

# **RESOURCE ACCESS: A MAJOR CAUSE OF ARMED CONFLICT IN THE SUDAN. THE CASE OF THE NUBA MOUNTAINS**

Mohamed Suliman

Institute for African Alternatives  
London, United Kingdom

## **ABSTRACT**

The famine in southern Sudan is threatening the lives of more than half a million southerners, especially in Bahr El Ghazal province. The famine has provoked a debate into its causes. Most commentators in the United Kingdom accused the war of being the main culprit. A few days ago, in the House of Commons, a conservative MP stood up and said that the war in the Sudan, and all wars in Africa for that matter, are caused by the political vacuum left behind by colonial powers and wondered if something could be done about that! Clare Short, the Minister for Overseas Development, called the Hounrable Gentleman foolish to ask implicitly for the return of colonialism. The war and the famine, she said, are the responsibility of the leadership on both sides of the conflict. They have to stop the war now and everything would go back to normal. She sat down happy in the feeling that she had defeated the argument of her conservative opponent. The war, according to Clare Short, is all about African leaders. The BBC, however, knew better. Commenting on the pictures of emaciated southern Sudanese children, its newsreader described the war as between Muslim Arabs in the north and Christian Africans in the south. The war is thus a religious and ethnic war. All three interpretations belong to traditional schools of conflict analysis, which explain all armed conflicts in Africa as ethnic, tribal, cultural, religious, etc. These interpretations throw the stick of ethnicity at all conflicts and see there, it devours them all. This is not only unhelpful, but could seriously hamper efforts at genuine conflict management and conflict resolution.

A study of all three major violent conflicts in the Sudan shows the futility of this traditional approach to conflict analysis and conflict resolution.

## **INTRODUCTION**

In the web of causes that collectively precipitate violent conflicts in the Sudan, scarcity, resulting from denying or limiting access to renewable natural resources and from growing environmental degradation, stands out as probably the most important factor. That is: violent conflicts arise mainly out of economic and ecological distortions.

The traditional assumption that violent conflicts in Africa emanate from ethnic, religious or cultural differences is seriously limited. Except for 'old' conflicts, ethnic dichotomies appear to be rather a consequence than a cause of violent conflicts. However, ethnic, religious and cultural dichotomies are very potent as people's perceptions of conflict – perceptions held by many fighters on both sides of the conflict divide. The longer, however, a conflict persists, the more these ethnic, religious and cultural factors come into play. In an old conflict, when even the initial causes have petered out or died away, that 'abstract', ideological ethnicity, becomes an active material and social force.

### **Denying or Limiting Access to Natural and Social Resources**

Recent research (Beachler 1993; Homer-Dixon 1994) has shown that ecological degradation can act as a

cause or catalyst of violent conflicts. Greater emphasis, however, has been given, in some of this research, to the impact of ecological degradation than to the implications of denying or limiting access to natural resources. The focus on the degradation of the natural resource base imparts by default greater significance to the causes of environmental degradation, namely, land-use, human and animal population growth, climatic variations and so on. Such conflict analysis tends to limit conflict resolution to tackling the causes of ecological degradation. The proposed conflict resolution mechanisms are thus more technical than economic or political. For example, better water management, soil conservation, reforestation, family planning to curb population growth, etc. The crucial issues of the economy, the state and politics are inadvertently pushed aside. Persistent inequity in resource allocation, which is inherently political and economic, and the role of the beneficiaries and perpetrators of the status quo, are thus taken out of the limelight.

However, in all group conflicts we scrutinised in the Sudan, access to natural and social resources expressed in terms of justice, fairness, equitable sharing and equal development was the primary concern of people in arms.

### **Fragile Ecology, Fragile Social Peace**

In the Sudan, as in most other parts of the continent, human and animal life depends on the delicate balance of soil, climate, water and flora. Since the mid-1970s this equilibrium has been upset, particularly in the vast arid and semi-arid areas of the northern half of the country. In addition to the persistent drought, unsustainable methods of land-use, such as large-scale mechanised rain-fed farming and overgrazing in marginal lands, are destroying the Sudano-Sahelian ecozone in which 70 percent of the population live. Millions of people have been forced to abandon their homelands and have become displaced (in Arabic *naziheen*); so many in fact that the Sudan has the highest proportion of internally displaced people in the world, one in every six.

### **The Resource-Miners**

The slow processes of natural wear and tear on the environment have been accelerated enormously by the unprecedented extraction of renewable resources. This is being carried out by members of the northern Sudanese traditional merchant class, known as the Jellaba, prompted by their integration into the world market in the restricted role of extractors of primary resources. In addition, loan conditions imposed by the World Bank and the IMF have considerably boosted the restructuring of Sudan's resource utilisation away from local needs and the local market towards the demands of the international market.

This has been compounded by a steady decline in international terms of trade, brought about by the collapse of primary commodity prices, which had a knock-on effect on the local market, where terms of trade have also worsened. To maintain their living standards, the peasants and pastoralists have had to produce more from a shrinking resource base. If they fail to do so, they have no option but to join the millions of dispossessed and asset-less poor.

### **Mobility Curtailed**

In the past, those in distress simply moved to a richer ecozone nearby. However, this 'exit option' is increasingly being hampered by an expanding population, large-scale mechanised farming, political and ethnic tensions and the general worsening of the environmental situation. As central government control of law and order in the countryside is weakened, physical security considerations are also becoming increasingly important in the decision of people to abandon their homelands and move to urban centres, where food is in greater abundance and physical security is relatively better maintained.

The movement of people and herds from one affected ecozone to another, which is already occupied by a different ethnic group, is a recipe for tension and hostility. Conditional agreements used to be reached when the need for sharing land was occasional, but now that this need is for prolonged periods (or even for permanent sharing), the strains are much greater. These difficulties are particularly prevalent in the South and in the drought-stricken areas of Darfur and Kordofan.

