



**THE BBC AND
SUDAN:
A CASE STUDY
IN PREJUDICE
AND POOR
REPORTING**

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March 2001

WORKING FOR PEACE IN SUDAN

THE BBC AND SUDAN: A CASE STUDY IN PREJUDICE AND POOR REPORTING

On 29 January 2001, the British Broadcasting Corporation Television screened **Everyman: The Dangerous Adventures of Baroness Cox**. This programme followed Baroness Cox, President of Christian Solidarity Worldwide (formerly Christian Solidarity International or CSI), on one of her controversial visits to southern Sudan. She was filmed there claiming to have “redeemed” several hundred Sudanese “slaves”. In dealing with what is a very controversial issue, the BBC chose to give those questioning the claims made by Baroness Cox 60 seconds in a programme that was one hour in length. In so doing, the BBC demonstrated not just poor journalism, but also in effect allowed the unchallenged articulation of deeply questionable claims. The BBC is also in danger of having fuelled undeserved prejudice against Arabs and Muslims. The programme clearly ignored the BBC’s own guidelines with regard to impartiality, accuracy and its handling of people and cultures.

Civil war has raged in Sudan off and on since 1955 between the Sudanese government and rebels in southern Sudan. Since 1983 the war in the south has been fought by the Sudan People’s Liberation Army (SPLA).¹ The essence of the claims made by Baroness Cox is that as a consequence of this war there is a flourishing “slave trade” in Sudan. She claims that Sudanese government and its northern forces raid southern villages and “enslave” Dinka tribesmen, women and children and that the people involved in the “slave trade” are northern Arab “slave traders” and “militiamen”. Baroness Cox further claims that on visits to parts of southern Sudan she has bought back or “redeemed” thousands of slaves, often several hundred at a time. Leaving aside the issue of whether she is actually buying “slaves” or people kidnapped for ransom, what Baroness Cox claims to be doing has been heavily criticised by groups such as UNICEF, whose executive director has stated that “the practice has encouraged more trafficking and criminality”², Anti-Slavery International and the Save the Children fund.

“Slavery” and “Slave Redemption” versus Kidnapping, Abduction or Fraud?

The unchallenged claims of large scale “slave redemption” made by Baroness Cox in the course the BBC programme can be clearly assessed against more objective sources. One of these is the report by the Canadian government’s special envoy to Sudan, John Harker, into human rights abuses in Sudan, a report commissioned by the Canadian government. The Harker report, **Human Security in Sudan: The Report of a Canadian Assessment Mission**, was published in February 2000. One of the two missions with which John Harker was tasked was to:

independently investigate human rights violations, specifically in reference to allegations of slavery and slavery-like practices in Sudan.³

While Harker was critical of many human rights abuses in Sudan, he clearly questioned claims of large scale “slave redemption”. He specifically touched on the credibility of such claims:

[R]eports, especially from CSI, about very large numbers were questioned, and frankly not accepted. Mention was also made to us of evidence that the SPLA were involved in “recycling” abductees...

Serious anti-abduction activists...cannot relate the claimed redemptions to what they know of the reality. For example we were told that it would be hard not to notice how passive these “slave” children are when they are liberated or to realize how implausible it is to gather together so many

¹ The SPLA is sometimes also referred to as the SPLM/A, a reference to the Sudan People’s Liberation Movement.

² ‘Buying Slaves Is Wrong’, **International Herald Tribune**, May 13, 1999.

³ John Harker, **Human Security in Sudan: The Report of a Canadian Assessment Mission**, Prepared for the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Ottawa, January 2000, available at <http://www.dfait-maeci.gc-foreignp-3110186-e.pdf>, p. 1.

people from so many locations so quickly - and there were always just the right number to match redemption funds available!

The Harker Report also detailed how fraudulent “slave redemptions” were being used to raise money for the SPLA, money which he stated is used to purchase arms and ammunition:

Several informants reported various scenarios involving staged redemptions. In some cases, SPLM officials are allegedly involved in arranging these exchanges, dressing up as Arab slave traders, with profits being used to support the SPLM/A, buy weapons and ammunition...

The Harker Report documented the deliberately fraudulent nature of many “slave redemptions”:

Sometimes a “redeeming group” may be innocently misled, but other groups may be actively committed to fundraising for the SPLM/A & deliberately use “slave redemption” as a successful tactic for attracting Western donors.

