

Mbeki facilitates US-Sudan peace deal

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On January 1, South African President Thabo Mbeki made an extraordinary speech before the Sudanese parliamentary assembly. The meeting was held to celebrate the 49th anniversary of Sudanese independence and was on the day after the signing, in Naivasha, Kenya, of the peace accord between the Sudanese government and the Sudan People's Liberation Army/Movement (SPLA/M).

After an introduction that heaped praise on the regime of President Ahmed al Bashir, Mbeki launched into an attack on the bloody record of British imperialism in Africa.

He singled out Winston Churchill in particular as a representative of "our colonial masters," denouncing him as a racist who justified the crimes of British colonialists like General Gordon, Field Marshall Viscount Wolseley and Lord Kitchener by depicting all Africans as inferior beings.

Mbeki said, "To some extent we can say that when these eminent representatives of British colonialism were not in Sudan, they were in South Africa, and vice versa, doing terrible things wherever they went, justifying what they did by defining the native peoples of Africa as savages that had to be civilised, even against their will."

He quoted from Churchill's book *The River War*, where, when describing the exploits of Lord Kitchener in Sudan, Churchill defined the "curses of Mohammedanism" as a "fanatical frenzy which is dangerous in a man as hydrophobia in a dog," which results in "fearful fatalistic apathy.... Improvident habits, slovenly systems of agriculture, sluggish methods of commerce, and insecurity of property exist wherever the followers of the Prophet rule or live. A degraded sensualism deprives this life of its grace and refinement; the next of its dignity and sanctity."

Mbeki continued, "What Churchill said about Mohammedans was of course precisely what our colonisers thought about all Africans, whether Muslim or not. And this attitude conditioned what they did as part of their colonial project."

What Mbeki said about the crimes of colonialism was undoubtedly true. But one must ask the question—why did he make the outburst in the way that he did and why did he choose this particular occasion?

His speech was clearly designed to enhance his own reputation as a critic of imperialism. But more importantly, it was also intended to boost the National-Islamic Front government of President Ahmed al Bashir—which came into

power in 1989 as the result of a military coup and which has ruled Sudan ever since under brutal Sharia law—attempting to provide some anti-colonial credibility for this despotic regime.

The much heralded peace agreement, which was concluded in a ceremonial signing in Nairobi, Kenya, on January 9, brings to an end a civil war that has raged for 21 years.

Until 1999, the US supported the SPLA/M against the Khartoum government, a regime they regarded as Islamic extremist and identified as a pariah state.

In August 1998, US cruise missiles destroyed the Al Shifa factory, Sudan's only pharmaceutical plant, because they claimed it was producing chemical weapons. They also accused the owner of having ties with Osama bin Laden, who had been based in Sudan from 1991 to 1996.

Under the Clinton administration the US passed the Sudanese Peace Act, which gave official support to the SPLA and other opposition organisations, and pledged to provide them with aid.

A characteristic of the Khartoum government regime's method of rule has been to use the army to back "warlord" militias against peasant villages. Along with the militias they used bombers and helicopter gun-ships to attack civilian areas where rebels were supposedly gaining support. Two million people were killed and 4 million were driven from their homes during the civil war period.

After George Bush became US president there was a change in policy because of the discovery of vast oil reserves in southern Sudan—the region is estimated to have at least 2 billion barrels of recoverable oil and is currently producing about 320,000 barrels a day. The industry was mainly financed by Canadian, Chinese and Malaysian capital.

America was keen to gain control of the oil resources and the necessity to establish political stability in the country—especially in the oil producing regions—became a priority. The US therefore started looking more favourably towards the National Islamic Front regime. Bush appointed a special envoy to negotiate a settlement and along with Britain, Italy and Norway began pressing for a peace deal between the opposing sides.

After September 11, al Bashir was praised for collaboration when he handed over 30 suspected associates of bin Laden and 200 intelligence files on Al Qaeda to the US. In return, the US put more pressure on the southern rebels to agree to a deal with the government.

