist to the spiral of violence in the rural west. In the short term, there will be an increase in conflicts over grazing and water, and well-armed herders are likely to raid villages to steal stored food. In the slightly longer term, if and when the drought breaks, impoverished herders are likely to engage in large-scale raiding of animals in order to rebuild their herds. Traders are also likely to turn to forcible extraction of commodities (i.e. banditry) in conjunction with armed tribesmen and militias. Local government services, including the police, will become more overstretched and less capable of delivering basic local government.

When the scale of the famine becomes clear, journalists and aid organizations will predict that millions face death through starvation. Similar predictions were made during 1984/5, but were proved wrong: that famine killed an estimated 250,000 people, mostly children, and mostly on account of outbreaks of diseases such as diarrhoea and measles. A similar scale of famine mortality can be expected in 1991.

Destitution, War and Famine in the South

Background to the Famine

Before, in a drought like this, we depended on our cattle for milk and meat. But today cattle and goats have been taken by the Murahalin [militias]. Then came the

drought. That is the source of our hunger.*

The underlying reason for the vulnerability of the South to famine is the legacy of the famine of 1986-9, which was caused by war and massive militia raiding. This famine killed several hundred thousand people, displaced over two million, and left many more destitute.** The impoverishment of the South on account of this famine will be felt for at least a decade. It represented not only a great human loss and social upheaval, but a massive loss of productive assets, which ensured that the level of productive resources in the South remained very low. Thus although there was no acute famine in 1989/90, the extreme poverty of the region meant that the situation was one of serious concern to international agencies.

A UN investigation team in May-June 1990 estimated that cattle numbers in Jonglei Province had dropped from 483,000 in 1976 to 273,000 today, with even greater losses probable in Bahr el Ghazal.*** Rinderpest has remained a major problem, with many cattle succumbing to the disease. Many farmers have been unable to plant sufficient areas of crops, or replant after the failure of their first planting, on account of shortage of seeds. While the rivers and lakes of southern Sudan remain full of fish, people have no nets or hooks with which to catch them, and are reduced to the inefficient and time-consuming method of fishing with spears.

Waters from the severe flooding of August 1988 have remained in many areas, two years later. Large areas of pasture and arable land close to the Nile have remained unused for this reason.

Another legacy of the war has been the fragmentation of markets and the lack of commerce and migrant labor. Rural people cannot go to towns, and have no access to banks, salaried relatives, work opportunities, or the chance of selling animals or fish to an urban market. Each locality must depend on itself far more than in the past, and surpluses in one area can only be carried to nearby areas with deficits at great expense and difficulty. There is almost no trade carried out using wheeled vehicles, in part because of the danger of land mines, laid earlier in the war by both the army and the SPLA:

The road running along the eastern bank of the Jonglei canal was mined, as were all major roads between the Sobat [river] and the canal, and from Ayod through Waat to Akobo. The mines have yet to be cleared.... there are no proper roads, just alternative tracks driven through the grasslands, or running parallel to the old roads.*

The recent bombing of SPLA-held towns, and the abandonment of those towns by the residents, will further disrupt trade.

* A Dinka chief, quoted in United Nations, "Lifeline Sudan: A Report on Food Sources and Needs," (June 1990), p. 49.

** See Africa Watch, *Denying "The Honor of Living"*, chapter 4.

*** United Nations, *op cit*, pp. 25, 38-9, 51-2.

* United Nations, *op cit*, p. 13.

The result of these disruptions has been that rural people have been left vulnerable to relatively mild droughts and floods. In the past, faced with such natural adversities, they would have been able to fall back upon stored grain, milk, trade and migrant labor. This is not possible now: the slightest failure in production means famine.

Meanwhile, fighting has continued in several parts of the south. This year has seen an offensive by the SPLA into Yei and Maridi, and another into northern Upper Nile Province. Both these areas are normally surplus-producing, so the disruption caused by this insecurity is particularly damaging. Much of Jonglei Province was also affected by an army column sent from Malakal to Juba earlier this year. The UN investigation team reported:

In February and March 1990 the government armoured convoy appeared in the area. Not only did they capture a large number of cattle belonging to the Nyang and Bar Gaawar, but they burned a number of villages around Mogogh, Wau (mid-way between Mogogh and Ayod) and Ayod. Ayod itself was occupied and burned. People had to flee without taking their belongings, and the stores of grain were burned inside their huts. Had it not been for the loss of a good proportion of their harvest in the renewal of fighting this year, the Gaawar would probably have managed to feed themselves and their neighbours.**

Raiding and burning of villages by the Fertit militia near Wau continued into at least May of this year.