We did speak with an eyewitness who can confirm observing a staged redemption and this testimony conformed with other reports we had from a variety of credible sources. The “redeeming group” knew they were buying back children who had not been abducted or enslaved. The exchange was conducted in the presence of armed SPLA guards. The “Arab” middle man/trader delivering the children for “redemption” was recognized as a member of the local community even though he was dressed up in traditional Arab costume for the event.⁴

It is not just the Canadian government that has questioned the sort of process to which Baroness Cox was an all too willing party, and which was so unquestioningly recorded by the BBC. The respected human rights expert, and Sudan specialist, Alex de Waal, while co-director of the human rights group African Rights, has stated with regard to claims made by Baroness Cox that:

(O)vereager or misinformed human rights advocates in Europe and the US have played upon lazy assumptions to raise public outrage. Christian Solidarity International, for instance, claims that “Government troops and Government-backed Arab militias regularly raid black African communities for slaves and other forms of booty”. The organization repeatedly uses the term “slave raids”, implying that taking captives is the aim of government policy. This despite the fact that there is no evidence for centrally-organized, government-directed slave raiding or slave trade.⁵

In a July 1999 article entitled ‘The False Promise of Slave Redemption’, published by **The Atlantic Monthly**, American journalist Richard Miniter provided unambiguous first hand evidence that there was fraud and corruption in the process of “slave redemption” in Sudan, whereby southern Sudanese tribesmen, women and children were supposedly “bought back” from northern Sudanese tribesmen said to have abducted them during raids on southern villages.⁶

Minter documented that SPLA officials are involved in fraud with regard to “slave redemption”:

[They] set themselves up as bankers and insist that redeemers exchange their dollars for Sudanese pounds, a nearly worthless currency...The officials arrange by radio to have some villages play slaves and some play slave-sellers, and when the redeemers arrive, the Sudanese pounds are used to free the slaves. When the redeemers are gone, the pounds are turned back over to the corrupt officials, who hand out a few dollars in return. Most of the dollars stay with the officials, who now also have the Sudanese pounds with which to play banker again.

⁴ Ibid., pp.39-40.

⁵ Alex de Waal, ‘Sudan: Social Engineering, Slavery and War’, in **Covert Action Quarterly**, Spring 1997.

⁶ The article was published in two parts in **The Atlantic Monthly** and is also available online in two parts. Part one is available at <http://www.theatlantic.com/issues/99jul/9907sudanslaves.htm> and part two at <http://www.theatlantic.com/issues/99jul/9907sudanslaves2.htm>. Miniter’s work has previously appeared in **The New York Times**, **The Wall Street Journal** and **Reader’s Digest**.

This was not the first time that an American journalist has questioned rebel involvement in the whole issue of “slavery” and “slavery redemption”. William Finnegan, in his article ‘The Invisible War’, which appeared in **The New Yorker** in January 1999, tells of having himself come across a “slave trader” at Nyamlell similar to the one spoken of by Minter:

To me, perhaps the most disturbing aspect of the mystery surrounding Nyamlell’s slaver rescuer was his relationship with the S.P.L.A. If he was in fact a double-dealer, running a nefarious business, could the local rebels be in league with his operation? They certainly seemed to endorse his work.⁷

Minter was accompanied during a visit to southern Sudan by James Jacobson, the president of Christian Freedom International. Jacobson, a former Reagan Administration official, had previously served as Christian Solidarity International’s Washington representative. In 1998, the American branch of Christian Solidarity International USA went its own way as Christian Freedom International, with Jacobson at its head. He was an enthusiastic supporter of “slave redemption” until he actually visited southern Sudan to see the “slave redemption” situation for himself. Jacobson subsequently publicly disowned “slave redemption” because the financial incentives involved encouraged both the taking of captives as well as fraud and corruption.

Interviewed after his visit to Nyamlell, James Jacobson told the **Denver Post** of his clear reservations about “redemption”: “I just felt everything was not as it appeared to be. You don’t know if after several days these groups of people get reabducted.” The **Denver Post** reported that the leaders of major human-rights organizations were stating that abductions are “not only...increasing but that the increases almost certainly are related to the sudden availability of Western money for buybacks”:

It’s like paying hostage takers ransom, they say, arguing that any payment lends credibility to the notion of buying and selling human beings. They say the money encourages scams...⁸

A Reuters report in July 1999 confirmed the “massive corruption” reported by Jacobson:

Local aid workers...say that they have seen children who they have known for months passed off as slaves...And Reuters interviewed one boy in Yargot who told a completely implausible story of life in the north, a story which he changed in every respect when translators were swapped.⁹

In May 1999, the **Christian Science Monitor** also clearly stated:

There are increasingly numerous reports that significant numbers of those ‘redeemed’ were never slaves in the first place. Rather, they were simply elements of the local populations, often children, available to be herded together when cash-bearing redeemers appeared.¹⁰

