

Transcript of Seminar Seven

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Discussion with Bill Finnegan

Bill Finnegan

Everything in Sudan is on a very large scale. It's the biggest country in Africa. Its civil war is the longest-running war in the world. There have been some two million people killed in the current round of the war, which has lasted seventeen years--the previous round, which lasted seventeen years, started in 1955. There are currently more than four million Sudanese living as displaced people. To put these numbers into perspective--two million is more than all the casualties suffered in Chechnya, Bosnia, Rwanda, and Somalia combined. But Sudan's civil war goes on almost entirely outside the penumbra of world attention, mainly because it is happening in a remote part of East Africa. If Milosevic were to do in the Balkans anything like what the government of the Sudan has done--the government routinely bombs schools, refugees camps, and hospitals in Southern Sudan from the air; there's one hospital that was hit at least fifteen times last year--I think it's safe to say the West would respond even more forcefully than Nato did in Kosovo last year.

The war is conventionally described as a conflict between the Muslim Arab North and the Black Christian South. But it's really much more fractured than that. The current government is in fact Islamist, and Arab-dominated, and its base is in the North, in Khartoum, the capital, and the main armed opposition is in the South, where the people are black and many (not most) are nominally Christian. But the South, which is home to a vast number of different ethnic groups, is not united against the government, and the rebel movement itself has often fractured along ethnic lines. The main army in the South, the Sudanese People's Liberation Army, or SPLA, has at times been down to controlling just a sliver of land, though at the moment it's in a fairly good position, holding a lot of territory--most of Southern Sudan, where the government really controls just a series of garrison towns. The SPLA is also in an alliance, called the National Democratic Alliance, with Arab groups from the North who are in opposition to the government and who are also fighting inside the country, mainly in the East. So it is fair to say that the Khartoum government has not exercised control over a large part of its own territory for the last fifteen years, and that we are thus talking, to an extent, about a failed state. We're also talking about a place where a tremendous amount of international relief has been pouring in for many years now--something like two billion dollars over the past decade. Still, there is no sign of imminent humanitarian intervention.

I won't try to rehearse the history of the country, but I do want to say that Sudan is as good an example as you'll find in Africa of modern state boundaries badly drawn. Within its borders, drawn by the British, are not just traditional enemies but the Arab-speaking Muslims of the North, who for many centuries ran a huge slave trade out of the South, and their traditional human prey, the black tribes of the Sudd, including the Dinka and the Nuer. And so the antipathy, the opposition, the distrust, between these two basic groups--blacks and Arabs -- runs incredibly deep. And yet they were roped together into one state. The British, when they administered Sudan, managed, after much trouble, to stop the slave trade--basically by dividing the country in two. They ordered Arab traders out of the South. They let Christian missionaries in, but otherwise ran the South as a closed territory. And they really oriented it not towards Khartoum but towards their black colonies farther South, Kenya and Uganda. And yet virtually all the infrastructure, all the colonial investment, went to the North, and when independence became inevitable, and the Northern leaders, who were generally better educated and more sophisticated than their counterparts in the much-less-developed South, demanded that the South remain part of Sudan, the British agreed,

essentially without consulting the South. The Southern leaders basically said, We refuse to be ruled by Khartoum. And so the first round of the civil war started, a few months before the British had even left. A lot of the country's natural resources are in the South-- primarily water and oil. And that's what a lot of the war was and is about--the North wanting access to those resources.

A peace agreement was reached in 1972, with the South being guaranteed a significant degree of autonomy. The peace lasted until 1983, when Khartoum rescinded that autonomy and the war resumed. During this round of the war, there have actually been several changes in government. The last one was in 1989--a military coup that installed the radical Islamist regime which still rules Khartoum today. This government -- the Turabi-Bashir regime, it's sometimes called--actually represents a political tendency, hardline political Islam, that is relatively small in Sudan, even in the North. But its leaders have been clever, penetrating the army and civil service and other key sectors in order to seize and consolidate power. The government has had to resort to a tremendous amount of repression in both the North and the South--religious repression of Christians, but also of the most popular local forms of Islam, which are Sufi sects traditionally aligned with the main Northern political parties, which are in turn essentially family political dynasties. It's extremely unlikely that the current ruling party could ever win a free and fair election, even in the North, against either of the two big traditional parties, which retain large popular followings. But the

government has cultivated foreign allies among both the other Islamist regimes, such as Iran, and the fundamentalist powers, such as Saudi Arabia, particularly for its war in the South, which it advertises as a holy jihad.