However, for most of the rural South, violence is not an immediate problem. The rural areas are mostly controlled by the SPLA, and remain essentially at peace.

Since the beginning of the year, tens of thousands of people displaced from Bahr el Ghazal and Upper Nile to northern Sudan (principally Khartoum) have begun to return. Free rail transport is usually provided from Khartoum to an intermediate staging post (usually Muglad or Babanusa in Kordofan). The train usually leaves each Monday, and may be delayed en route, with the passengers suffering on account of lack of food and water during their prolonged journey. From there onwards the returnees travel by lorry, as far as the border with Bahr el Ghazal, which can be expensive. At the border (usually Abyei), the army and the militia remove all food and money from the returnees, who continue, on foot and destitute, towards their home villages. In Khartoum, the would-be-returnees are told that assistance from the UN awaits them on their arrival in the south: on arrival, they find nothing apart from informal help from friends and relatives. There are recent reports of famine migrants leaving Bahr el Ghazal to travel north towards Abyei - in the reverse direction - in search of food.

The SPLA siege of government-held towns continues. People are prevented from leaving and food

** United Nations, *op.cit.*, pp. 22-3.

and other commodities are prevented from entering, except when aircraft belonging to humanitarian organizations fly in. The army connives with these sieges, benefitting from the human shield provided by the civilian population, and also profiting from the high price of food and other essential commodities, scarcities from which merchant-officer partnerships are able to build fortunes.

Conditions Now

The 1990 rains have been poor throughout much of southern Sudan. Some areas have suffered drought, and others have suffered floods.

Prices of grain are high and rising. In Juba, sorghum is about LS2300 per sack, and in Malakal (probably the worst-affected town) about LS3300. In the rural areas, most transactions occur by barter, so that price information is not available. However, the rates of exchange between animals and grain indicate that grain is relatively as expensive as in rural north Sudan. In May-June, cows were exchanged for sorghum at a rate of one animal for one to four sacks.* These rates indicate that the food scarcity is very severe in the rural south.

Since March, about 30,000 new refugees have arrived in the huge refugee camp of Itang in south-west Ethiopia. Their condition has been described as extremely serious, with child malnutrition rates of up to 30%, and raised death rates. Recent visitors to areas nearby on the Sudanese side report seeing more refugees on the move, many of them reduced to eating wild foods and grass to sustain themselves.

Health problems in the South are severe. There have been epidemics of pneumonia and diarrhoeal diseases, which have been particularly serious in the area around Rumbek. A report in June indicated that 743 people had died in Akot and the adjacent areas, while in Cuibet the death rate had been even higher. Information is not available for Rumbek, which is controlled by the army, but conditions there are likely to be as bad or worse.

Operation Lifeline Sudan

Operation Lifeline Sudan (hereafter OLS I) was started in April 1989 as a response to the international outcry over the famine in the South and the internal momentum for peace which had been given an impetus by the "November Accords" between the Democratic Unionist Party and the SPLA. In six months OLS I succeeded in transporting over 100,000 tonnes of relief supplies to people in the South, both in areas under SPLA control and in government-held towns. Equally important was the fact that the relief was delivered by humanitarian organizations, who were accountable for the delivery of the grain to the needy people. Perhaps most important of all to the people of the South was the fact that the relief operation took place during a period of ceasefire, and indeed contributed to the ceasefire itself, so that farmers were able to plant their crops in the

* In Darfur in July, one cow brought between 9 and 20 sacks, and in September two to three sacks.

confidence that they would be able to harvest them. For international organizations, OLS I represented a triumph of humanitarianism over politics: the Sudan government ceded the right of relief agencies to work in rebel-held areas, providing assistance to civilians whom the government had until recently regarded as hostile.*

OLS I broke down in November 1989, after a resumption of hostilities in the South. On 3 November the government stopped all relief flights to the South, amid a welter of accusations that the UN and voluntary agencies were assisting the SPLA with arms and materiel. The only relief flights that continued were (after a short break) those of the Lutheran World Federation into Juba. Overland road convoys by voluntary agencies into SPLA-held areas also continued, but the operations by the UN and International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) were halted. In December, RCC member Col Mohamed al Khalifa announced that OLS was to restart "under government control" - i.e. on the condition that SPLA areas were no longer assisted, or only assisted on government conditions. This was unacceptable to the UN and the voluntary agencies. Fighting intensified and during January and February the SPLA tightened its siege of Juba, not letting any relief flights in for a period, with threats to shoot down any planes.

