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## INTRODUCTION

Famine is a gross infringement of the rights of ordinary Sudanese to live an acceptable life, or indeed live any life at all. Hundreds of thousands of Sudanese, very many of them children, have died from hunger and disease in the last fifteen years. The blame for this lies squarely at the door of Sudanese politicians and military commanders, who by their abuses and inactions have created these human tragedies.

The purpose of this book is partly to document some of the famine crimes committed in Sudan. Partly it is to evaluate relief programmes, not in detail but more generally with respect to their success or failure in fighting Sudan's chronic vulnerability to famine. More fundamentally it is to identify the political conditions that create famine or make its prevention possible.

The decline of Sudan is incontestable. Nearly a decade ago, a prominent Sudanese scholar and educationalist wrote:

In three decades the Sudan has lived through two tragic civil wars. We are now more than a match for the Lebanese and the Irish. During these wars we have destroyed immense wealth, lost valuable opportunities for growth, and inflicted permanent injury to the national psyche with nothing to show for our deeds.<sup>1</sup>

In retrospect, the time when these words were written—1988—appears as a time of relative optimism. Sudan still had an elected government

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<sup>1</sup> Abdul Rahman Abu Zayd Ahmed, 'Why the Violence?' in Panos, *War Wounds: Sudanese People Report on their War*, London, 1988, p. 14.

with a vibrant opposition, there were hopeful peace talks with the rebel Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA), and government and international donors were collaborating on programmes for reconstruction and development of areas stricken by drought and famine a few years earlier.

Things have got worse. Within a year, the military had seized power on behalf of the extremist National Islamic Front (NIF) and inaugurated Sudan's worst-ever wave of domestic repression, human rights abuse and militarism. The prospects for a negotiated end to the war have all but vanished. The NIF is implementing a gargantuan programme of social engineering intended to create an extremist state in its own image; at times the ruthlessness with which this is implemented has bordered on the genocidal. The SPLA has split (several times) and internecine warfare within the South has witnessed appalling human suffering. In 1996-7, the war has come North, with new fronts in Southern Blue Nile and Eastern Region to add to the longstanding armed resistance in the Nuba Mountains.

## **AID AND DECLINE**

During the fifteen-year period this book is concerned with, Sudan has been one of the world's major recipients of international aid, especially humanitarian relief. While Sudan has changed from being one of the west's most favoured countries in Africa to being an international pariah, a constant factor has been the intimate involvement of international aid providers in the country's affairs. Sudan has also been a laboratory for humanitarian ideas. The series of aid and relief experiments includes:

- An extraordinarily high level of western aid to sustain a client regime, notably U.S. assistance to President Nimeiri, 1978-84, followed by a cut-off in almost all official development assistance following the 1989 coup.

- The deregulation and privatisation of relief work, starting with refugee programmes in 1980 and extending to general famine relief in 1984-5.
- Operation Lifeline Sudan (OLS) and the establishment of the principle of 'humanitarian access' in wartime in 1989.
- 'Islamic relief' and the rejection of western secular models of humanitarianism, especially pronounced since the 1989 coup brought the NIF to power and the 1992 adoption of the 'Comprehensive Call'.
- Various initiatives to assist and protect internally displaced people, including the mandate of the UN Department of Humanitarian Affairs, established in 1992.
- The initiation of 'capacity building' and 'humanitarian principles' within OLS-Southern Sector, with the aim of establishing a new humanitarian culture and humanitarian institutions in SPLA-controlled South Sudan.

Contrary to the assertions of many humanitarian advocates, Sudan *has* received its share of international attention and resources (at least compared to other countries in Africa). Sudan is rarely out of the news for long. Almost every major relief agency has an operation in Sudan. The UN has been deeply involved. Western governments, led by the Netherlands, have been consistently engaged in a range of initiatives.

There have been some successes. At one level, relief workers can point to achievements: nutrition rates improved in such-and-such a community, distress migration prevented somewhere else. (There are also relief programmes that cannot demonstrate any benefits at all.) But, more broadly, the massive investment of resources and effort seems to have had singularly little success. Sudan is worse off than it was fifteen or twenty years ago.

So, if the problem is not lack of resources, concern or goodwill, what has gone wrong? There are no simple answers. But in an important way, the remedy has become part of the problem: aid has been part of Sudan's decline.

Much of this book is concerned with the unanticipated (and often unobserved) outcomes of international involvement. One area of impact is allowing the belligerents to pursue the war through the simple provision of resources. The second area of impact is changing the direction of political accountability. Aid flows and the demands of external donors change internal political processes. Most obviously they may undermine democratic accountability in favour of external dependence, allowing dictators to resist pressures for democratic reform, but the relationship is often more complex. Finally and most insidiously, aid can influence political ideologies. Humanitarianism exercises its subtle tyranny over thought and speech.

