

"Genocide in the Nuba Mountains of Sudan"---one year later, and counting ...
Dissent Magazine (on-line), June 22, 2011

By Eric Reeves

The Kauda valley in the very center of the Nuba Mountains of South Kordofan, Sudan is a beautiful place, one of the most beautiful I've ever encountered. The hillsides are alive with tukuls (traditional thatched huts) and terraced landscapes that give the impression of always having been there---of belonging there. During my days there I took long walks into the remoter regions of the valley, taking many pictures and communicating awkwardly with folks I met. My camera seemed the perfect translation tool, as most of the people I photographed had never had the experience before, especially the children. And when they saw themselves---typically for the first time in their lives---in my flip-out monitor, the inevitable reaction (once recognition took place---not always an immediate process) was unconstrained laughter. I'm not sure I understood the laughter, or that there was much to understand beyond the fact that seeing themselves was hugely entertaining and out of the ordinary.

I attended a local church service in Kauda town, where I was welcomed graciously, and every word not sung was laboriously (and in places bewilderingly) translated for me. This made the service rather long, but it was a sign of real appreciation. Afterward there was a beautiful interweaving of communicants, walking in opposite directions around the church. All the women and children were in colorful finery, and the men were dressed in their best attire.

But I also attended a much grimmer gathering, in the rocky hillside well above Kauda: a meeting of Nuba military and civil society leaders, led by the deputy governor of the region (the governor, was in Nairobi), in a large tent set up for this occasion. They were determined that I should hear their story, and they were deadly serious. Again and again I felt the force of decades of anger and disappointment pushing me back in my seat. I learned firsthand how bitter the people of the Nuba were, having been left out of consideration at the time of independence (1956), and in the Addis Ababa peace agreement (1972) that ended Sudan's first civil war. They would not be left out of the next peace agreement, they insisted with a vehemence that was almost shocking, and clearly meant to be conveyed to those in whose hands their fate rested.

This was in January 2003---shortly after the cessation of hostilities agreement (October 2002), but well before the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (January 2005) was signed by Khartoum and the southern Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM). The Nuba knew that key decisions were going to be made about their future, and they wanted a voice. Most of all they wanted self-determination, even as they knew that the Nuba Mountains were not only in the North but nowhere contiguous with what will become the Republic of South Sudan on July 9. Their fear was that they would be left alone in a North Sudan dominated by Khartoum's ideological Islam and Arabism (the ethnically diverse African people of the Nuba follow a number of religions, including Islam). Their worst fears have been realized.

Historical memory in this part of Sudan is defined by the terrible experiences of the 1990s, when Khartoum mounted a full-scale genocidal assault on the people of the Nuba, killing and displacing hundreds of thousands. This was jihad, and it was based on a fatwah issued in Khartoum in January 1992. With this justification, a total humanitarian blockade was imposed on the region, and many starving people were driven into "peace camps," where receiving food was conditional upon conversion to Islam; those refusing were often tortured or mutilated. It is hardly surprising that Deputy Governor Ismael Khamis would tell me bluntly, "Khartoum doesn't regard us as human beings."

And judging by the nature of the genocide that is rapidly developing in South Kordofan, there can be little quarreling with Khamis' assessment. Clear patterns have emerged from the many scores of reports that have come to me from the region over the past two weeks, Human Rights Watch has confirmed that Khartoum's regular military and militia are undertaking a campaign of house-

to-house roundups of Nuba in the capital city of Kadugli. Many of these people are hauled away in cattle trucks or summarily executed; dead bodies reportedly litter the streets of Kadugli. The Nuba are also stopped at checkpoints grimly similar to those in Rwanda; those suspected of SPLM or "southern" political sympathies are arrested or shot. The real issue, however, is not political identity but Nuba ethnicity; one aid worker who recently escaped from South Kordofan reports militia forces patrolling further from Kadugli: "Those [Nuba] coming in are saying, 'Whenever they see you are a black person, they kill you.'" Another Nuba aid worker reports that an Arab militia leader made clear that their orders were simple: "to just clear."

Yet another Nuba resident of Kadugli ("Yusef") told Agence France-Presse that he had been informed by a member of the notorious Popular Defense Forces (PDF) that they had been provided with plenty of weapons and ammunition, and a standing order: "He said that they had clear instructions: just sweep away the rubbish. If you see a Nuba, just clean it up. He told me he saw two trucks of people with their hands tied and blindfolded, driving out to where diggers were making holes for graves on the edge of town." There have been repeated reports, so far unconfirmed, of mass graves in and around Kadugli. We should hardly be surprised that the charges of "ethnic cleansing" and "genocide" are coming ever more insistently from the Nuba people, observers on the ground and in the region, and church groups with strong ties to the region.