In March, after intense diplomatic activity, the government agreed to a resumption of Operation Lifeline. The new operation (hereafter OLS II) differed from OLS I in that there was no ceasefire, and that the government was more aggressive in asserting its "right" as a sovereign power to control the destiny of relief. The government claimed that 80% of the needy people were in government controlled areas, and so the government-controlled areas should receive a proportionate amount of aid. It also claimed that OLS was a UN-controlled operation (in OLS I the UN had been merely "first among equals", operating alongside voluntary agencies, many of which had programs in the South which predated the UN involvement). Voluntary agencies were therefore obliged to submit their plans for relief programs to the UN, and the UN coordinator for OLS II, who was based in Khartoum, had in turn to submit them to the government (in theory the RRC, in practice also security). Certain voluntary agencies working in SPLA areas did not receive "permission" from the government, and hence the UN, and the UN attempted to pressure western donors to prevent these voluntary agencies from carrying out their operations, on the grounds that their "breach of discipline" was endangering the whole of OLS II. Thus politics (specifically, the government's requirement of respect for national sovereignty) came to take precedence over humanitarian need.

The agreement for OLS II was made in Khartoum before all the details of its implementation had been worked out. As a result, OLS II, while it succeeded in delivering about 65,000 tones of food relief (about 70% of its target), was dogged by disputes, and ultimately foundered. The ICRC, which had a program involving relief deliveries to three government-controlled towns and three SPLA-controlled towns, started flights only in May and suspended them on 26 September when it failed to receive government permission to fly to the SPLA-held areas. The government promised to send relief barges to Malakal and a relief train to Aweil, but neither moved.* There was a

* See L. Minear, Humanitarianism under Siege: A Critical Review of Operation Lifeline Sudan, Red Sea Press, 1990.

* On 19 August the train did in fact move - about 15 miles from Babanusa Junction to el Muglad. Both towns are in Kordofan. Much of the 1500 tonnes of sorghum on the train is believed to have deteriorated so as to be unfit for human

continual stream of government abuse and harassment of western voluntary agencies involved in OLS II, including repeated accusations of ferrying arms to the SPLA. While the OLS II agreement included provision for the needs of the displaced around Khartoum, very little of this relief was ever delivered, and instead the government unilaterally began to implement its policy of returning migrants to the South, promising them UN assistance, but without consulting with the UN on the provision of any such assistance or the manner of the migrants' removal. Hostilities also continued throughout OLS II, including an air attack on the town of Torit, in which bombs landed close to the civilian hospital.

In September, OLS II finally began to founder. Less than 1700 tones of relief was delivered that month. The government banned all relief flights to the South (though, as before, the Lutherans continued to supply relief to Juba). There was a succession of bombing raids against towns which were key sites for the relief to SPLA-held areas.

On 20, 23 and 24 September Bor was bombed. Bor is a linchpin for the overland relief efforts in the South, and one of the targets appeared to be a barge loaded with relief belonging to the ICRC. Seven civilians were killed and fifteen injured, and most people evacuated the town immediately after the attack. Ler, the site of one of the relief projects declared "illegal" by the government was bombed three times in the last week of September. The first two attacks passed off without casualties, but the third, which occurred shortly after a relief plane operated by the ICRC had left, killed seven. The town was also frequently "buzzed" by government planes, and many people have abandoned it, while others have dug primitive air raid shelters. Kongor, Waat and Ayod were also bombed.

On 4 October the government allowed relief flights to continue, to locations of which it approved. Two conditions were attached: the ICRC planes destined for SPLA-controlled towns had to pass through Juba for inspection by the government (a condition the ICRC has not agreed to), and the air force reserved the right to shoot down unidentified planes.