### **The War in Southern Sudan**

The return of civil war to the Sudan in 1983 had generally been regarded as a typical ethnic and religious conflict between northern Muslim Arabs and southern Christian black Africans. While this categorisation was true for the Sudan's first civil war (1955-1972), ecological degradation over the past three decades, caused mainly by climate variations and large-scale mechanised farming, has added a new dimension to the old conflict. It has almost transformed the nature of the war from a classic ethnic strife into a resource struggle triggered by ecological scarcity (Suliman 1993).

The quest for land, water and oil in the South to replenish the already degraded northern resource-base has driven some Jellaba and their state to wage war against their own people. Although most warriors on opposite sides of the conflict divide still perceive the war as one about ethnicity, culture and religion, it is our contention that the current conflict is mainly about land, water and oil.

### **The Oil**

In April 1981, Chevron, the American Oil Company, announced the discovery of commercial deposits of oil in the Unity Field in its south-western concession. Recoverable reserves from Unity and the adjacent Heglig fields were officially estimated at about 236 million barrels. Confirmed oil reserves, for the whole of the Sudan, are estimated at 2,000 million barrels: enough to earn the country some US \$ 10,000 million, or cover its projected energy needs for ten years.

Original plans to process the oil locally were deferred in September 1982; instead, with Chevron's encouragement, the Nimeiri government opted for the construction of a refinery and export terminal south of Port Sudan, linked to the oil fields by a 1,400 km pipeline.

This sudden reversal alerted people in the South to the probable intentions of Nimeiri and his backers among the Jellaba. One of the first acts of the Sudanese People Liberation Army, SPLA, was to attack Chevron's oil field operations, forcing the company to suspend work in February 1984. Since then, and in spite of pressure from Nimeiri and all subsequent governments, oil operations in the south-west had halted.

### **The Water**

Since the beginning of the century, the idea of constructing a canal to drain the Sudd marshes of the White Nile at Jonglei has been debated by developmentalists and environmentalists. Motivated by the desire for more water downstream and the prospect of uncovering a vast expanse of fertile land, the Jonglei canal is one of the most intensively researched water projects in the world. What has always been conspicuous by its absence, however, is any serious assessment of how the local people, some 1,700,000 *Dinka*, *Shilluk* and *Nuer*, *Murle*, *Bari* and *Anuak*, would be directly and indirectly affected by the project and what they actually felt about it.

Actual construction of the Canal began in 1978 as a joint Sudanese-Egyptian project working with the French Company CCI. Aimed at conserving some 4 billion cubic meter of water lost annually through

evaporation the operation was forcibly suspended in 1984, having completed 250 km of the proposed 360 km, following a series of attacks on the construction site by the SPLA.

Egypt desperately wants the additional water, represented by its half share in Jonglei, to help grow food for its burgeoning population. Before the expansion of mechanised farming, the Sudan was not under the same pressure to obtain water. Since the mid-1970s, however, water has become an important limiting factor for agricultural expansion in many parts of northern Sudan.

The 450,000 *Dinka*, *Shilluk* and *Nuer* who were directly affected, feared the drastic changes the canal would bring to their way of life. They could not accept the prospect of life without migration to the *toich* (marshes) during the dry season, when they would find fish and improve the milk yield of their cows. They also feared the prospect of alien people being settled in their midst, and the possibility of conflict. Rumours that Egyptian farmers would be sent to the canal area immediately sparked student riots in Juba in November 1974. There was justifiable mistrust of the project from the southerners who saw the North and Egypt benefiting while their own lives were irreversibly changed, and not for the better. By drying out the swamps and taking away the 'grass curtain', the canal would open up the entire Sudd area for mechanised farming, the domain of the Jellaba, and also allow the north to move military equipment and troops into the South with greater ease. Thus the project's giant earth-excavating machine, the biggest in the world, was one of the SPLA's earliest targets, much to the chagrin of the governments of Egypt and the Sudan.

### **The Land**

The fertile savannah plains of acacia trees and tall grass are where the 'bread-basket' was envisioned by the Nimeiri regime. More predictable rains make these plains suitable for sorghum, millet, maize, sesame, groundnuts and cotton. The huge expansion of large-scale mechanised farming, which constantly devours new land, spread into southern Kordofan and the northern parts of Upper Nile Province. The owners of the mechanised farms, having exhausted vast tracts in the North, pushed inexorably southwards into the area inhabited by the Nilotic tribes, the major cattle economies of the South. The Jellaba knew that the draining of the Jonglei canal would open a huge area for large-scale mechanised farming. The military looked forward to the drying of the swamps, which would remove this huge obstacle before their armed vehicles and hasten their movement southwards.

## **WAR IN DARFUR: THE INCESSANT STRUGGLE BETWEEN THE OASIS FARMERS AND THE DESERT NOMADS**

### **The Drought in North Darfur and Kordofan**

Drought is an inherent feature of the arid regions of western Sudan, north Darfur and Kordofan. There have been five drought disasters over the last hundred years. Two of these, however, have occurred in the last twenty years alone. In these regions, lying between the isohyets 100 mm and 600 mm, a mere 100 mm decline in the mean annual precipitation could bring people and livestock to the brink of disaster.

Rainfall data covering the period 1950-1990 reveal three major spans of drought, a relatively mild one in the mid-1960s, and two severe droughts in 1972-1974 and 1982-1984. In all three cases the drought was accompanied by the flaring of skirmishes, the worst of which took place in the mid-1980s and assumed the form of a regular armed conflict (Suliman and Omer 1994).

The diagram correlates rainfall data to conflict intensity over a 30 year period (1957-1990). The diagram reveals two interesting patterns: an increase in incidents of conflict with the corresponding decrease in

rainfall and a lag between minimum rainfall and maximum conflict intensity of roughly one year, a relaxation period for the impact of the drought to take full effect.

