

# Atrocities in Sudan linked with fight for oil

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Recent allegations have pointed to the involvement of western petroleum companies in the bloody conflict for control of the oil-rich Unity and Western Upper Nile regions of Sudan.

The nature of this conflict and its toll on the civilian population is graphically detailed in a recent report by Amnesty International, which points to atrocities against the civilian population carried out by government troops, pro-government militias and opposition rebels alike.

Government troops have been clearing the area of Bentiu, 470 miles south of the capital Khartoum. They have been using helicopter gunships and cluster bombs dropped from a high altitude.

"The civilian population living in the oil-fields and surrounding areas has been deliberately targeted for human rights abuses—forced displacement, aerial bombardments, strafing villages from helicopter gunships, unlawful killing, torture, including rape and abduction," said Maina Kiai, Amnesty's director for Africa. There are reports of mass executions of male civilians and of government troops cutting the throats of women and children, or nailing them to trees with iron spikes.

Rebel forces of the Sudan Peoples Liberation Army (SPLA), which has been fighting a civil war for the last 17 years, are reported to have used summary executions, rape and the destruction of homes to terrorise the people of the region. The SPLA and its political wing, the Sudan Peoples Liberation Movement (SPLM), consist mainly of the Dinka tribe. There are numerous reports listed throughout the 1990s of atrocities committed by the SPLA/M against non-Dinka ethnic groups. A former military officer of the SPLA/M, Doctor Peter Nyaba, described the organisation as having "degenerated into an agent of plunder, pillage and destructive conquest".

Other methods of terror used by both sides against the civilian population are the destruction of harvests, looting of livestock, and permanent military occupation. A ban on UN aid to the region imposed by the Khartoum government and moves by the SPLA/M to control the activity of Non Governmental Organisations (NGO) in the area—forcing many to pull out—has increased the risk of famine. Children are being forcibly recruited from Khartoum into the government's paramilitary Popular Defence Force, with most being sent to the front line to fight, the report continues.

Security firms linked to the foreign oil companies in the region are allegedly being used in the training of troops for the pro-government militia, the South Sudan Defence Force (SSDF) and as military advisors. The SSDF is made up of a number of breakaway southern factions with ties to the SPLA/M, who signed a peace deal with the government in 1997. It is characterised by in-fighting

and a leadership that is constantly shifting its loyalties.

According to Amnesty, "This raises further the question as to the extent to which involvement of the oil companies is directly or indirectly contributing to the conflict." The Khartoum government has admitted that oil sales are financing the war and Amnesty points to the clear connection between the wealth generated by oil sales and the purchase of Polish tanks and weapons from China and Bulgaria.

An article in the British *Observer* newspaper of April 16 also raised questions about the activity of oil companies directly leading to human rights violations and escalating fighting between rival groups for control of the region.

The *Observer* gives disturbing details of barbaric acts carried out against civilians living near the Helig oilfields, north of the Bentiu region. It cites eyewitness accounts of involvement by the SPLA/M in villages being razed and men, women and children being tortured to death. An official of the New Sudan Council of Churches (NSCC) said, "The government is using the roads and airstrips of the multinational companies engaged in the production of oil in Sudan for military purposes."

The *Observer* report focuses on the oil operations of the Greater Nile Oil Consortium, made up of Canada's Talisman Inc, the China National Petroleum Corporation, Petronas of Malaysia, Sudapet of Sudan and the Anglo-American company BP Amoco, which has the largest share in the project at 40 percent.

Although these reports concentrate on the extreme brutality of the Sudanese government and SPLA forces, the growing interest of Western governments, particularly the United States, since the opening of Sudan's oil pipeline in August 1999, has encouraged increased repression. The US previously supported the SPLA rebels, but sections of the Clinton administration now see a rapprochement with the Khartoum government as being more likely to secure their interests in the region. On August 29, 1999, the day before Sudan's first oil shipment was exported, Harry Johnston was appointed US special envoy to Sudan. This was followed in September by the lifting of several sanctions against Sudan by the International Monetary Fund.

In March of this year, Johnston travelled to Khartoum and described his visit as "very productive, very educational". On April 20, Donald Teitelbaum returned to his post as US chargé d'affaires in Khartoum. Two years ago he was recalled when the US bombed a pharmaceutical factory in Khartoum, based on an unsubstantiated claim that it was being used for manufacturing chemical weapons for terrorists.

A number of articles on [www.stratfor.com](http://www.stratfor.com), which analyses American foreign policy, pointed to this change in the geopolitical

strategy of the US in the region. An article from September 1999 states, "the area of southern Sudan between the other major African conflicts is oil country. Increased US support for the government and decreased support for the rebels portend a stabilisation of oil exports. At the other end of the pipeline, it gives the US greater strategic influence over the shipping lanes in the Red Sea. Since the Somalia debacle US littoral influence in the Red Sea has been a strategic weak spot." Port Sudan is the only outlet to the Red Sea for exporting oil from the country. It is located in the north of Sudan, which is controlled by the government of Al-Bashir in Khartoum.