Visiting New York at the invitation of UNICEF in early October, President Omer al Bashir offered a three month ceasefire in order to facilitate the vaccination of children in the south. This otherwise welcome offer was rendered suspect by the government's simultaneous actions against OLS II. It was greeted with skepticism by the donors and was rejected out of hand by the SPLA.

Prospects for the South

Juba food stocks are enough for only three or four weeks. If the SPLA suspends OLS II, and tightens its siege, relief flights will be at risk, and acute famine could follow rapidly. Malakal is in a worse situation. The rural areas are patchy; some being relatively well-off, and others very poor. There will be famine in many areas of the south this year, whether or not it develops from a severe

consumption. Up to August a contributory reason for the delay was SPLA reluctance to guarantee the safe passage of the train and barges. This guarantee was obtained on 24 August.

scarcity into a "famine that kills" depends on factors such as the level of fighting, next season's rains, and the delivery of relief.

The Donor's Response

Assistance to people stricken by calamities is, under present conditions, slow, poorly organized, and in a great degree, inefficient.*

Primary responsibility for the existence of the severe famine and the lack of an adequate response lies with the government of Sudan. However, Sudan's principal aid donors also must shoulder some of the blame. Over the seven decades since the complaint voiced above, they have failed to improve their response to famines to any great degree. The donors failed to respond to the food needs in 1989/90, and in recent months have shown both complacency and a preparedness to use food as a political or diplomatic weapon.

Response in 1989/90

The donors' response to the food needs in Sudan in 1989/90 has been outlined above. In most respects it was found wanting. The relief operation for the west was a shambles, especially in Darfur. OLS II was mishandled: the donors placed too much emphasis on the simple delivery of relief items, and not enough on the context in which relief can be made effective (specifically, full neutrality for humanitarian aid, accountability of aid, and a cessation of hostilities in areas where relief is distributed).

Human rights organizations such as Africa Watch have long appealed for economic assistance to Sudan to be tied to the government's respect for human rights. Until last year the western donors were actively supporting the Sudan government and unwilling to criticism its human rights record in public. Earlier this year, mounting concern over the level of human rights violations combined with growing exasperation at the Sudanese government's unwillingness to repay its debts to western donors, implement economic reforms, or realign its pro-Libya and pro-Iraq foreign policy, to result in a cut in foreign aid. Led by the US, all the major western donors have cut back economic assistance or suspended it altogether.

Reaction to the Current Crisis

The donors cannot claim that they were ill-informed about the current crisis. Famine has been developing in the provinces for over a year. Food security experts were warning of the prospects of national food shortage as early as March 1990. The "famine early warning system" set up after the 1984-5 disaster has been producing monthly bulletins which document in detail the signs of

* Senator Giovanni Ciralo, speaking in April 1921, quoted in R. Kent *Anatomy of Disaster Relief*, (London, Pinter, 1987), p. 33.

approaching famine. Yet the donors have done almost nothing.

Part of the problem is inflexible thinking. The donors are used to famines in the provinces, on account of drought and war. They are not used to famine in the central regions and the cities, on account of economic crisis and high food prices. Thus a famine can occur outside their very own head offices in Khartoum, while their attention is fixed on far away districts in Darfur and the South.

Another problem is a degree of complacency, brought about by the repeated warnings of famine catastrophe every year since 1985. Some of the predicted famines have occurred (e.g. in the South in 1986-9), others have not. Most donors prefer to rely on their own assessments of need rather than those produced by local government and the RRC early warning system. The cut-back in economic assistance has led to a cut-back in technical staff. USAID for instance has cut back the number of economists on its staff in Khartoum from six to two. The donors have thus produced a welter of reports, all marked "confidential", over the last few months, most of them singularly ill-informed about the crisis. For example, as late as September the FAO Food Outlook was predicting a harvest of 3.1 million tones (implying a surplus). The FAO has declined to make a further estimate pending a survey of the harvest in November, and many donors are waiting on the results of this.

Reflecting this lack of detailed knowledge and analysis, Trevor Page, director of the WFP in Khartoum, has said that while "much of Sudan faces food security," he would not call it famine but "serious food shortage."^{*} The problem at the present is precisely the reverse.