## **FOOD AND POWER**

Control of food, and by extension a range of aid resources, has become an intrinsic part of taking and wielding power in Sudan. Alongside the aid innovations mentioned above, Sudanese politicians have used food and famine for both democratic and authoritarian ends. This holds for successive governments in Khartoum, for the SPLA and for breakaway rebel factions, and for various coalitions of democratic or progressive forces.

As an account of the history of colonial famine relief shows, state security and food security (especially in the towns) were always linked. But in the early years of Independence, the politics of the food economy had become relatively benign. Until the 1970s, the safeguards against famine rested on a combination of robust local government, professional administration and a growing economy. Under the rule of President Jaafar Nimeiri (1969-85), these structures were swept away, to be replaced by much more fragile ones based upon a single party (the Sudan Socialist Union) and the promise of accelerated economic development.

By the early 1980s, Nimeiri's rule rested on a massive subsidy from international donors, primarily the U.S. This inflow of money made possible his authoritarian rule. Food aid was at first a relatively small part of this (and most of it was directed to the cities). This aid created a pattern of dependence upon—and accountability to—foreign donors. Without foreign aid, the Sudan Government would not have been able to fight the civil war. Since Nimeiri, subsequent governments have been compelled to find more creative ways of financing themselves and their war efforts, as Sudan has gradually become more and more isolated internationally. To a remarkable degree, they have succeeded.

In 1984/5, a democratic coalition was formed against Nimeiri's aid-subsidised dictatorship. It mobilised people on several issues including opposition to the war, to human rights abuses, and to an Islamic state. Among these issues was famine: the famine then raging in western Sudan and the Red Sea Hills became a political scandal that discredited the government, while famine victims themselves became a small but important part of the coalition protesting on the streets. The 1985 Popular Uprising remains a model for how famine became part of a citizens' movement for democracy. Unfortunately, this democratic politicisation of famine was not sustained after the Uprising achieved its aim of removing Nimeiri. Control of food was re-captured by government and technocratic institutions.

The period 1985-9 saw the intensification of the war in the South, between the elected government of Prime Minister Sadiq el Mahdi and the SPLA headed by Dr John Garang. The most intense famine of the whole period under analysis occurred in Bahr el Ghazal at this time, as a direct result of the war strategies carried out by both sets of belligerents, but particularly because of the 'militia strategy' used by the government. Both sides were trying to deny food to the other and neither expressed much concern with providing for civilians under their own control. Both diverted food aid to their armies.

The liberal political institutions in Khartoum (such as the press and parliament) proved unable to halt this disaster. There was a succession of attempts, by *ad hoc* coalitions of concerned citizens, politicians, churches

and relief agencies, to bring relief to the South, but all failed in the face of intransigence by one side or the other. Only in 1988-9, with the combination of a strong domestic peace process and heightening international concern with the blockage of relief, was there a breakthrough, which created Operation Lifeline Sudan (OLS) in April 1989.

The formation of OLS, followed by the resumption of the war, marked an important change in the way that food relief was integrated into the war. Rather than only trying to blockade their adversaries (although that continued), both sides became active in trying to manipulate relief deliveries to their advantage.

For the military-NIF government, humanitarian assistance came to assume greater importance as other sources of foreign aid were gradually cut off. For this reason it tolerates OLS, even though it regards it as an insult to national sovereignty. The famine of 1990-1 in northern Sudan (which even threatened an unprecedented food shortage in Khartoum) revealed the importance of food to national security. Taking control of food aid, and directing it to the most politically significant constituencies (such as the northern cities) became a government priority. Having established this, the NIF then moved on to using food, and humanitarianism more widely, as an integral part of a far-reaching programme of social, economic and political transformation: the 'Comprehensive Call' or *Da'awa al Shamla*.

Islamic humanitarianism under the aegis of the Comprehensive Call is one of the most important developments in contemporary Sudan. It is also one of the least understood. Islamic relief draws upon elements in the Islamic tradition of humanitarianism, which differs from the Christian and secular traditions in important respects. Some of its elements (for example regarding alms-giving as a duty rather than merely an act of charity, and certain forms of small-scale credit) are both politically progressive and remarkably effective. Islamic relief agencies have succeeded in channelling the energies of many committed people and reaching the poor. But overall, the Comprehensive Call is a project for the NIF to achieve a very high degree of domination of all aspects of

Sudanese society. In the war zones of the South, the NIF is implementing an ambitious counter-insurgency strategy through the Comprehensive Call. It is a political project that serves the aims of an authoritarian, exclusivist and warlike party, and as such, it is not a protection against famine.