The diagram also exposes an anomaly between the impact of the drought of the mid-1970s and that of the mid-1980s. Both are almost equal in intensity; the latter, however, causing far greater social turbulence.

The drought of the 1980s brought famine, displacement and war on a much larger scale than that of the 1970s. Possible explanations of this apparent discrepancy are:

- In the 1970s agricultural food production of the Sudan was geared towards the internal market. In the 1980s it was geared towards export;
- During the 1970s regional food and other reserves mitigated the impact of the drought, the 1980s found these reserves depleted;
- In the 1970s the local traditional administration was still functioning and supportive. In the 1980s it was abolished by central government; and,
- In the 1970s there was no large-scale warfare in the Sudan or neighbouring countries. By the 1980s there was civil war in the Sudan and the Chadian-Libyan conflict was raging.

This vindicates the plausible assumption, that, by itself, environmental degradation can rarely precipitate an armed conflict and only in combination with other economic and social factors does it function as cause of violence.

## **THE ARMED CONFLICT IN THE NUBA MOUNTAINS**

### **The Nuba People**

The Nuba Mountains lie southern Kordofan, almost exactly in the geographical centre of the Sudan covering an area of 50,000 sq km. The Nuba hills rise sharply some 500 to 1,000 meters from the plains. The area is classed as a sub-humid region. The rainy season extends from mid-May to mid-October, and annual rainfall ranges between 400 mm to 800 mm, allowing grazing and seasonal rain-fed agriculture.

The term Nuba is often used to refer to the inhabitants of the Nuba Mountains. The Nuba number 1.5 million. The various Nuba people make up some 90 percent of the population of the area, while the rest are *Baggara* (cattle herders), mainly *Hawazma* and *Misiriya* Arabs. The *Baggara* moved into the mountains from the west and north around 1800. There is also a smaller minority of Arab traders, the so-called *Jellaba*.

The term Nuba refers to ‘a bewildering complexity’ of ethnic groups (Nadel 1947). Stevenson (1984) identified more than 50 languages and dialect clusters, falling into ten groups. Many authors have argued that the term ‘Nuba’ was originally an alien label used to group together all peoples living in the hills area who were seen as ‘black Africans’ as opposed to the *Baggara* Arabs (Baumann 1987; Nadel 1947). When the term has been used by the Nuba people to describe themselves, it has not always been consistently applied in portraying who is or is not Nuba (and therefore what distinguishes Nuba from non-Nuba). Nadel (1947) commented:

*The people of a certain tribe will describe all similar groups of which they know or with which they come in contact as being their ‘race’ but would be uncertain into which category to place other groups outside their kin ... In the opinion of a Korongo man all the surrounding tribes were Nuba, but not the people of Dilling, whom he believed to be Arab.*

Despite the problematic involved in using the term, one can reasonably assume that the contemporary ethnic type presented by the Nuba today was formally widespread in the Sudan but was forced to retreat by incoming Arabs to the mountains where there was adequate water supply and easy defense. As MacMichel (1912) wrote:

*In the earliest days and for thousands of subsequent years the ancestors of the Nuba probably held the greater part of this country (i.e. what is now known as Kordofan), except the northern most deserts. Beaten back by other races that ruled the Nile banks in successive generations, by tribes from the interior, and finally by the nomad Arabs, the Nuba have now retired to the mountains of southern Kordofan.*

In spite of the previous difficulty in using the term Nuba for all non-Arab inhabitants of the mountains, successive calamities have imposed a common destiny upon these peoples and have been conducive to the development of a loose unity and a growing feeling of a common 'Nuba-ness' among them. Their mutual historical experiences – the slave-raids, the Turkish and British invasions and the Jellaba domination – as well as the existence of something akin to a common Nuba culture permit commentators now to speak of one Nuba people.

This classification is also justified by the identification of the Nuba by others and the consequent implications of this identification on individual Nuba in relation to non-Nuba and among themselves. Thus in a sense, a common ethnicity has been forced onto these diverse peoples by the actions and definitions of other more powerful groups.

The Nuba identity is therefore subjectively defined in contrast to the Baggara Arabs of Kordofan and Darfur regions, and objectively determined by shared space, comparable cultural values and similar economic activities.

### **History of the Nuba**

Having no written language, the distant history of the Nuba peoples has largely been forgotten. As Nadel (1947) noted:

*The traditions and memories of the peoples themselves yield sparse information. It often seems as if historical traditions had been cut short by the overpowering experience of the Mahdist regime (1881-1898).*

Of all Nuba peoples, those of Tegali have the best historical records because of the strong links they had with the Funj Kingdom of Sennar. However, this information does not go beyond the mid-16th century. The more recent history of the Nuba goes back to the early 16th century at the point when large groups of Juhaina pastoral tribes began to move south-westwards into the plains of northern Kordofan, ultimately confining the Nuba to the region now known as the Nuba Mountains. This great movement coincided with the establishment of the Kingdom of Sennar by Umara Dungas around 1504 AD.

In spite of the lack of certainty about the Nuba's distant past, most authors seem content to assume that the Nuba have lived in the area they now occupy for a very long time. Some of Nadel's informants seem to attest to this. When asked about previous places of settlement the people replied, 'we have always lived here'. It is also possible to assume that during most of their recent history the Nuba have been farmers living mainly on the plains.

### **The Tegali Kingdom**

The Nuba peoples seem to have lived traditionally in separate communities, with the exception of the Kingdom of Tegali, which was a relatively powerful settlement; at its peak (during the 18th century) it laid many smaller communities under its tribute.

The Tegali Kingdom was founded in the Tegali hills in the extreme north-east, the area nearest to the riverain centres of Islam.

