

Sudan moves toward peace; will Washington support the effort?

by Hussein Al-Nadeem and Muriel Mirak-Weissbach

Since U.S. State Secretary Madeleine Albright's tour to East Africa last October, which aimed at starting a new war against Sudan, events have happily gone in the opposite direction, altering the political landscape fundamentally. One significant indication of this, is the fact that, although President William Clinton signed a bill on Nov. 29 to provide direct food and logistics aid to the Sudanese People's Liberation Army (SPLA) rebels under warlord John Garang, the move backfired and many aid organizations and politicians have appealed to the President not to implement the bill.

One development which contributed to shifting the political climate, was the action taken by the SPLA itself in late February, when it blackmailed international humanitarian organizations working in southern Sudan, in an attempt to force them to surrender most of their food, logistics, and administration to SPLA military officers, to put into the service of war.

Fourteen organizations refused to sign the Memorandum of Understanding demanded by Garang, which would have constituted their recognition of his sovereignty over the region. The 14 left the SPLA-controlled areas, fearing for their security. The pullout interrupts 75% of the non-United Nations aid operations in southern Sudan and affects up to 1.5 million people, at a time when food stocks are low, ahead of the major planting season in late May. Care, World Vision, Save the Children, Oxfam, and Doctors Without Borders were among the organizations that suspended aid operations in Sudan and withdrew their staff. Other organizations operating under Operation Lifeline Sudan, the UN-led umbrella organization that oversees aid operations, were not affected, because they operate under a separate accord with the rebels and the Sudanese government in Khartoum.

Garang's attempted blackmailing operation drew heavy criticism from around the world. The European Union Com-

mission decided to suspend all aid to southern Sudan in protest at the SPLA ultimatum. European Union sources said that the SPLA move was "a thinly veiled attempt to extort money from the relief groups in the form of taxes, highway tolls, and landing and takeoff fees and protection."

The U.S. State Department spokesman also criticized the SPLA, saying that "the attitude of the rebel Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM) makes it less likely that the Clinton administration will approve direct food aid to the rebels."

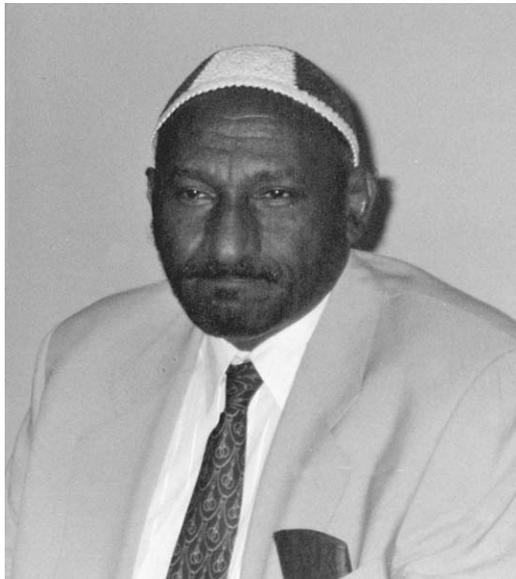
This latest move by the SPLA is a desperate attempt to cover its financial and political bankruptcy, in contrast with the increasing political support the Khartoum government is gaining regionally and internationally. In addition, the government's financial resources have improved significantly since oil exports from Sudanese ports have started again.

'Charm offensive'?

The Sudanese diplomatic efforts which Albright had mocked last October as a "charm offensive," have led to important regional and international support for the Sudanese government's peace and national reconciliation efforts.

One important step in this direction is the improvement of Sudan's relationship with its neighbors, especially Egypt. A summit meeting has been planned for in Cairo in April between Sudanese President Omar Hassan al-Bashir and Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak. The discussions will focus on the normalization of relations, after Cairo's decision in late February to appoint an ambassador to Khartoum, following a five-year break. This marks the intention of the two countries to achieve complete normalization of relations.