The donors have begun to make some commitments. USAID has outstanding contracts with Sudan of wheat for concessionary sale amounting to 100,000 tones, and has indicated that this amount is still available, in the form of relief. WFP has made a commitment of about 20,000 tones for Red Sea Province, pending the provincial government's request for it. However, a major response from the donors depends on the Sudanese government meeting a set of conditions.

Donor Conditions

The western donors have essentially attached four conditions to their delivery of relief to Sudan. Two of these conditions are largely propaganda, one is a genuine concern, and one amounts to using food as a political weapon.

1. Declaration of Famine

The first condition is that the government should declare a famine and request aid. To a large extent this is simply a stalling tactic, as can be shown by recalling the famine of 1984-5.

^{*} AP 6 October 1990.

In September 1984 USAID pledged 90,000 tones of famine relief to Sudan although then-President Nimeiri had neither declared a famine nor officially requested aid. As late as November, Nimeiri was claiming that Sudan had not asked for any aid (except for refugees). USAID was at that time considering increasing its commitment to 255,000 tones, which it subsequently did. Nimeiri only publicly recognized the famine in January 1985, by which time the first deliveries of USAID food (known as *Reagan* throughout rural Sudan, after the man who had supposedly donated it), were being distributed.** This illustrates that if the political will is there, generous aid can be given before a government declaration of famine.

However, in the absence of a declaration of famine, it is difficult to obtain assurances from the government that any food aid delivered would reach the people who need it.

2. Targeting

A second condition is the issue of targeting: getting aid to where it is needed. A sub-issue is allowing humanitarian organizations to work effectively and efficiently.

This is the condition which is the most genuine and poses the most difficult moral dilemma. The donors do not want to be in the position, a year hence, of having supplied perhaps 500,000 tones of food aid to Sudan, only to see it directed to middle-class areas in the main cities, used to feed the army and militias, or sold for profit by pro-government merchants, while rural areas are neglected and displaced people forcibly removed from Khartoum. The donors would quite rightly be accused of allowing the Sudan government to consolidate its position by adding food aid to its arsenal. In addition to simply appropriating the food, the government can use any number of subtle measures to ensure that food is directed to its favored areas, for example giving priority clearance to certain shipments in Port Sudan, or providing fuel for only certain transport routes.

The dilemma is particularly acute because effective famine relief does not consist of free food alone. Measures such as freedom of movement, and guarantees of physical security enable famine-stricken people to help themselves much more effectively. For example, OLS I would have been a relatively successful relief operation even if no food at all had been delivered, simply because the period of tranquillity would have allowed rural people to plant their farms in safety, travel to collect wild foods, and attend markets. Likewise a condition of allowing merchants to import food without restrictions or tariffs would do as much to ameliorate famine in the central regions as would a large distribution of free food.

However, the abuses of food by the Sudan government do not justify the withholding of aid by the donors. The situation calls for diplomatic skill, but at the end of the day the donors cannot simply refuse to send food. Even food that is poorly targeted will have a significant impact. Releasing a large supply of food onto the market should break the speculative spiral and bring down the price, benefitting both residents and displaced. Fine-tuning the targeting is neither possible nor desirable.

** See Article 19, *Starving in Silence: A Report on Famine and Censorship*, (1990).

Voluntary agencies do not want to take over the task of distribution from local government, and do not believe that anything other than targeting by region or district is appropriate.

Time is short, and a "twin-track" approach should be followed. Commitments should be made now, while negotiations continue. Donors should be aware of both failures and successes of this approach. An example of failure was OLS II: the agreement was signed in March before the details of targeting and the role of voluntary agencies were agreed, and these unagreed details contributed to the premature death of the operation. A success was the commitment of relief by USAID in 1984, four months before Nimeiri requested it.

To some extent, the US is already following this "twin-track" policy, by using food already committed to Sudan as a bargaining counter to obtain improved internal delivery of aid. On 2 October the US turned back a ship carrying 45,000 tones of (concessionary sale) food aid destined for Port Sudan, and suspended all further deliveries of food under the current PL 480 contract. At the same time the US turned down a request for \$150m of food aid (on concessionary sale terms).