Contact with the Funji Kingdom was therefore quickly established. In the Tegali tradition a holy man, known as Muhammed al-Jaali came to Tegali about the year 1530 to preach Islam, married the daughter of the chief of Tegali and settled in the area. His son, al-Jaili abu Garida, is said to have become the first in the dynasty of Tegali kings (1560-1585).

Islam was thus introduced into Tegali some 400 years ago. It is significant to note that the exposure to Islam did not seem to create any crisis in the people's identity as Nuba. Indeed one Funji Sultan, the despotic Badi abu Shilukh (1724-1762), had even recruited mercenary soldiers from the Tegali region – the so-called Mamelukes – and appointed them chiefs in place of the old nobility.

Many Nuba chiefs held the title of Sultan. They dressed in traditional Muslim clothes and also held the position of *Kujur* (shaman), a pivotal role in traditional Nuba religious life.

Despite the strong relations between the Funj and Tegali kingdoms, the hill communities themselves remained unscathed and were not occupied or conquered neither by the Tegali nor the Funj. The latter seemed content with the levies in slaves and gold it received from Tegali. It was therefore possible for the Nuba in the hills to remain locally autonomous.

Beside the attraction of gold in the Sheibun area, the fact that Nuba people were sturdy soldiers worked in a curious way to their disadvantage, because it encouraged continuous attacks from slave raiders who were looking for potential soldiers.

### **The Baggara Enter the Mountains**

As mentioned before, it was around 1800 that the Baggara tribes, which had previously roamed the plains of Kordofan and Darfur, began to move into the valleys of the Nuba Mountains in search of water and pasture for their growing herds.

The Baggara are said to have divided the plains among themselves and driven the Nuba uphill. A large part of the Nuba area fell to the *Hawazma* (a Baggara tribe). The advent of the Baggara in the mountains coincided with the beginning of slave raiding.

Driven into the hills, the Nuba turned to terrace farming of the relatively barren hill soil. Gradually barter-trade relations began to unite the two communities in a strong reciprocal, albeit asymmetrical, relationship.

Sargar (1922) mentions relations of co-operation, which stretch across the Nuba-Baggara divide. He wrote:

*Each sub-tribe of Baggara protected, as far as possible, the hills of its own zone, in retain for supplies of grain and slaves.*

These local Baggara/Nuba relations had, not infrequently, created inter-Baggara rivalries, when a Baggara sub-tribe defended 'their' Nuba from the machinations of another Baggara group. In some areas,

Baggara/Nuba relations were even much closer than the protection agreements indicated, with some Baggara assuming titles and 'posts' in Nuba tribes. Inter-marriages were also recorded (Suleiman, R. 1993). However, the extent and limits of these cross-cutting ties varied greatly from one area to another.

These sporadic good relations should not obscure the fact that the most prominent feature of Baggara-Nuba relations was the slave raids by the Baggara upon the harassed Nuba communities.

These raids were especially widespread during the Turkish rule, known in the Sudan as the Turkiyya, which began with the conquest of the Sudan by Egypt in 1821. The Turkish governors of Kordofan led many expeditions into the Nuba Mountains in search of gold and slaves but never made serious attempts to administer the mountains directly. As Stevenson (1984) noted: 'with this strange mixture of trade and enslavement, the Nuba people continued through, and endured the Turkiyya.'

### **The Mahdiyya**

The rise of the Mahdist movement in the 1880s brought fresh trouble to the peoples of the mountains. Some supported the Mahdi others resisted him. This difference in approach to the Mahdi was to be characteristic of Nuba policies to central governments in the future, dividing them into rebellious and government-friendly Nuba.

The brutal harassment of the Nuba people was to continue after the defeat of the Mahdist State by the allied forces of Egypt and Britain at the battle of Omdourman in 1898.

In spite of their devastating experience during the Mahdiyya, the Nuba were not very welcoming to the new administration. Stevenson (1984) remarked that: 'hills which had managed to beat off the Mahdists at different times thought themselves impregnable to attack, notably Dair, Nyimang, Katla, Fanda and parts of Koalib.'

It took almost 30 years to subdue completely the different Nuba peoples and bring them in line with the rest of the country. With state authority at last established all over the Nuba Mountains, inter-communal raiding were minimised and community leaders were empowered by state appointment. Nuba 'friendlies' were recruited to pacify Nuba rebels.

It was during this period of pacification that many Nuba began to come down from the protection of the hills to farm and even live in the plains. This was a process of natural adaptation to peaceful times supported by the desire of the central government to bring as many Nuba down to the accessible plains for the purpose of effective administration and control by the state, which grew weary of the stubborn resistance of the Nuba against the new regime in Khartoum.

The new regime brought about far-reaching changes in the Nuba Mountains. These changes transformed, and in many respects irreversibly, the way the Nuba lived. Suffice it to outline some of the salient features characteristic of the rule of the condominium over the Nuba Mountains to assess the magnitude of the changes realised within a relatively short span of time. Far-reaching among these changes is the introduction of modern agricultural practices with cotton as cash crop. The success of large-scale mechanised production of cotton has brought the mountains to the attention of international companies and subsequently to the attention of the Sudanese Jellaba. The other is the introduction of modern school education, although the Nuba people had to wait until 1940 to see serious efforts by the government to introduce large-scale modern schooling into their area. The emergence of an educated Nuba elite was to have far greater implications on the subsequent history of the Nuba people than any single event or process. Education would later emerge as one of the strongest unifying factors, a pillar on which to build the edifice of a unified Nuba people.

## **The Post-Independence Period**

The independence of the Sudan in 1956 accelerated the opening up of the mountains to all winds of change, and catalysed the mobility of the Nuba people towards the urban centres of the Sudan and farther to foreign countries. This opening up has also meant that the Nuba Mountains were henceforth open to economic and social intrusion by national and international agents of trade and politics, and to cultural exchange.

Going out to meet the world meant also coming home to understand ones own identity. Many Nuba discovered their Nuba-ness in the Diaspora, and in the towns of the Sudan, where their cultural diversity was reduced to a single Nuba identity.

