

## The Sudanese Women's Advocacy Mission to New York and Washington DC (June 2-13, 2000)

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In June 2000, eight women from the war-torn country of Sudan traveled to the United States to present their message to the world. They wished to say that they were tired of the 45-year-old Sudanese civil war and they wanted to announce that they had formed a peace movement and were calling for an active role in the peace negotiations, to help end the war. Their discussions with United Nations officials and high-ranking officers of agencies and non-governmental organizations coincided with the Beijing +5 conference, a conference on women's rights convened by the UN General Assembly that was attended by more than 10,000 female delegates from 180 countries.

### **A Peace Movement Created by Women in Sudan**

In creating their peace mission, the eight Sudanese women succeeded where so far the male political leaders have failed. Their peace movement is composed of 31 political, social, religious, and refugee organizations, from both the North and the South. As elected representatives of the different political and civil society organizations, these women have been meeting outside of Sudan since 1994.

"We have met 11 times. We cannot meet in Sudan. It has taken us a long time to reach this point. We have cohe-

sion and a common cause. Now we are ready to go out into the international world," said one of the women. During the international meetings that they have attended, they have worked on social, economic, and political empowerment issues in order to determine a common ground that cuts across the many divisions of Sudan's heterogeneous society.

The war has taken an extremely heavy toll on all the regions that these women represent. It has so far resulted in 2.9 million deaths, the result of both war and famine. According to the woman representing SPLM-New Sudan<sup>1</sup>, northern Sudanese bombs hit civilian targets in the South such as market places, schools, hospitals, and churches.

The bombardments and famines have created a terrible situation that combines elements of war, apartheid, and ethnocide. Add to the mix disfigurements and mutilations due to the explosion of landmines and a return to the former practices of slavery. This slavery is reminiscent of the trafficking in humans by Northern Sudanese and Arab traders during the 19th century. The abduction of women and children is frequent, according to one of the Southern Sudanese women.

The statistics of this war are appalling: Aside from the deaths, it has caused the displacement of 4.5 million people. 250,000 people are disabled. Countless others are affected by trauma and disease. Eleven million people live in utterly impoverished conditions, and 2.5 million face serious food shortages.

The women are concerned by the war's disastrous effect on the country's economy and the environment. They note that three generations of children have now been deprived of education. As grassroots organizers, they predict the advent of two new famines, one in the Bahr el Ghazal region, the other in Darfur. The reasons for these anticipated famines are drought as well as inter-ethnic warfare and conflict that have prevented the planting of crops.

These eight women know that women and children are disproportionately affected by the war. Eighty percent of all war-related deaths in the past 17 years are believed to be unarmed civilians, mainly women and children. "The abduction of women and children is still going on," says the woman representing the SPLM. They suffer, more than men, from hunger, disease, and the lack of medical supplies. "We are more helpless without our men." In wars women suffer more physical abuse, work harder, and have more family responsibilities. They endure widowhood, emotional trauma, and stress. This is added to the usual constraints faced by African women and other women of the Third World: limited access to education, lack of schooling opportunities for girls, lack of skills and experience, and limited exposure to the outside world.

The war in the Sudan is unique not only for its length but because the country has known only war since its independence in 1956. Disorder and mutiny broke out even before independence, when the British officers of the Southern Equatoria Corps were replaced by northern Sudanese officers. A brief respite in the civil war lasted from 1972, the year of the Addis Ababa Agreement ending the hostilities between North and South, and 1983. But President Ja'far Nimeiri's introduction of the *Sharia* (Islamic Law) in 1983 led to a collapse of the agreement and to a mass exodus of students, civil servants, and organized forces. Over time, this created a huge flow of half a million refugees and four million internally displaced persons (IDPs).

Five of the eight women are from the South, a region long divided by inter-ethnic conflict and actively bombarded by the government. Warring factions in the South fight over water points and animal grazing rights, as part of longstanding tensions between agriculturalists and pastoral peoples. And yet, "we have learned to build our peace movement in the midst of war." As they work out

a common strategy to make their voices heard, they constantly bridge the gap between their cultures and religions. At the peace mission to the United Nations, the lady from Khartoum translated from English into Arabic for the lady from the Nuba Mountains, a region severely bombarded by the Sudanese government.

The UN officials were stunned by the women. "We have never seen this", said a high ranking officer. "We salute the solidarity of these women, who represent the collective voice of anger and determination." While these meetings unfolded in New York, two of the Sudanese women flew to Washington to receive an award from the National Peace Foundation.

### **Using the War to Further the Cause of Sudanese Women**

Despite the heavy toll of the war, the message of these women is one of hope. They see "positive" aspects of the war, in that the war can help women shake off the traditions that have bound them. In Sudan, as in other parts of the world, women have not had the same educational, political, legal, or economic opportunities as men. The Beijing +5 conference on women provided insights for them into how women from other countries have tried to advance the cause of gender equality.

In their efforts to use the war to eliminate all forms of discrimination against women, they will need to address the issue of Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) or Female Genital Cutting, as it is now called. It is applied in North Sudan but not in the South. It was made illegal in Sudan in 1947, but the war caused a step backwards in this area. Southern women living in the North who seek health care sometimes have to endure female genital cutting against their will. The lack of choice is a human rights issue.

While most of the world sees the conflict in Sudan in simplistic terms of North versus South, there are at least eight factions in Sudan. For various historical reasons the South is divided along ethnic, political, and religious lines. Nairobi, in neighboring Kenya, has refugee camps and numerous Southern Sudanese living in exile. Some make regular trips back to the field to maintain contact with the beleaguered region of their origin. In Nairobi, groups and associations of displaced Sudanese women help keep together the Sudanese community and seek to overcome the divisions. These women help each other financially and have initiated self-supporting economic activities. They send the most promising of the Sudanese students to university. They look out for each other in situations of domestic abuse, harassment, and violence. They provide assistance when there are hassles with the Kenyan police.