The Turabi-Bashir regime actually manifests a weird combination of religious fervor, hardheaded Machiavellian politics, and primitive capital accumulation. There has been a great deal of profiteering among the regime's inner circle as state-owned enterprises and agriculture are privatized under the deregulated, mafia capitalism that their version of political Islam prescribes. Serious oil development is now under way, with China, Iraq, Malaysia, and a big Canadian company called Talisman deeply involved in the regime's effort to turn Sudan's oil, which is mainly found in the South, into the country's financial salvation. There has also been extensive covert government support for Islamist movements and terrorists in neighboring countries, particularly Egypt. The most famous of these, of course, is Osama bin Laden, who was a guest of the government for many years. He's now gone, but there are other radical Islamist groups reportedly still operating from Sudan.

The United States has, of course, broken off all diplomatic relations with Sudan. It's declared the regime a sponsor of international terrorism, and imposed comprehensive economic sanctions.

On the humanitarian front, some very interesting things have been going on in Sudan. (I should mention that I haven't been there recently. I was last in Sudan in late 1998.) The international aid presence in the country, both North and South, is, of course, huge. There was a terrible famine in the South in 1988. Something like a quarter of a million people died. This was great business for the aid industry, and so much aid flooded in that a big consortium was formed, called Operation Lifeline Sudan, which today has about thirty-five NGOs in it, plus UNICEF and the World Food Program. OLS, as it's called, was originally formed to coordinate an emergency airlift of food into the South. But the emergency has now gone on for ten, twelve years. It's a permanent emergency. In 1998 there was another famine.

OLS has access agreements with the government and the SPLA, though the government has been in the habit of periodically forbidding relief flights into the South. The OLS respects the sovereignty of the Sudanese government, even though the government has no real control over vast amounts of territory. And so OLS has been rightly accused, when these flight bans come down--and one came down in '98, during the famine, and OLS respected it, and did not fly to areas where people were starving--of complicity with the

government's policy of deliberately starving its own people. It's actually the most blatant modern use of food as a weapon, of deliberate starvation, that I know of. The SPLA also uses food as a weapon and, though the scale of its human rights abuses may not match the government's, it's still pretty stunning. This is all, actually, postmodern war--the armed forces largely avoid each other; civilians are very much the targets. The great majority of the two million people who have died in this round of the civil war are, in fact, not soldiers, but Southern civilians. The great majority of the displaced are also Southerners--most of them now living in terrible conditions in the North. And, militarily, the conflict is a stalemate--quite unwinnable by any side in the foreseeable future.

So, as you can imagine, it's an incredibly difficult place for all these international organizations to work--a deeply compromising place. All sides in the war--and there are, besides the SPLA and the government, many smaller armies, even private militias, under the command of various warlords -- seem to have come to accept that this crazy, desperate situation--the permanent emergency--is simply how it is, even how it ought to be. The so-called international community should be feeding the Sudanese people while we fight, loot, rustle cattle, run businesses, and take whatever we can take. Civilians starve on both sides of the front, and food aid very much keeps the combatants in power. The government, in particular, in the garrison towns it controls, would have a political powder keg on its hands if the people in those towns were starving, so the food aid to those areas is essential to its war effort.

Meanwhile, in Northern Sudan, there is modern, irrigated farming along the Nile, and the country exports grain on a large scale. Last year Sudan exported more than 500 million dollars' worth of agricultural products, mostly to the Gulf States and East Asia. Nearly all of the country's foreign exchange comes from this trade. While people in the South--people under the government's control--are starving, and others, in both the South and the North, are being fed by the international community, the government exports grain. And the foreign exchange earned by those exports is then largely spent on the international arms market, so that the government can keep fighting the war. This cycle is quite clear, quite graphic, quite appalling--and very little is being seriously done to stop it.

But then last year, early in the year, several of the large aid organizations--CARE USA, Oxfam America, World Vision, Save the Children US--broke ranks and did something fairly unprecedented. They violated their neutrality. These are groups that work on both sides of the war in Sudan and that traditionally try to stay out of politics, arguing that they're only trying to feed hungry people, not take sides, etc. And these groups last year suddenly came out publicly, basically urging the Western powers to push harder for peace in Sudan. Their leaders met with Madeleine Albright, arguing for a change in US policy. The US, while loudly and consistently hostile to the government in Khartoum, supports, much more quietly, the SPLA in the South. Albright has met with the SPLA leader, John Garang. Uganda, an ally of ours, is a main backer of the SPLA. Various neighboring countries have supported the rebels at various times -- in fact, the SPLA has gone through the whole cycle of the Cold War, including a long stretch as Marxists with Ethiopia as their main backer (when Ethiopia was a Soviet client). Israel--a lot of countries have helped the rebels. And in recent years the US has helped those countries that help the rebels. We're on the SPLA's side. But now these big aid organizations were suddenly coming out and saying, 'Enough. Enough side-taking. Enough war-enabling.' They were arguing for a serious and dramatic effort to achieve what they were calling a just peace, which would include many of the things that the SPLA has been fighting for--most importantly, self-determination for the South.