Over the past four years there have been continual breaches of the peace process. The government bombing continued, but the US turned a blind eye to it because with local villages destroyed and the inhabitants cleared out of the area, it was difficult for rebel forces, with local backing, to attack the oilfields.

The Sudanese government's actions were condemned by organisations like Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International. In 2002, Christian Aid accused the government of operating a "scorched earth policy."

The peace deal that was finalised on January 9 will set up a power sharing government in which the SPLA/M is supposed to hold 28 percent of ministerial positions. Rebel leader John Garang, whom America has backed for years, will become vice-president. Ostensibly the oil revenues will be split 50/50 between north and south, although many experts doubt whether al Bashir and his supporters will actually implement this part of the agreement. The north will continue to be ruled under Sharia law.

Meanwhile, the conflict in Darfur, in western Sudan, continues. Fighting began there in 2003, when the Sudanese Liberation Army/Movement (SLA/M), inspired by the rebellion in the south, took up arms against the National Islamic government in Khartoum.

The government utilised the same techniques against rebels in that area that they had in other parts. So-called Janjaweed militants were used to terrorise the population, burning villages and committing rape and murder. As in the south, government forces attacked the rebels with bombers and helicopter gunships. About 70,000 civilians have been killed and millions were displaced and had to flee into neighbouring Chad and into refugee camps.

In 2004 the situation in Darfur hit the world's headlines. It resulted in a widespread condemnation of the Khartoum regime and accusations of genocide. The UN Commission on Human Rights reported on the atrocities and Human Rights Watch declared that there could be "no doubt about the Sudanese government's culpability in crimes against humanity in Darfur."

After issuing verbal warnings to the Khartoum government, the US and Western powers bypassed the UN—where China and other backers of the Sudan government would have blocked a military intervention—and declared the need for an "African solution." A decision was taken to send African Union (AU) troops as a "peace force" into the area. With little financial support forthcoming from Western powers, and reluctance to get involved in a member country's affairs, the AU have so far sent in only 400 troops to police an area the size of France.

The Sudanese regime, concerned that it could be undermined in Darfur by a Western-backed intervention, has recently stepped up the army-backed Janjaweed attacks on villagers. But recent reports also indicate more extensive operations by rebel forces in the Darfur region, presumably encouraged by the deal

made with the SPLA/M in the south. UN Secretary General Kofi Annan last week reported a deteriorating situation with a "build-up of weapons and intensification of violence" in which "both the government and rebels had repeatedly violated the ceasefire agreement, and the government had started a massive build-up of forces and logistics."

Last month the charity Save the Children announced that it was withdrawing all its 350 staff from Darfur because the worsening situation made its work too dangerous. Four of its workers had been killed the previous week. The UN and all the other aid groups have also pulled out. After all the hue and cry about genocide throughout last summer, the people of Darfur have been abandoned with no food, no medical care and no security.

What was Mbeki's role in all this?

Behind his anti-colonial rhetoric and praise for the Khartoum elite Mbeki was also warning the Sudanese regime that to receive further Western support they must not only share out the oil wealth with their former enemies in the south but also patch up their disagreements and share power with the rebel forces in the west. Using the rhetoric that South Africa is now using in intervening in other disputes in Africa, such as Burundi and the Congo, Mbeki suggested that the conflict between Arabs and blacks in Sudan was similar to that between blacks and whites in South Africa and that "some kind of peace or healing process is required." Expressed in less diplomatic language, the implication is that the government and Western rebels must negotiate a settlement otherwise a much bigger AU intervention with South African involvement would be the next step.

This is entirely in line with US and Western policy, which while cheering on the Khartoum regime for agreeing to the peace settlement in the south is also pressuring the government to make a deal in Darfur. South Africa's interests, like those of Washington, are not motivated by concern for the dire conditions now facing the population in western Sudan, but in gaining a share of Sudan's oil and mineral wealth. As South Africa's *Business Day* newspaper reported, Mbeki's visit to Sudan included the signing of a new agreement by Mbeki and al Bashir for cooperation in exploring Sudan's vast oil reserves. "The South African and Sudanese governments committed themselves to expanding and consolidating relations between the two nations."



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