Just as shocking is Khartoum's renewed blockade of humanitarian assistance to the people of the Nuba, hundreds of thousands of whom have already fled into the hills or mountainsides. The Kauda airstrip, critical for humanitarian transport, has been relentlessly bombed over the past ten days, and the UN now reports that it is no longer serviceable for fixed-wing aircraft. The airstrip has no military value, as the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) forces have no aircraft. The concerted bombing, with high-explosives producing enormous craters, is simply to deny the Nuba food, medicine, and shelter.

The same assault on humanitarian efforts is underway in Kadugli and other towns under Khartoum's military control. The UN World Health Organization warehouse and offices in Kadugli have been completely looted, as have those of other UN humanitarian agencies. The Kadugli airport has been commandeered by Khartoum's military forces, and all humanitarian flights into South Kordofan have been halted. The World Food Program has announced that it has no way to feed some 400,000 beneficiaries in South Kordofan. As in Darfur, Khartoum intends to wage a genocide by attrition---defeating the Nuba by starving them.

What Khartoum seems not to have fully understood is how determined the Nuba SPLA are. These are not southerners, but true sons of the Nuba; they cannot "return to the South," because they are from the north. And they are well armed and well led by Abdel Aziz el-Hilu, a former governor of the region and fearsome military commander. They believe they are defending their homeland and their way of life. They have no alternative: as Khamis said to me during our 2003 meeting, "we have no way out." Given the geography of South Kordofan, there can be little quarreling with this assessment. These people will fight to the death.

Princeton Lyman, the U.S. special envoy, declared on June 16---eleven days after the killing began in Kadugli---that the United States "doesn't have enough information on the ground to call the campaign 'ethnic cleansing.'" This is an astonishing claim, given what the UN is saying in its confidential reports on the situation in Kadugli, what Human Rights Watch has reported, what is revealed by satellite photography, what escaping aid workers have told journalists, and what is revealed by photographs of the bombing of the airstrip at Kauda. Again, the airstrip has no military purpose: it is being attacked solely to deny humanitarian access to the Nuba people. And it is working: the World Council of Churches, an organization with close ties to the Nuba, reported on June 10 that as many as 300,000 people were besieged and cut off from humanitarian relief.

Yet again the Obama administration is showing a painful lack of clear-eyed assessment and moral courage in addressing the genocidal ambitions of the Khartoum regime. This is the

President's second "'Rwanda moment," the second moment in which to decide whether or not halting genocide really matters to this administration. The first "moment" came early in the form of a decision about how to respond to undiminished human suffering and destruction in Darfur, about which Obama now barely speaks, despite his forceful campaign rhetoric: "The government of Sudan has pursued a policy of genocide in Darfur. Hundreds of thousands of men, women, and children have been killed in Darfur, and the killing continues to this very day" (April 2008). Obama's response was to appoint a special envoy to Sudan, General Scott Gration, who failed badly and conspicuously with his policy of accommodating Khartoum's *génocidaires*, men he thought would be impressed by his offer of "cookies, gold stars, and friendly faces." But as I've repeatedly argued in this forum, conditions on the ground in Darfur are if anything worse than when Obama issued his uncompromising words.

This brings us to the present, to this very moment, in which a decision must be made: acquiesce and settle for stern warnings to Khartoum, or act forcefully to compel a change in Khartoum's thinking. A militarily enforced No Fly Zone over South Kordofan---however desirable---is impracticable for a number of reasons: there is no easy or obvious solution to the problem of basing the necessary aircraft (including AWACS, tanker refueling aircraft, and patrolling combat aircraft); constant mid-flight refueling would present extraordinarily difficult and expensive challenges; and there appears to be no possibility of securing either UN backing or even moral support from the Europeans for such a complex undertaking---let alone domestic support from a war-weary America.

There is a much less costly but equally effective alternative, one that could be undertaken unilaterally if necessary: attacking Khartoum's military aircraft on the ground, if those aircraft have been implicated in bombing civilians and humanitarians. The U.S. should then demand as a condition for halting these serial attacks an end to hostilities in South Kordofan, and an opening of humanitarian access. For despite Ambassador Lyman's disingenuous claim about our not having enough information to assess the nature of the atrocity crimes in South Kordofan, there can be no reasonable doubt about the reality of widespread, systematic, ethnically targeted destruction of the Nuba people.

When I think back to my time at Kauda, and the beauty of the people and the hillsides---now much of it in flames, and all of it under the most intense assault---there hardly seems to be a choice. But diffidence, over-commitment, and apparent failure to understand what is at stake have made for what appears to be a disastrous decision by Obama in confronting his second "Rwanda moment."

[Eric Reeves has published extensively on Sudan, nationally and internationally, for more than a decade. He is author of *A Long Day's Dying: Critical Moments in the Darfur Genocide*.]