The prevalent attitude of the Jellaba and most middle-class professionals and intellectuals towards the Nuba has always been racially motivated. This arrogant stand of most Arab northerners towards non-Arab southerners and westerners was, and is, one important factor in hardening the attitudes of these people against all northern-dominated regimes in Khartoum.

## **Economy of the Region**

The Nuba practice a range of productive activities, which include animal husbandry, hunting and foraging. Despite this wide spectrum, agricultural production is the mainstay of the Nuba economy. This is fairly widespread throughout the Nuba communities, and is certainly one of the elements that distinguish the Nuba from some of their neighbours.

## **Nuba Farming**

The basic farming unit of the Nuba is generally the nuclear family. The family unit farms family-held land, which is, according to tradition, individually or family owned.

Farmland is divided into three basic types. These distinctions refer to the location of the land and usually determine the choice of the crops grown and the family members responsible for their care. House farms are generally situated within the village's area and are used to grow a variety of early maturing crops (maize, bulrush and millet). These village farms are the responsibility of the women.

Hillside farms (terraced plots on the hillside) are planted with later maturing grains. The third category are the far farms which are situated on the clay plains that have been utilised by the Nuba since the 'pacification' of the area under Anglo-Egyptian rule. The 'far farms' are farmed traditionally by men. Land holdings are thus fragmented. This means that a large amount of time is used in travelling between home and the different plots. It also means that the use of modern agricultural machinery is impractical for any one farm. The spread of plots tends to spread the risk of all crops failing in any one year.

The Nuba practice a form of shifting agriculture. Land is planted with a selection of crops and farmed until it is felt that a new plot should be located, cleared and farmed. As a result, the regular demand for new land is an integral part of the farming system. It is also important that used land be allowed to lie fallow in order to regenerate and regain fertility.

The demand for new land and the need to allow used land to regenerate is upheld in the traditional Nuba land 'laws'. Within any given area the Nuba recognise three types of land. Individually owned land, vacant land which is recognised as being communally owned by a village or hill community, and vacant land which does not belong to any one. Any – usually a male – member of a village community has the

right of access to these communal lands. All the respective member has to do is clear and cultivate the land to make it one's own.

The patterns in Nuba agricultural production show several risk-spreading factors. For example, a range of crops grown on a range of farmland relieves the land from the pressures of monoculture. Harvesting times are staggered so as to allow for lean times. Families try to produce a range of crops to cover most of their subsistence needs. Leaving large tracts of land unused gives herders greater room for grazing without interfering with crop production. However, now that large-scale mechanised farming is spreading all over the Nuba Mountains this integrated system is being eroded.

The ability of the Nuba farmers to respond to erratic rainfall and climate change has been severely limited by the expansion of mechanised farming. As is the case in many areas in the Sudan where mechanised farming has displaced traditional farming, the mere subsistence of millions of people is severely affected.

### **The Armed Conflict**

In the past, problems arising from land and water disputes were resolved at an annual conference of Nuba Mekks and Arab Sheikhs. These meetings usually took place on neutral ground, both sides abided by the agreements reached and the Nuba Mountains enjoyed decades of peace and relative prosperity. In recent years, however, the drought has pushed the Arab nomads deep into Nuba territory, sometimes even before the harvest is collected. This has resulted in clashes between Nuba farmers and Arab nomads. On the other hand, more land fell into the hands of absentee landlords, mainly Arab Jellaba. Out of 200 mechanised farms supported by the State Agricultural Bank in the Habila area, four were local co-operatives, one was leased to a group of Habila merchants, four to individual local merchants and the rest (191) were leased to absentee landlords, mainly rich Jellaba, government officials and retired generals from the North (Suleiman, R. 1993).

The scissors effect of the advance of the nomads into the mountains on the one hand, and the encroachment of mechanised farming on the other, alerted the Nuba people to the possibility of being squeezed out of their best farming lands into marginal and poor territory. That is why, when the civil war broke out in the South in 1983, the Nuba were generally sympathetic with the proclaimed aims of the Sudanese People's Liberation Movement (SPLM) and the Sudanese People's Liberation Army (SPLA), and individual Nuba even moved into liberated areas and joined the movement.

The SPLA made its first incursion into the Nuba Mountains in July 1985. In response, the government began to arm the Baggara as a militia to counter the SPLA. It is:

*One of the deepest tragedies that the Baggara Arabs, who have implemented so much of the government's policies against the Nuba, are themselves an impoverished and marginalised group in the Sudan. (African Rights 1995)*

The Murahaliin militia had been created as a pro-government force against the SPLA, but the Baggara groups had their own agenda. They immediately began raiding Nuba communities. These raids further polarised Nuba public opinion against the Baggara, the central government and the Arab North as a whole. The mistrust reflected itself in substantial votes for the Sudan National Party, a Nuba party headed by the Rev. Philip Ghaboush. The government became alert of the change in Nuba political situation. Anticipating serious developments in the region, the government began to replace the Nuba administration and security officials by non-Nuba, mostly Arabs.

There was a marked escalation of the war in 1989, when an SPLA unit, known as the New Kush Battalion, headed by the Nuba commander Yusuf Kuwa Mekke, entered the mountains. Its intention was

to establish a base in the eastern part of the Nuba Mountains and take the guerrilla war into Kordofan. The SPLA quickly occupied the area around Talodi, and began recruiting Nuba youths.

### **The Response of the Jellaba Government**

The response of the ruling Umma Government to the turbulence in the mountains was highly irresponsible. Without authorisation from the Constituent Assembly, it reorganised the Misiriya militia into a paramilitary force, the Popular Defence Force (PDF) and by 1988 systematic killing of Nuba civilians by the army, the military intelligence and the PDF had begun. This pattern of violence – elimination by attrition – became well-established in the following years, which saw the SPLA advance very close to Kadugli town, the administrative centre of the Nuba Mountains.