Sudan has also mended its relationships to Kuwait and Saudi Arabia recently, relations which were broken due to



Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir (left) is mending fences with Sudan's neighbors, as well as with opposition figures who are interested in ending the civil war. Among the latter is Umma party leader Sadiq al Mahdi (right), who has called for moves toward "reconciling with the regime so they can work within the process for democracy."

Sudan's refusal to support the war against Iraq in 1991.

On March 7, Sudan and Ethiopia signed ten agreements on trade, transport, oil and other matters, marking the restoration of relations between the two countries after some years of political and even military conflict. The two countries reactivated a border committee to facilitate freedom of movement of goods and people between them. They also agreed to initiate cross-border power projects and to exchange visits by Ethiopian and Sudanese businessmen. Sudan agreed to sell oil to Ethiopia and to allow Ethiopia to use Port Sudan, its main port on the Red Sea. Ethiopia had become landlocked in 1998 when Eritrea blocked its access to the Assab port on the Red Sea, leading to a bloody war between the two.

An agreement on ending support for rebels which was signed between Uganda and Sudan in December, has not materialized yet. The Ugandan government of Yoweri Museveni, the main regional supporter of the SPLA, still insists on supporting the SPLA's armed rebellion against the Khartoum government. However, diplomatic contacts between the two countries are still ongoing to settle problems related to the implementation of the agreement.

It is extremely difficult to tell whether any agreement between Uganda and Sudan will ever work, as long as Museveni, up to now, Britain's leading asset for fomenting regional conflict, is in power. Museveni's adherence to signed agreements depends on the strategic and economic conditions of his regime, which are shifting all the time, according to his involvement in conflicts on many fronts in east and central Africa.

The U.S. role

Potentially the most important diplomatic development, actually involved the United States. The U.S. President's envoy Harry Johnston made a four-day visit to Khartoum in

early March to meet with Sudanese officials. Although he insisted that these meetings were not concerned with Sudanese-American relations and would only concentrate on issues of human rights and peace in southern Sudan, Johnston's visit was regarded as a "breakthrough" by observers. Part of his mission was to restaff, or practically reopen, the U.S. Embassy in Khartoum, which has been closed since 1996, after Britain's Lady Caroline Cox lured the United States into imposing harsh sanctions, based on the lie spread by her Christian Solidarity International, that Bashir's government was abusing the human rights of Christians and other non-Muslims.

Following his meeting with Johnston, Sudan's Foreign Minister Mustafa Osman Ismail said he hoped the visit of a special envoy would hasten the re-establishment of normal relations between the two countries. Ismail's meeting with Johnston was the first encounter between senior American and Sudanese officials since 1998.

Speaking to reporters, Ismail said that if the United States wants to play a role in Sudan, it has to be neutral and cannot take sides between the government and separatist rebels. Ismail said he hoped Johnston's visit would enable him to understand what is going on in Sudan and would be a "step in the direction of the return of Sudanese-U.S. relations." He later said that "the U.S. has to play a role in resolving the conflict in Sudan, but cannot do so as long as bilateral relations are strained and as long as it is not impartial." However, Ismail added that "it is premature to talk about normalization of those relations, as the situation is still as it has been."

Johnston also met with the Sudanese Justice Minister to discuss the issues of human rights, and with Sudanese Deputy Foreign Minister Bishop Gabriel Roric. "He told us that his mandate included the issues of peace, humanitarian aid, and human rights, but we told him that he would face obstacles in

carrying out his mission if issues such as bilateral ties are not taken care of," Roric said. He described Johnston's visit as a "good start of contacts."

Peace talks to resume

The peace talks between the southern Sudanese rebels and the Khartoum government are to be resumed soon. The important involvement by Egypt and Libya in reconciliation efforts between the northern Sudanese opposition and the government, is going slowly, but steadily, and is beginning to bear fruit. In fact, the combination of peace initiatives promoted by regional powers, especially Egypt, and the first signs of a possible rapprochement with Washington, have brought massive pressure to bear on the National Democratic Alliance (NDA), which includes the northern opposition parties and the SPLA.