Although the Comprehensive Call, as actually implemented, contradicts many of the principles of humanitarian action, the government has succeeded in obtaining a high degree of compliance from western relief agencies and donors. Several UN agencies are active partners in government-sponsored schemes for 'pacification' and social transform-ation, and some NGOs have also willingly collaborated.

One of the central theses of this book is that aid has supported the authoritarian tendencies of successive governments. For the SPLA, the story is more complicated.

In its early days, when based in refugee camps in western Ethiopia, the SPLA received a large subsidy of foreign aid, which it used to establish its control over the refugees. Since relief began to flow into SPLA-held areas of the South in 1989, and after the SPLA was forced to flee from Ethiopia in 1991, it has sought to recreate these conditions inside Southern Sudan, but with little success. On the whole, SPLA commanders and officials of the Sudan Relief and Rehabilitation Association (SRRA, its humanitarian wing), have seen relief flows as simple flows of material resources. The leadership has also used aid for diplomatic and propaganda purposes. But the SPLA has not had a practical social programme, into which foreign aid could be integrated, so that it might serve *both* the immediate needs of civilians and the political agenda of the Movement. As a result, the SPLA has not turned aid to its best advantage.

The internal weaknesses of the SPLA were dramatically revealed, and then exacerbated, by the splits in the Movement that began in 1991. Foreign aid, while it did not cause the splits, certainly helped to shape them: access to relief supplies was one factor in making some factions sustainable. The SPLA-Mainstream of John Garang (which has always been dominant) then recognised the need for internal reform, and

permitted some liberalisation (for example allowing indigenous Southern Sudanese NGOs) and institutionalisation (in the form of a Convention in 1994 and a Civil Society Conference in 1996). Foreign humanitarians, led by OLS-Southern Sector's programmes for capacity building and 'humanitarian principles', have been intimately engaged with the SPLA's reforms. There have been some successes, but they are modest. The humanitarians have been handicapped by their own interests and preconceptions, and the opulence of expatriate lifestyles and the apparent waste of resources in international aid programmes has proved a constant source of irritation to Southern Sudanese. Meanwhile the SPLA leadership has always kept the issue of political power firmly in its sights.

International agencies enjoy a remarkably free hand in SPLA-held Southern Sudan, and their aspirations have been publicly embraced by the leadership of the SPLA to an unprecedented degree. There is a powerful coalition in favour of international humanitarian action in the South: but this is *not* the same thing as an anti-famine coalition. There is a need for Sudanese democrats to restore the taint of scandal to famine: it should be an issue that forces politicians from power, rather than only a malfunction that demands technical capacity and charitable giving.

## **AIMS OF THIS BOOK**

This book follows the official review of OLS, led by Dr Mark Duffield of the University of Birmingham.<sup>2</sup> The *OLS Review* was required to aim its recommendations at the international humanitarians, specifically the UN Department of Humanitarian Affairs and other UN agencies. It provided an opportunity for those who were dissatisfied with the way in which OLS had been manipulated by the Sudan Government to seek a way out, by imposing the same standards of neutrality and accountability

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<sup>2</sup> Ataul Karim, Mark Duffield *et al.*, *OLS: Operation Lifeline Sudan: A Review*, University of Birmingham, July 1996.

on the Northern Sector operations as were required in the Southern Sector. (This opportunity was lost.)

*Food and Power in Sudan* is different in several respects: primarily in its wider and longer scope, and its focus on the domestic political ramifications of humanitarian programmes. It is intended to be complementary to the official *OLS Review*, and to refocus attention on some of the main issues highlighted by that Review, in particular the way in which relief programmes have been co-opted by the Sudan Government in pursuit of its own political, military and social agenda.

It is customary for reports on human rights or humanitarian crises in Sudan to bemoan the lack of international (i.e. western) attention to the country. This book does not. The problem is not lack of attention, it is lack of knowing what can be done. Almost every international instrument of pressure has been applied to Sudan except military intervention or all-out trade sanctions. They have simply failed to work. The second reason is that responsibility for resolving the crises ultimately rests with Sudanese. Leaders of the opposition may call for international action, but they often have no clear idea of what that action might achieve and how it is linked to domestic initiatives. Beyond serving short term political interests, crying out for international action is not very helpful.

By contrast, the primary audience for this book is Sudanese. It aims to influence Sudanese citizens, including politicians and humanitarian workers, to adopt a different approach to preventing and mitigating human disasters such as famines. The key to this is building a democratic anti-famine politics.