

# Sudan's sorrows: is there a way out?

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Dawn  
25.7.00

**THERE** are few countries in the world that have attracted greater public attention more frequently whenever there was some mention of human sufferings resulting from famine, disease and civil war. Sudan is one country which has hit the headlines time and again and not always for the right reasons, but the never-ending saga continues.

The country, which is the largest in Africa, has innumerable problems. Things happen suddenly and often unpredictably, putting pressure on the country to seek some kind of a solution or avoid being targeted for criticism and slandering abroad. One such recent development was a report by the Commission on International Religious Freedom, a US-based organization, which has criticized the Sudanese government for its handling of the issues of religious freedom. It remains to be seen how Khartoum will react to the report but the problems for Sudan are multifaceted and it would require all the ingenuity and resilience to seek permanent solution to various issues which confront the nation.

The Commission, an independent advisory body, makes recommendations to the president of United States, and the Congress. In the report, it has asked Washington to be prepared to give non-lethal aid to Sudanese opposition groups if Khartoum does not improve its religious freedom record.

Considering that Sudan is the largest country in Africa, it is obvious that its problems are also multitudinous. While religious strife and dissension is an important factor in causing a split in the country, it is really just the tip of the iceberg. There are hosts of other problems

changed. Any legislation or edict based on religion, if it was judged violative of the rights of a group of people or community within the country, would naturally be resented by the affected group or community and raise critical eyebrows abroad. This is precisely the situation facing Sudan today.

There has to be realism and consensus on vital domestic issues which include economy and regional alienation, power sharing, etc. Regardless of what some world bodies and governments think or say on specific policy issues and situations in that country and what are the stipulations of aid and assistance, the Sudanese government will have to do some serious thinking of its own. It will have to work out a framework within which all Sudanese, irrespective of their affiliations, feel fairly accommodated and can live in harmony.

The population of Sudan is estimated at 34.47 million with a growth rate of 2.71% per annum. It presents a mix of ethnicity in population, which is of both African and Arab origins. More than 70% of people are Muslims. The animists are 25% while Christians close to 5%. Obviously, with this demographic make-up and a host of related problems, it is obvious that

applies only to the Muslims, the hardliners in the south are presenting it as a cover to eventually convert them to Islam. This apprehension may not be very helpful when a Sudan has a host of other problems to worry about. The government will have to consider various options, including decentralization of powers to the regions or provinces, to allay fears and misgivings decentralization may also prove helpful in facilitating quick decisions in local matters and laws and in giving various regions of the country a greater sense of involvement and participation in the conduct of their affairs. A larger measure of political and administrative autonomy may well hold the key to the complex set of circumstances and problems facing Sudan.

General Al-Bashir's government is definitely working on finding a lasting solution to all these and several agencies and organizations, including UN have been in the forefront of these efforts, but no clear direction has emerged yet. As situation stands, there is no quick fix. Difficult terrain and weather have locked the warring groups in a no-win situation but the dialogue for compromise and conciliation must go on.

The international community has been quick to respond to the needs of Sudan in coping with the consequences of the civil war and has provided massive relief to the hungry and displaced persons in the country. It has undertaken rehabilitation work in agriculture, road construction and other sectors but these are only palliatives. So long as there is conflict in the country the people will continue to suffer.

The donor agencies must consider linking the assistance package with some kind of peace formula, which can bring the warring groups together and stop cease hostilities. But the donors agencies or the foreign governments critical of the situation

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are hosts of other problems which make things still worse. History of Sudan has been a turbulent one and offers interesting insights into issues and problem facing the nation down the ages.

When united and galvanised, the Sudanese have performed wonders. Like any nation or a country, they need a rallying point to show creativity. In this case the most powerful inspiration they could find was from Islam. The rise of Mohammed Ahmed, who later proclaimed himself as the 'Mahdi' in 1881 was the master of almost the whole of Sudan by 1884. He gave the Sudanese a unique opportunity to assert themselves as an independent and proud people. General Charles Gordon's misadventure and military defeat in Sudan provided an added boost to their national pride.

The glory proved short-lived, however, as after the death of the 'Mahdi' his successors could not put up a solid defence against the expansive Anglo-Egyptian force commanded by General Kitchener and lost in 1898. A condominium was established in Sudan but clearly there were lessons to be learnt. The rise and fall of the nationalists was quite sudden, the reason being that they did not have enough time to develop sound governance and defences. However, despite the reverses they suffered, the flame of freedom was kept burning until the elected Sudanese parliament in 1955 declared itself independent and sovereign.

Against this backdrop, it was evident that any administration coming to power would try to mould public opinion on the lines similar to the ones used by its predecessors. In the present context, it is apparent that any inspirations derived from Islam for the purpose of governance would not be accepted in a region which was multi-religious in character. Times have

events and developments in Sudan would be very closely watched by countries and organizations which have some kind of interest or stake in this country and region.

Sudan's main problem is its economy. This fact is partially obscured by numerous other problems. Its inability to harness its resources to the optimal level has compounded its problems. Also the required skills required to take advantage of modern technologies, which could lift the country to higher levels of employment and incomes from different sectors of the economy, mainly agriculture, are not there.

Most importantly, the river Nile with its tributaries flowing through the Sudanese plains provides the biggest source of water. There are vast tracts of fertile land which, if better utilized, can produce enough food not just for Sudan but perhaps for the entire Middle East. Its climate is so varied and congenial that one could even grow three crops in a year. The same goes for livestock, which is plentiful and of good quality and offers a good potential for further development.

By far the thorniest issue troubling Sudan is the civil war, between the Northern and the southern regions of the country. It is not easy to trace the origin of hostilities but it is apparent that three decades of fighting between the predominantly Muslim north and largely Christian and animist south has compounded the country's predicament. Some analysts believe that the imposition of Shariat (Islamic law), which is being resisted in the predominantly Christian South, has made Sudan a centre of controversy infringing a section of citizens' religious of their rights.

Although the Sudanese government has made this very clear that the Shariat law

in Sudan have not been able to put forward any tangible peace formula for bringing an end to the civil war entice North and South to come closer.

An impression also pursuits that the foreign governments or donor agencies are not always fair and impartial. There is always a danger that statements of ambassadors or representatives, although made in good faith, could be twisted to suit a particular situation or stance and thus cause misunderstanding.

The world community must realize that any tampering with the existing boundaries in Africa will open a Pandora's box and could unleash never-ending wars in an already troubled and deprived continent. Another important areas which has bothered Sudan time and again is the vast borders it shares with different countries. Internal strife in neighbouring countries like Ethiopia, Eritrea or a war between them has a direct effect on the strife-torn country, especially its southern part.

The Organisation of Islamic Countries (OIC) can perhaps help in unravelling the Sudanese knot. Its membership includes all the Muslim countries, and a large number of them being African, it is in an ideal position to take an initiative. It can address issues on Islamic laws, which perhaps cannot be tackled by the Sudanese government alone.

It will also find support and understanding among the southerners, as they would be more comfortable dealing with an organization which transcends the racial or any other discriminatory barriers. If peace returns to Sudan and the civil war ends, millions of people who are living as refugees in neighbouring countries will have a chance to return to their homes where they belong and contribute towards national reconstruction, prosperity and progress of their country.