There was no respite for them with the new regime of the National Islamic Front (NIF). In October 1989, the NIF regime promulgated the Popular Defence Act, which in effect legitimised the Murahaliin militia. Africa Watch (1992) documented an upsurge in violence – since the middle of 1991 – against Nuba civilians by the army and the military intelligence, the main targets appear to have been young educated Nuba men. Some Nuba believe that the army has drawn up lists of all educated people, whom it planned to kill.

In 1992, massive human rights violations were recorded against the Nuba people. The Kordofan State Government declared a '*Jihad*', or Holy War, to implement a 'final solution' to the 'Nuba problem'! The *Jihad* was supported by a *Fatwa* issued in 1993. Beside the burning of villages and the disappearance of civilians, a large-scale plan of forcible relocation began to be implemented. Tens of thousands of Nuba are currently scattered in small camps all over northern Kordofan. Many other thousands are taken hundreds of miles away from home and abandoned there. The scale of the killings and relocations permits us to speak about genocide against the Nuba people.

First-lieutenant Khalid Abdel Karim Salih, who was in charge of security in Kordofan State, and who was a personal bodyguard of the Governor of Kordofan (who is also his brother) from May 1992 to February 1993, gave a statement in a press conference on October 1993 in Bern in Switzerland. In his detailed statement, Mr Salih estimated that during a seven months period 60,000 to 70,000 Nuba were killed by the army and the Popular Defence Forces, PDF. He stressed that these ethnic-cleansing operations had made no distinction between Muslims and Christians. Churches and mosques, missionary centres and Quranic schools were all indiscriminately shelled.

### **The Root Causes**

The three predominant causes of the armed conflict are:

- Allocation of the best lands to absentee Jellaba landlords;
- The drought, which brought large numbers of Baggara and their animals to the mountains; and,
- The treatment of the Nuba in all walks of Sudanese life as second-class citizens.

### **Land Ownership Is the Biggest Problem**

The single most important issue behind the outbreak of the conflict in the Nuba Mountains is the encroachment of mechanised agriculture on the Nuba smallholder farming. This devastated the economic and social life of the Nuba and ultimately destroyed the friendly relations with the Baggara.

The Mechanised Farming Corporation (MFC), established with a credit from World Bank in 1968, supervised the introduction of large-scale mechanised farming at Habila, between Dilling and Delami. Of

the 200 schemes at Habila, 191 were leased to absentee Jellaba, merchants, politicians and soldiers. A community leader from Korongo Abdalla told African Rights:

*Land is a big problem. At Abu Shanab, the land was prepared by the local people, but the government brought its tractors and began to prepare cultivation. We asked them to go to another side. They refused. (African Rights 1995)*

Two witnesses from Delami described the spread of mechanised farming:

*The merchants came with tractors and ploughed right on top of people's cultivation. They could do this, because anyone who objected will be arrested. (African Rights 1995)*

In an interview with the author, a leading Nuba civil servant gave the following testimony.

#### A Witness' Testimony Against Mechanised Farming in the Hills

*The mechanised farming problem has two ways of taking our land: The government planned mechanised farming schemes which are given from Khartoum, from the Ministry of Agriculture and regardless of the reality of the area, land is just allotted to certain people, who are mainly retired army generals or civil servants, or wealthy merchants from northern Sudan or to local Jellaba who have been living in the area for a long time and here accumulated wealth. They have links with Khartoum and the central Sudanese government, because they originally come from the north. These people acquire land and then go and tell their relatives that they too can acquire land through the ministry. They join forces together and acquire more land.*

*Because the Nuba are not wealthy only a small number of them are involved in this distribution of land. The government just demarcates land regardless of the realities of the area. They do not care if there are villages in this land or not. In the area of Habila, many villages have been circled by mechanised farms. There is no more land for the Nuba, no land for farming and no land for the animals to graze. What happens is that the Nuba are squeezed and have to choose between two options: either to leave the area to work for the government as soldiers, or become workers in a mechanised farming scheme. This phenomenon is becoming massive.*

*Besides the planned mechanised farms, there is the unplanned land acquisition. Here you have somebody who is powerful and wealthy, who just comes in and cleans up a piece of land, which is actually owned by the community. But because he is powerful he just cleans it and brings in his tractors and his workers and begins to farm. And then, if any resistance happens, he will go to the authorities to protest and ask them to protect him. Because he can bribe the authorities, he can pay and do whatever he likes. Otherwise, he has a politician friend, or an army officer, who is powerful and can send an order down here, so his friend can get the land. There are also other ways of getting land, for example burning down a village and forcing its inhabitants to move on.*

*You can find no intention of keeping some of the land for the Nuba. The land is either taken by the Arab nomads for grazing, or taken by the wealthy landlords who come from the North. What remains for the Nuba is to fight back against these things. The Nuba have to find a way to protect themselves. They have already started to build their own political organisations or activate old ones. (From an interview with a leading Nuba professional who cannot be named).*

### **The Drought**

Since 1967, rainfall in western Sudan was less half the average annual. Coupled with large increases in human and livestock populations, the persistent drought is a major cause of war in the Nuba Mountains, where pastoralist Arab nomads, not local to the area, are seeking prolonged or permanent shelter in the

wet hills. As mentioned earlier, the other major cause is the scramble for the fertile Nuba plains to establish mechanised rainfed farming schemes.

This overlap of interests between the Jellaba and the Arab pastoralists explains the temporary alliance forged between the two groups. Both are trying to dislodge the indigenous people and take over their land. It remains to be seen whether this marriage of convenience can endure the conflicting interests of its partners, all seeking to eat the same cake. There are already signs that the powerful Jellaba will use the Arab pastoralists to secure their objectives in the region and then deny them access to the best lands.