There are still those in US ruling circles who want to continue the policy of treating Sudan as a pariah state, a position that began in 1991 when Sudan supported Iraq in the Gulf War. The Commission for International Religious Freedom, set up in the US in 1998 to "monitor religious freedoms around the world," recently called on Washington to supply "non-lethal aid" to opposition forces, sooner rather than later, if the Khartoum government did not improve its record on religious freedom and human rights. The organisation has also called for the implementation of "no-fly" zones and the banning of any capital being raised by foreign firms in the US market for use in Sudan's oilfields. This would appear to be in line with the law passed by the US government last November allowing direct food aid to be given to the SPLA. Sudan remains on the United States list of states that support "terrorism".

In January 2000, Al-Bashir moved against his government ally, Hassan al-Turabi, the parliamentary speaker and main Islamic ideologue. This sent a clear message to the Western powers that Khartoum was breaking with the isolationist policies personified by Turabi, who was sidelined, and Al-Bashir began to speak of the need for "more democracy".

There are now frantic moves being made by the Al-Bashir regime to establish a broader based, and more Western-friendly government—made up of individuals and parties that until quite recently were hostile to the ruling National Congress Party (formerly the National Islamic Front). The main focus is the government's drive to create the best conditions for the extraction and export of oil.

There are signs that the opposition coalition, the National Democratic Alliance (NDA), is beginning to break up because of these moves. The NDA is made up of the Muslim Umma Party, the Democratic Unionist Parties, the Sudan Communist Party and other organisations. It was founded in 1989 and brings together parties from the northern and southern opposition forces. The SPLA/M is also a part of the NDA. Its policy is for a secular state and control of the south.

In March this year the main opposition Umma Party, which was overthrown in a coup by Al-Bashir's National Islamic Front in 1989, walked out of an NDA meeting and was said to be "throwing in the towel". The leaders of Umma are now moving away from their previous strategy of opposition to the Al-Bashir regime and are hoping for a place in his government and a portion of its new-found wealth.

The Al-Bashir government is in fact fighting two civil wars—one in the southern region against the SPLA/M and one in East-Central

Sudan against the NDA. It is possible that Al-Bashir may move to grant limited autonomy to the NDA and SPLA/M to control the areas where they are active. Both groups have attacked the 1,000-mile oil pipeline that runs from the Helig and Unity oilfields to Port Sudan, seeking to pressure the Khartoum government and strengthen their position at the negotiating table. Ahmed Hassan, a spokesman for the Umma Party, made its position clear, saying, "exports of oil are vulnerable and can be protected only by a political agreement among parties."

Throughout 1999 and into 2000, the government of Al-Bashir was successful in re-establishing diplomatic relations with Uganda, Ethiopia and Eritrea. These three countries all had the support of the US through the "Front Line States Initiative" that worked for the destabilisation of the Islamic regime in Khartoum, backing the SPLA/M. Relations with Egypt have also improved, with Al-Bashir travelling there in April to meet the Egyptian foreign minister. The two countries broke off diplomatic ties in 1995, when Egypt accused Sudan of involvement in the attempted assassination of President Mubarak. The NDA and SPLA/M both have offices in Egypt, and Egypt is the principal backer of the Umma Party.

The Khartoum government has also improved diplomatic relations with the Gulf states, who broke off ties with Sudan due to its support for Iraq during the Gulf war. It has recently set up a deal that allows a United Arab Emirates mining firm to prospect for gold and copper in Darfur state, an area rich in minerals.

The roots of the conflicts in Sudan today stretch back to the time when Britain was the colonial power in the region, between 1899 and 1956. London signed an agreement with Egypt in 1899, granting it rule over Sudan but under joint authority with Britain. The British pursued a conscious policy of keeping the north and the south of Sudan divided. It operated a "closed door" approach towards the mainly Christian south to stop the spread of Islam, which it viewed as a possible factor that could unite the different peoples.

The machinations of the British led to the economic development of the north and east of the country, but the south remained isolated and economically backward. Britain hoped at this stage to integrate Southern Sudan into what was then known as British East Africa, and is now Uganda, Tanzania and Kenya.

Sudan was granted independence in 1956, but the economic, religious and cultural divisions cultivated by British colonialism had already exploded into a civil war a year earlier that was to last until 1972. In 1983 a second civil war started, based on the same divisions as before, and has cost the lives of up to 1.5 million people.

The Amnesty International and *Observer* reports show that the growing scramble for oil in Sudan, far from providing the basis for a resolution to this conflict, threatens even more brutal repression for the people of this devastated country.



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