At a meeting of the NDA in Asmara, Eritrea, which opened on March 10, Garang issued a call for continuing the armed struggle, an "Intifada," as he called it, against the National Islamic Front government, rather than accepting international diplomatic efforts or a negotiated settlement. Garang said that only armed conflict would pressure the Khartoum government, and went so far as to assert that a negotiated settlement would only lead to the capitulation of the opposition to the Khartoum government.

"Regarding intensification of the struggle, the NDA has already identified four different, but interrelated, forms of struggle against the NIF regime," he said. "These are: (a) The Intifada (Popular Uprising). (b) The armed struggle. (c) International pressures. (d) Negotiated peaceful settlement."

Garang went on:

"The first two forms or means of struggle, above, are primary, while the other two only become viable as a result of the pressures generated by the armed struggle and the forces of the Intifada. The option of a negotiated peaceful settlement should therefore be seen in its proper context, and not in isolation from the other forms of struggle. The pursuit of a negotiated peaceful settlement 'per se' and in isolation from the indispensable prerequisites of the threat of an uprising and sustained military pressure, does not and cannot lead to resolution of the conflict and attainment of a just peace. It can only lead to the capitulation of the opposition forces and their absorption or assimilation into the [NIF] system, which is the intention and strategy of the NIF regime."

Garang argued for continuing the armed struggle, in hopes of "weakening the regime and creating the necessary favorable conditions, for the streets in our main cities to erupt in a successful popular uprising"—i.e., overthrowing the government, not negotiating for peace with it.

In sharp contrast to this demand for continued war, Sadiq al-Mahdi, leader of the opposition Umma party, called for reconciliation with the government. Speaking on March 14, al-Mahdi, a former Prime Minister and the most influential

opposition leader, said that the NDA should "take note of the changes in Khartoum and move toward reconciling with the regime so they can work within the process for democracy." The Umma leader summed up the situation created by the change in the international and regional picture, saying, "In other words, we don't have the support of the region, so it's best to throw in the towel."

Al-Mahdi's stance shocked the assembly, and led to a virtual split. On March 15, Garang tried to ram through a reorganization of the NDA's leadership, by replacing the executive committee with an interim committee, until the NDA's second congress, scheduled for June. Al-Mahdi and his entire delegation walked out of the meeting in protest, thereby igniting a crisis within the NDA as a whole, and further isolating Garang.

The basis on which Sadiq al-Mahdi was able to make his pitch for reconciliation, is solid, as he personally had begun separate negotiations with the Khartoum government in December, which led to an agreement with President Bashir himself.

Changes in Khartoum

The "changes in Khartoum" which al-Mahdi referred to, were the internal changes that had been introduced by Bashir on Dec. 12, when he declared a state of emergency, and suspended Parliament. This move signalled the beginning of the end of an internal political conflict that had arisen between Speaker of the Parliament Dr. Hassan al-Turabi, and the Presidency.

Bashir, who received regional support for the move, proceeded to make rapid progress in mending fences with Sudan's neighbors. Bashir announced on March 12, that the emergency decree would be extended until the end of the current year, thus guaranteeing a continuation of the political process that had been initiated. On March 11, committees of the Cabinet and the ruling National Congress party, approved a draft law for the allowance of political parties. The draft, which President Bashir is expected to sign, and enact in the form of a Presidential decree in the absence of Parliament, would allow opposition parties to resume activity immediately. They would still have to register with the government before being allowed to contest in elections for public office. The government said that the new law, replacing a controversial 1998 law, was to "promote political dialogue for achieving national unity."

The course of future events in Sudan, will depend on the ability of the government now to engage the opposition actively in this process, seizing on the opportunity opened up at the NDA meeting, by the Umma walkout. It will also depend on the extent to which the U.S. administration translates the halting baby steps taken by envoy Johnston, into secure strides toward supporting the efforts of President Bashir and his neighbors, especially Egypt, to finally bring peace to the country, and to the entire region.