### **Discrimination Against the Nuba**

By the 1970s, as many as half the adult Nuba population was working in northern towns or in agricultural schemes in central and eastern Sudan. The Nuba were treated as second class citizens in the towns and villages of the north. They were given inferior jobs, many could find work only as servants in Jellaba households. A few were recruited in the army as foot soldiers. Even in the Nuba Mountains, Nuba people were discriminated against by a coalition of Jellaba, government officers and Nuba collaborators. When the Nuba sought justice in courts, justice was usually denied them.

The way the government wages war against the Nuba is indicative of the prevailing attitudes to the Nuba. Indiscriminate shelling and killing, mass deportation and internment and utter disregard of human rights and dignity characterise the government's dirty war in the Nuba Mountains.

### **Conflict Resolution**

Since its inception in 1956, the Sudanese State has always been a Jellaba state and so government troops have always been fighting the Jellaba wars by proxy. It is also interesting to note that earlier attempts at conflict resolution in the South and West have almost entirely been focusing on the sharing of political power, the issue most relevant to the power elite on both sides of the conflict divide. Sharing political power in the Addis Ababa Accord (1972) for example had left the economic status quo in tact, a state of affairs most welcome to its beneficiaries, the Jellaba elite.

Given the complex triangular relationships between the Nuba, the Jellaba and the Arab pastoralists, two independent approaches to conflict management and resolution can be postulated. The first approach concerns the relationship between the Nuba and the Jellaba: the only way to resolve this conflict is to stop the incursion of large-scale mechanised farming into the Nuba Mountains and retain all stolen lands to their original owners, the Nuba people.

As to the relationship between the Nuba and pastoralist Arabs, there is a need to accept some sort of a temporary and equitable sharing of the available resources, mainly land and water. This should not be a difficult proposal to implement, since the Nuba and the Arab groups had working agreements in the past, which secured an uneasy peace in the mountains for almost two hundred years.

It is in the long-term interest of both the Nuba and the local Arab groups to go back to co-operation and abandon confrontation. Strongly recommended is the 'Borana solution', which demands from the Arabs that they recognise the right of the Nuba over their land, and from the Nuba that they recognise the right of the Arabs and their livestock for survival.

These two different approaches to the two partners in war against the Nuba, namely the Jellaba and the Baggara, constitute the point of departure that can lead to peace. The Arab groups should understand that they are being used by the Jellaba (the government) to facilitate their plans, namely to relocate the Nuba and take over their land for the expansion of mechanised farming.

It is important to this proposal that all so-called development activities that further exacerbate the ecological malaise of the region should be halted. Most crucial in this respect is the need to roll back mechanised farming, especially in areas where these schemes are wreaking environmental and social havoc.

Since 1993, several peace agreements have been reached between the Nuba and the Baggara, which vindicate our call for the need for co-operation between the two groups.

### **The Peace Agreements Between the Nuba and the Arabs**

After years of fighting between the Nuba and the *Hawazma* and *Misiriya* Arab groups, three peace agreements have been reached in 1993 (the Buram agreement), 1995 (the Regifi agreement) and 1996 (the Kain agreement) respectively. A precarious peace is still holding.

Several reasons were cited during the peace negotiations between the Nuba and Baggara for their coming together to deliberate peace, notable among these are the following:

- The Baggara lamented that they have lost many men and animals and some of them were forced to abandon their homes;
- The Baggara admitted that the government has deceived them. It told them that the war against the rebels would only take a month or two to finish. It is now over 10 years old;
- The Baggara said that they needed to trade with the Nuba. They want to trade their consumer goods for cereals grown by Nuba peasants;
- They told the Nuba that their political parties, for example, El-Mahdi, the leader of the Umma party, had already left the Sudan and is working with the SPLM against the NIF regime;
- The Nuba emphasised the fact that they are fighting against the government, never against the Baggara; and,
- The Nuba told the meeting that they also need to trade with the Baggara. They specially need to exchange cereals and animals for clothes, salt and other industrial goods that the Baggara bring from Khartoum.

Both sides emphasised that:

- They had been living together in peace for two hundred years;
- They intermingled through marriage and sharing of cultural and religious values;
  - Most of the Nuba and the Arabs fighters had been and are still poor;
  - Only outsiders, mainly rich *Jellaba*, seem to be the only beneficiaries of the war;
- Both sides have lost many people and animals for no good reason; and,
- The outsiders come and go, but those indigenous to the mountains will stay and have to find ways to live together in peace.

### **The Buram Agreement**

The first peace negotiations between the Baggara and the Nuba took place in February 1993 in Buram in the southern Nuba Mountains. The initiative came from the Misiriya in response to earlier written appeals made by Yusuf Kuwa, the leader of the Nuba. The agreement reached spelled out conditions and commitments for peace, which have been echoed in all future agreements.

- Both sides will immediately stop all military actions against each other;
- Both sides have the right to move freely in the other's territory;

- In case of dispute or violation of the peace, the joint committee will intervene to settle the dispute;
- All animals stolen will be returned, the thieves will be punished;
- Killings will be investigated, those responsible will be punished;
- Trade will be safeguarded;
- Information, especially of military relevance, will be exchanged; and,
- Travelers to either side will have safe passage and, when need be, assisted to reach their destination.

The peace agreement opened up a trade route into Buram and adjacent areas. The Misiriya traders brought in essential goods such as salt, matches, clothes and medicine. The Buram trade flourished until the end of 1993 when government troops overran the Nuba positions in Buram area and closed the market. Although sporadic trade still goes on and an uneasy peace still holds in the area, the government has succeeded in weakening the accord that began so well in February of 1993. Disheartened, a group of Nuba rebels joined the government and were used by its security to attack the Baggara to rekindle the feuds between them and the SPLA.

However, it is also important to note that a number of Baggara fought with the Nuba troops against the government in Buram and continue to honour the agreement with the Nuba rebels.