I should probably pause here and address the obvious question--whether this is in fact a war for independence. It's a delicate question, for many reasons. The official position of the SPLA--and remember that they're now fighting in an alliance with Northern opposition groups--is that they're not fighting for independence. They're fighting for a democratic, secular state against this intolerant, imperialist, Islamist mafia in Khartoum. And yet popular sentiment in the South is very much in favor of secession. So self-determination is

a sort of compromise platform. The idea is that a peace agreement would be signed, refugees would be allowed to go home, and the South would enjoy a healthy degree of autonomy. Then, after a couple of years, there would be a referendum in the South on independence. Everybody supposedly agrees on this idea -- the SPLA coalition, its backers, and so on. In fact, none of Sudan's neighbors support the idea. None of them want to see a free vote on secession. Kenya, Uganda, Ethiopia, Eritrea--not to mention Egypt, which is the regional superpower and the main American ally--none of them would support an independent South. For governments in Africa, the idea of secession, partition, independence, is just anathema--even though Eritrea fought long and hard for, and achieved, its independence. All of Sudan's neighbors have minority populations who would like to secede. Indeed, the government of Sudan is supporting a number of these very groups. Still, none of Sudan's neighbors want to see an independent Southern Sudan. Anyway, this recent move by the big aid groups may not sound like much, but it's actually been compared by some people to that decisive moment, long ago, when the people who created MSF broke away from the ICRC in Biafra. The problem in Sudan is similar: that the operating version of neutrality has simply become unacceptable, that the situation is too dire. This really is very unusual. These aid groups are making good money in Sudan. These are big contracts. They're making good money, and they have been in Sudan for a long, long time. And yet they're saying, 'Enough. It may be off the media radar, but this war is just too terrible. It has gone on just too long.' As far as I know, their motives for doing this are good--although I'm sure there are other theories. They're basically saying to the US government, 'You should be speaking with Khartoum. Apply the pressure that only the US can apply. In cartoon terms--get Richard Holbrooke and these guys into a hotel and don't let them leave until they settle this thing. Actually get serious about the diplomatic side of things. Take measures that will put real pressure on all sides.'

Now that's a risky thing for the aid agencies to do, in part because they work in the South, and the SPLA will inevitably see this initiative as them saying, 'Stop backing the SPLA, start being evenhanded.' As it is, the US is backing the SPLA, and theirs is the just cause, and Khartoum is the bad guy, the rogue state. A change in US policy that involves increased contact with Khartoum can only hurt the SPLA, or so the SPLA leadership will calculate. Which brings up a crucial point--that there really isn't any significant desire for peace on any side of this war. There are millions of ordinary Sudanese who want peace, of course, but they are, unfortunately, not a powerful constituency. They have no real leverage within the current dynamic. For the people who are running it, on the other hand, it's still a very profitable war. On both sides.

US policy is actually dissonant. Not everyone at the State Department is on board with this 'Isolate Khartoum, don't speak to them, don't have any conversation that could possibly lead to a peace conference' approach. In fact, there are other voices, especially outside the State Department, but also within the Department--Thomas Pickering, for instance, who would like to reopen the US Embassy--that don't think this is right. Just for a start, American power in Sudan is now effectively nonexistent. US policies are based on almost no information. I'm sure you all remember the Cruise missile attack on a Sudanese pharmaceutical plant. It was unbelievable. Nobody defends it anymore. Whoops, it wasn't Osama bin Laden's place. Whoops, no nerve gas. If the US had had any listening post at all in Khartoum, that fiasco would presumably never have happened. The domestic political effect was, incidentally, disastrous. The democratic opposition in Khartoum was just gathering strength at the time, and that attack was simply the end of them.