These groups have decided that, despite ethnic, religious, and political differences, it is in their interest to establish strength through their common fate. And while these groups use as many as eleven southern languages, thereby encouraging the vernacular expression of each ethnic group's identity, most southern Sudanese have in common the lingua franca known as "Juba Arabic". Arabic was imposed by the North upon the South for reasons of cultural domination, but was locally modified to produce a regional dialect. It is ironic that the language of the oppressor is now, along with English, the language of communication in the South.

In Nairobi these women in exile are creating the essence of the future Sudan. They see the diversity of the Sudan, with its multiple ethnicities, religions, and languages, as the Sudan's strength, one that has not been tapped yet. They seize the opportunity of each new international meeting to initiate a dialogue with other factions in the bitterly divided country. They keep adding new women's groups to their peace mission. They think of ways to represent the diversity of the Sudan in a future political structure.

In their talks with UN officials and agency directors in New York, they pondered how the UN system might bring development to crisis situations like the Sudan. The officials were challenged to find ways to bring help to the most neglected victims of the war. The women noted the lack of international legislation to protect the rights of internally-displaced women and children. Given that children are used as soldiers in this war, a convention was drafted protecting child-soldiers. It was submitted to the General Assembly in an attempt to prohibit children under eighteen from participating in any war effort.

Prompting these agencies to make development emergency-friendly was a key item on their agenda. As they put it, they cannot wait for peace and security to come to their country before addressing its development. Another item on their agenda was to draft specific proposals and request funds to help Sudanese women develop leadership skills. As they see it, women need to be trained in mediation and negotiation techniques. They wish to be mainstreamed into the peace negotiations.

Fully aware of the historic role they could play in ending the Sudanese conflict, they want to play a part in training civil society about civil rights and in creating a culture of peace that will reintegrate the fighting soldiers into society and will incorporate peace education into the future school curriculum. They want to help break the terrible momentum of war so as to destroy it as a "total system".

They know the importance of promoting the education of girls, fully aware that the returns are higher for girls than for boys. Having studied the role of women in other African countries in the midst of war and/or civil unrest, they want to carve a niche for themselves. They note that Eritrean women played a major role in the struggle for independence from Ethiopia, and yet were denied active participation in the new government after independence.

Several of these women's groups and political parties are now accessible via electronic mail. This allows for a speedy exchange of information and follow-through with the agencies and international organizations contacted in New York and Washington. It helps break down the isolation of these groups.

## **Pressure on the Sudanese Government from Outside**

Lobbying these international agencies gave the women a sense of their power and helped them assess the various factors perpetuating the Sudanese civil war. Many of these factors are clearly external to the country—which is why the Sudanese women decided to travel to the United States. They wanted to petition the outside world, knowing this might put pressure on the Sudan's internal situation.

They pointed first to the longstanding silence surrounding the Sudanese civil war. This silence can be attributed in part to the world's lack of knowledge of, and interest in, marginalized Sudan. Few articles are written about this "forgotten" war, in comparison, say, to neighboring Congo, or to Sierra Leone and Liberia. The reasons for these differences in press coverage raise all kinds of ethical issues. Is one war more important than another? How many deaths in the Sudan are needed before the international community stops ignoring this war?<sup>2</sup> "We are a forgotten people," said one of the Sudanese women.

The ways in which the outside world plays a direct role in perpetuating the conflict is in selling arms to both sides. These arms enter the country illegally. Also, foreign oil companies are exploiting oil around Bentiu. The oil proceeds help the Sudanese government finance its armed forces.

As these women seek a louder voice as world peace-makers, the conflict continues. Both Northerners and Southerners suffer in a country that has one of the lowest per capita incomes in the world. Yet it is a country with economic potential. The Southern women in the peace mission said that "all the resources are in the South". One of these resources is land. This may help

explain why the government shifted administrative boundary between North and South to include more southern areas in the "North".

Their peace mission gave the Sudanese women an opportunity to identify the greatest obstacles to peace and to develop a strategy. Women are the ones who want change in the Sudan. "Men don't see what you see," said Felicia Ekejiuba, the senior official for Africa at UNIFEM, in New York.

### **Conclusion**

Although the Sudan and its civil war continue to be marginalized by the rest of the world, the Sudanese women representing a coalition of grass roots organizations have broken out of their isolation. While the human and economic situation of the Sudan continues to deteriorate,

these women are on the cutting edge of an international movement that seeks to change the situation of women not only in the Sudan, but in the rest of Africa and the world.

Knowing the necessity of acting fast to stem Sudan's fall into a cycle of intensified poverty and famine, these women are ready to take on major leadership roles. Meanwhile, the male leaders have difficulty even meeting in the same room. Unable to protect civil populations for the past 45 years, these men now need to listen to the women. These women seem to have found it easier to talk to one another and to determine areas of common interest. They are more in contact with civil societies "in the field". They also have more at stake since they are the ones most responsible for the children.

### **End Notes**

1. SPLM - New Sudan represents an area composed of Southern Sudan, Southern Kordofan, and Southern Blue Nile.
2. Sudan outnumbers the deaths in Afghanistan, Algeria, Bosnia, Burundi, Chechnya, Kosovo, Rwanda and Somalia combined.

# The Arab World ... What About Masculinity?