### **The Regifi Agreement**

The Buram agreement found a new lease of life in the Regifi accord signed between the Nuba rebels on 15 November 1995. The eleven-point agreement reiterated the previous commitments to peaceful co-operation and mutual assistance stipulated in the Buram agreement. The Baggara delegation was keen to distance itself from the Khartoum government. Again, they told of their great losses in men, animals and trade. Both sides agreed that peace is crucial for their existence in the prevalent precarious situation in the mountains.

The government did all it could to sabotage the agreement. It targeted the leaders of the Baggara, who signed it. Abdalla, the leader of the Misiriya at the negotiations, was shot dead. Others were assassinated or imprisoned. A few were bribed and skilfully used by the government to undermine the spirit of trust and co-operation between the Baggara and the Nuba, which began to spread in the region.

### **The Kain Agreement**

This time, June 1996, the Nuba took the initiative for peaceful co-operation with the Rawawga Baggara. A delegation of five sought the Rawawga in neutral ground in Zangura, west of Tima, Lagowa region, and invited them to move their Suq (market) near the hajar (the hill) close to a liberated area. The Baggara traders accepted the invitation and met with a Nuba delegation headed by Ismail El-Nur Galab. The accord reached was almost identical to the previous ones. However, a special trade committee was established this time to oversee the fairness and safety of mutual trade. It is remarkable to note that:

- The Rawawga were so confident of the stability of the agreement that they began to bring in ammunitions and army uniforms to sell to the Nuba;
- The Baggara traders began to come often unarmed to the markets and were gradually being accompanied by their women and children there; and,
- The first test for the agreement came shortly after signing it, when an Arab attacked a Nuba, took his weapon and left him for dead, the Baggara brought the weapon back, paid for the treatment of the victim and promised to deliver the attacker to the Nuba authority.

Once again the government began to sabotage the agreement using murder, imprisonment and bribery. Government spies began to appear in the market places and the Nuba leadership became alarmed of the military security implication. They consequently ordered the closure of the markets. A Nuba official told the author that the markets would only be reopened, when they could be supervised properly. Peace is still holding.

### **Issues Troubling the Nuba-Baggara Peace Accords**

A number of obstacles have adversely affected all hitherto concluded peace agreements. The most serious problems are:

- The government's sabotage, targeting the leaders on both sides of the divide with murder, imprisonment and bribery. Especially vulnerable are the leaders of the Baggara (in one known case, the government offered a would-be assassin 4 million Sudanese pounds, equivalent to US \$ 2,000, and a licence for a mill, to kill a leading Nuba signatory to the agreement);
- The government's propaganda and indoctrination machinery have influenced people from both sides to rally behind its islamisation and arabisation programmes, against peace and reconciliation in the region;
- Not all Baggara and Nuba recognised the peace accords. Many Nuba fought and still fight with the government in the PDF. In fact, one of the biggest offensives against the Nuba rebels, the 1997 dry season offensive, was commanded by a Nuba officer, Brigadier Mohamed Ismail Kakum, nicknamed 'Amsah' (the Eraser) for his brutality;
- Difficulty in communication among the troops scattered all over the southern and western mountains resulted in clashes between armed groups that were not aware of the existence of the peace agreements;
- Security and financial interest occasionally dominated the actions of some Baggara traders. On the one hand they traded with the Nuba, even sold them ammunitions, on the other hand they supplied the government with information about rebel troops;
- Landlocked and cut off from the main SPLA forces in southern Sudan, the Nuba rebellion has been fairly isolated, nationally and internationally. This made both the Nuba and Baggara vulnerable to government pressures and atrocities; and,
- Old animosities die slowly. The Nuba have not forgotten the role of the Baggara in the slave trade, nor how arrogantly and abusively they behaved towards them, when the El-Mahdi's government armed the Baggara in 1986 and left the Nuba open to their blackmail.

### **War in the Nuba Mountains**

Before the onset of the violent conflict in the Nuba Mountains, the diverse Nuba people were fully aware only of their clan affiliations. They neither actively sought to be nor were they conscious of being a Nuba nation. Their relations with their Arab neighbours, the *Hawazma* and *Misiriya*, were tolerable. They exchanged goods and services, and intermarriage was an acceptable practice especially among Arabs and Muslim Nuba. At the beginning of the conflict, many Nuba even sided with the government, because they perceived the conflict to be a political discord, rather than an ethnic and economic strife.

Along with other aforementioned factors, the war has been crucial in bringing out and solidifying the awareness of the Nuba peoples as belonging to a larger ethnic group, a united and quasi-homogeneous Nuba people. The result is that the conflict is, increasingly, being perceived by many Nuba as an ethnic conflict. There is even a small core of angry Nuba, who believe that all Arabs should be thrown out of the Nuba land in a final and radical solution! For this group, ethnicity has already crossed the threshold from perception to cause of violent conflict. And the longer the war continues the greater the probability

that more Nuba people will join the ranks of those who fight for the ethnic cause. One hopeful sign that the current differences might not build an insurmountable ethnic divide between the Baggara and the Nuba is the unanimous agreement among all Nuba leaders interviewed by the authors, that peace and long-term co-operation between them and the Baggara are fundamental for them all.

Most violent conflicts are over material resources, whether actual or perceived. With the passage of time, however, ethnic, cultural and religious affiliations seem to undergo transformation from abstract ideological categories into concrete social forces. In a wider sense, they themselves become contestable material social resources and hence possible objects of group strife and violent conflict.

While usually by-products of fresh conflicts, ethnic, cultural and spiritual dichotomies can invert with the progress of a conflict to become intrinsic causes, and in the process increase its complexity thereby reducing the possibility of managing, resolving and ultimately transforming it. All three armed conflicts in the Sudan are, in varying degrees, witness to this transformation.

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