The reason cited by USAID for turning their ship back from Port Sudan was the government ban on the internal movement of grain (which had caused 35,000 tones of USAID grain already in Sudan intended for famine relief to be held up). If reversing this decision was the aim of USAID's action, it certainly had the desired effect. On 4 October the Sudanese government permitted food relief (though not commercial grain) to move freely in northern Sudan. Richard Boucher, a spokesman for the State Department, then said that "other obstacles remain" and referred to "concern about food getting to the people who need it, and about human rights abuses in Sudan."^{*}

Andrew Natsios, Director of the US Office for Foreign Disaster Assistance, later outlined ten conditions which a donor cartel, led by the US, had put to the Sudan government.^{**} These conditions fall into three groups: (1) giving priority and preferential treatment to relief commodities, (2) facilitating the work of voluntary agencies and the ICRC, and (3) targeting relief "based upon assessments of need conducted in cooperation with the UN"^{***}

Mr Natsios went on to say:

I do not want to give the impression that we are asking the Government of Sudan to submit to donor demands before we will help. That would be a misreading of our intentions. The US Government and the other donors are willing to help, but we must be allowed to do so in a manner which assures us that all Sudanese who need assistance are getting it. Our humanitarian assistance to Sudan is contingent only on

^{*} Sudan Update, 19 October 1990.

^{**} Statement to the US House of Representatives Committee on Foreign Affairs, Subcommittee on Africa, 25 October 1990.

^{***} Africa Watch hopes that the UN will show greater awareness of needs than in 1989, and suggests that the assessments of need made by several regional governments provide an adequate base for making relief allocations.

this fundamental principle of relief, not on any geopolitical strategy or agenda.

Africa Watch concurs with this statement of principle and urges the donors to conform to it. However, Africa Watch lacks some of Mr Natsios' confidence that geopolitical considerations have been absent from the donors' agenda (see condition 4, below).

3. Human Rights

The third donor condition, referred to by Richard Boucher above, is an improvement in the human rights situation in Sudan. While Africa Watch welcomes the US government's concern with this issue, the appearance of this condition is somewhat disingenuous, as earlier in the year one of the reasons why the US government was declining to criticize Sudan's human rights record was fear of endangering Operation Lifeline II. Long before, under the governments of President Nimeiri and Prime Minister Sadiq el Mahdi, the US and western donors were also happy to provide relief but less than willing to criticize human rights, even when the human rights abuses were directly creating the famine conditions which the donors were now being asked to relieve.

It should also be noted that, unlike development aid, emergency assistance from the US and EC is not subject to any human rights conditionality. In addition, any supplies of food in the present circumstances, whether for free relief or subsidized sale, will have the effect of ameliorating the famine.

This condition is therefore essentially a stalling tactic and a not-so-veiled threat to the government of Sudan that famine relief is dependent on political changes.

4. Change in Government

The fourth condition, implicit in much of the posturing of the western donors, is that the government should change, or that there should at least be a radical change in government policy, especially with regard to support for Iraq. Andrew Natsios strongly implied as much:

I think it would be as well if Sudan's leaders looked back at the last drought [1984/5]. Eleven of thirteen governments were overthrown by popular outrage [at] failure to respond.... Half the country is starving to death. That is a recipe for massive political convulsions.*

What Natsios says may be strictly true, but a strategy of withholding or delaying food relief in order to achieve political change is both morally unacceptable and practically ineffective.

Africa Watch believes that under no circumstances should food be used as a political or diplomatic weapon. Dislike for a government, including revulsion at its abuses of human rights, should never

* AP 28 September 1990.

be a reason for withholding essential humanitarian assistance from its people.

The record of using food as a means to change governments is poor. In 1984 USAID committed over 600,000 tones of food (relief and subsidized sale) to Sudan, partly with the intention of shoring up the Nimeiri government. Despite this generous support, the government fell. At the same time, the US and other donors were reluctant to give relief for the famine in Ethiopia, due to opposition to the Marxist rule of President Mengistu. Not only did this policy fail to topple Mengistu, but when the scandal of donor inaction was exposed by the BBC and Bob Geldof, the donors lost moral credibility and were obliged to supply large amounts of food aid over the following years, much of which was abused by the Ethiopian government, for instance to feed militiamen.