So this phobic US policy--'Rogue state, terrorist state, isolate them' -- was very much the target of this recent political push by the big aid agencies. The main risk being taken by the organizations, again, was that the SPLA would kick them out of the South. And, ironically enough, they were at first protected from that largely, I gather, by USAID, which apparently told the SPLA to keep its hands off CARE and Oxfam and company. This has been a very hot debate -- and indicates another obvious fissure in US policy. Then, a couple of months ago, a rather startling piece of legislation was passed in

Congress--authorizing the distribution of American food aid directly to The SPLA. This measure, if implemented, would shift US support for the SPLA dramatically into the open--and would also, presumably, turn international aid organizations into military targets. To understand the domestic politics that might motivate Congress to pass such drastic, micro-managing legislation, it's useful to recall the one or two issues in Sudan that do get some attention in this country. One is the persecution of Christians. Not only Abe Rosenthal but Pat Robertson and quite a few other people on the religious right are up in arms about that. Another is slavery, which has seen a terrible, large-scale revival in the course of this war--and stories about modern-day slavery tend to galvanize many different American constituencies. And so, despite furious resistance from the aid organizations, and from other people with experience in Sudan, this legislation, backed by a hardline faction at the State Department and the National Security Council--including Susan Rice, assistant secretary of state for Africa, and Gayle Smith, at NSC--was passed by Congress in December. Its implementation, however, is discretionary. It's up to the President to use it or not, and so far Clinton, apparently listening to cooler heads, has ordered that it not be used.

The EU generally takes a softer line than the Americans. France takes a French line, which enables French companies to make a lot of money in Sudan, even to broker arms deals--although the main arms supplier for both sides is still China. The British have sent their ambassador back. The Canadians are opening an embassy in Khartoum, very much over US objections. And one of the odd features of Sudan policy debates in the West is the unusually large role played in them by NGOs, many of which have, after all, major operations in the country and, thus, not only expertise but real interests at stake. It's often said that the war in Sudan would quickly end if the international community would just stop feeding both sides--that Sudan's politicians would suddenly become accountable, in that situation, to the people whom they themselves should actually be feeding. But I'm afraid that that is not what would happen. At least, there's been no indication to date that the major combatants--the SPLA, the Turabi-Bashir regime, or any of the other forces -- are ever given serious pause by the suffering they cause. Certainly, simply cutting off food aid would be playing an unconscionable game of chicken with the lives of millions of people. At the same time, it is said that, if the amount of money being spent on food and emergency aid in Sudan were suddenly devoted instead to repairing all the war damage, the country could be made physically whole in a matter of months. That's how enormous this relief operation is -- and how utterly wasteful this war is.

The most recent development in the war, and it's an interesting one, has involved an escalation in the struggle between the SPLA and the big aid organizations. About two weeks ago it seems the SPLA produced what it calls a Memorandum of Understanding, which it wants all the NGOs operating within its territory to sign. This Memorandum officially recognizes the SPLA as the government of the territory it controls--of, that is, a vast, constantly fluctuating area that the rebels like to call New Sudan. This is generally seen as a strong-arm tactic. If successful, it will allow the SPLA to collect landing fees on relief flights, to compel the aid agencies to hire their people, and generally to control the NGOs to a far greater extent than it has in the past. There's a lot of debate going on right now among the aid groups about whether or not to sign. The deadline is March 1--less than a week from today. Some groups are signing. If they don't sign, the SPLA says it will kick them out of Southern Sudan. MSF International has decided to sign, while MSF Holland has decided not to sign--and, if necessary, to pull out its people. It's not clear yet what Care, Oxfam, World Vision, Save the Children, or the other groups who've taken the initiative to try to influence US and UN policy will do -- though I understand that some of them are already pulling their people out to Nairobi. It's certainly gone too far for USAID to protect them now. This is a major showdown--and could become a humanitarian disaster, if many groups are in fact forced to pull out.

Although this new Memorandum clearly is a strong-arm move by the SPLA, it could also turn out, in practice, I think, to increase accountability on all sides--because the

international NGOs in the South, both those working inside Operation Lifeline Sudan and those working outside the consortium, without access agreements with the government, do not necessarily all have clean hands themselves. We tend to think of them as the good guys, noble foreign humanitarians with no ulterior motives, no corruption within their ranks, but in truth they are also susceptible to corruption--particularly where they are answerable to no local authority. The SPLA, whatever its liberationist pretensions, is really just an army, and is therefore about the farthest thing from a democratic movement. Still, it could conceivably serve, certainly better than it does now, as a Sudanese ground check on the operations of some of these international organizations who are working in the war zone. It's a very complicated situation, and the role of humanitarian relief is, as it always is, more problematic on the ground than it looks from a great distance--or on TV. And sooner or later the Sudanese are going to have to resume responsibility for their own country.