Conclusion

1990/91 will mark a new nadir in the suffering of the Sudanese people. Three famines are afflicting them, and the response to each will almost certainly be inadequate. It is now too late to prevent deaths which will number in the hundreds of thousands, in addition to massive destitution, social disruption, and further violence.

For the third time in a decade, a famine in Sudan has apparently caught the government and the donors by surprise. This indicates a deep moral malaise, as well as a measure of incompetence. Primary responsibility for the current crisis lies squarely with the government of Sudan, which has recklessly put the profit of a small cartel of Islamic banks and the military and political objectives of a cabal of fundamentalist soldiers before the welfare of millions of Sudanese citizens. By a tragic irony its negligence has been on such a scale that not only are the marginalized people of the south and west suffering (a fact of little concern to the rulers) but the residents of the national capital - including the families of government employees, policemen and soldiers - are facing hunger too. A secondary responsibility lies with the donors, whose cynicism and indifference was instrumental in allowing this situation to occur, who were happy to use food as a political weapon, and who are now frantically rushing to claim the moral high ground, just a little too late to be convincing.

Recommendations

To the Sudan Government

Africa Watch calls upon the Sudan Government to ensure that relief can be distributed to all Sudanese citizens in need, including the displaced and those in SPLA-held areas, to give priority to the provision of relief, and to enable humanitarian organizations to carry out their work effectively and efficiently.

Specifically, the government should:

- * Declare that the country faces famine, and request assistance from the international community accordingly.
- * Endorse the statements of need made by the regional governments of Darfur, Kordofan, and Kassala, and encourage other regional governments to make assessments of need. In addition, cooperate with efforts by the RRC, the donors, and private humanitarian agencies in making assessments of need, and endorse their findings.
- * Ensure that relief is distributed to all Sudanese citizens in accordance with need and the findings of the above surveys, regardless of which part of the country they live in, or assumptions about their political affiliations.
- * Give priority treatment and exemption from customs tariffs to relief commodities imported into the country and transported within it. Give priority allocations of fuel and railway trains to relief. Allow humanitarian organizations to exchange money at the preferential rate and operate with the minimum of controls that are compatible with security.
- * Extend the same privileges to merchants wishing to import grain; enact the provisions in the commercial code prohibiting hoarding of grain during famine, but guarantee that bona fide commercial food transactions will not be interfered with.
- * Restore the authority of the ABS in managing food security policy and the RRC in managing relief.
- * Reaffirm the commitment to Operation Lifeline and the primacy of humanitarian needs over political and military concerns and the ostensible demands of national sovereignty; allow the UN, ICRC and voluntary organizations to fulfil their humanitarian mandates in areas controlled by the SPLA.
- * Cease the forced removal of displaced people from around Khartoum and other

cities, and ensure that displaced people have access to relief and commercial food.

To the Donors

Sudan needs assistance now. Africa Watch calls upon the donors to make large amounts of food relief available immediately. While this food is on the high seas or being delivered inside Sudan, negotiations must continue with the Sudan government concerning the conditions under which this relief is to be distributed. Africa Watch urges the donors to attach the conditions outlined in the section above, and only these conditions. However, in the absence of an agreement, the first commitments of food should still be delivered. No political or other conditions should be attached.

The donors should cooperate with regional governments and the RRC in their assessment of need. They should be prepared to consign food to these authorities. Voluntary organizations have an important role to play, but this should be a monitoring and assessment role, as well as undertaking certain specialized medical interventions, and should not be expected to undertake wholesale food distribution.

Africa Watch is a non-governmental organization created in May 1988 to monitor human rights practices in Africa and to promote respect for internationally recognized standards. Its Executive Director is Rakiya Omaar; its Research Director Richard Carver; Alex de Waal is Research Consultant; Janet Fleischman and Karen Sorensen are Research Associates, and Ben Penglase and Jo Graham are Associates.

Africa Watch is part of Human Rights Watch, an organization that also comprises Americas Watch, Asia Watch, Helsinki Watch and Middle East Watch. The Chairman of Human Rights Watch is Robert L Bernstein and the Vice-Chairman is Adrian DeWind. Aryeh Neier is Executive Director of Human Rights Watch, the Deputy Director is Kenneth Roth, Holly Burkhalter is Washington Director, and Susan Osnos is Press Director.