Perhaps the final word on the “redemption” of abductees should be given to those closest to the issue. Anti-Slavery International cited a source close to the Dinka retrieval committee, the Dinka community’s own grouping which exists in the affected areas to secure the return of abductees, as saying that they were concerned that: “Such outside intervention with big sums of money may make matters worse and can encourage others to capture and “facilitate” the retrieval of more children for economic motives.”¹¹

The BBC programme did not deal with the issue of whether the people said to have been “slaves” were “slaves” or rather people kidnapped or abducted for ransoming to Westerners with large amounts of cash. The programme also did not deal with the issue of whether or not “slave redemption” actually encouraged further kidnapping and abduction specifically for that market. Nor did the programme even touch upon let alone discuss the well-documented issue of simple misrepresentation or fraud within the “slave redemption” issue. The BBC’s inability to adequately present the issues they claimed to document in this program is clear. It is

⁷ William Finnegan, ‘The Invisible War’, **The New Yorker**, 25 January 1999.

⁸ ‘Rescue of slaves backfiring’, **The Denver Post**, August 22, 1999.

⁹ ‘Aid group tries to break Sudan slavery chain’, News Article by Reuters on July 11, 1999 at 23:40:58.

¹⁰ ‘Slave ‘Redemption’ Won’t Save Sudan’, **Christian Science Monitor**, 26 May 1999.

¹¹ Peter Verney, **Slavery in Sudan**, Sudan Update and Anti-Slavery International, London, May 1997, p.20.

clear that “overeager and misinformed” also applies to BBC personnel and their unquestioning acceptance of terms such as “slavery” and “slave redemption” in the Sudan. This is all the more surprising given that the programme makers were provided on request by the European-Sudanese Public Affairs Council with a wealth of materials detailing public concerns about this very issues.

Has the BBC Encouraged Racial Prejudice?

What is perhaps equally disturbing about this BBC programme is that it may have encouraged prejudice against Arabs and Muslims. The sort of claims given free rein in the BBC programme have disturbed groups such as Anti-Slavery International, the world’s oldest human rights organisation. In a submission to the United Nations Commission on Human Rights in Geneva, Anti-Slavery International stated:

There is a danger that wrangling over slavery can distract us from abuses which are actually part of government policy - which we do not believe slavery to be. Unless accurately reported, the issue can become a tool for indiscriminate and wholly undeserved prejudice against Arabs and Muslims. **[We] are worried that some media reports of “slave markets”, stocked by Arab slave traders - which [we] consider distort reality - fuel such prejudice.**¹² (emphasis added)

Anti-Slavery International would seem to believe that talk of “Arab slave traders”, as unreservedly echoed by the BBC, distort reality and fuel prejudice against Arabs and Muslims. In **Everyman: The Dangerous Adventures of Baroness Cox**, there are **fifteen** specific references to Arabs. These appear in statements such as “Arab slave traders”, “Arab raiders”, “Arab traders”, “Arab militia” and “Arab militiamen”.

The BBC, Baroness Cox and Credibility

The BBC programme makers showed an amazingly lackadaisical approach to Baroness Cox’s credibility regarding Sudanese affairs. On issue after issue her accuracy has previously been found to be wanting, and her claims are or have been contradicted by the British and American governments, UNSCOM and human rights groups such as African Rights and Anti-Slavery International. Even more caution should have been exercised given the fact that, as the program itself states, she was “going off to help the rebels” and that she herself admits that there is “a one-sidedness” in her work. Even **The Times** newspaper review of the programme described her as looking “ever so slightly unhinged”.¹³

It is not just Baroness Cox’s judgement that has been called into question. The veteran southern Sudanese politician Bona Malwal directly challenged claims made by Baroness Cox to have “redeemed slaves”. In a letter to her Malwal stated that:

On at least three different occasions, you have come into Twic County without the permission of the local leadership, using Messrs Stephen Wonda and Martin Okeruk [SPLA officials] as your license to do so. **You then say each time that your mission was to redeem slaves and that indeed you have done so, when in each instance this had not been the case.** The latest episode was in October [1999] when you landed at Mayen Abun without even the courtesy of informing the local area representative....

I know that you have put out for propaganda, and maybe for fundraising purposes as well, that you redeemed slaves at Mayen Abun in October when nothing of the sort happened. I sincerely hope that this type of game stops...I sincerely hope that you do see the harm that could be caused and that you will refrain from this activity in the future.¹⁴

¹² The reference number of this submission to the United Nations Commission on Human Rights is TS/S/4/97, and is available to view on the Anti-Slavery International web-site at <http://www.charitynet.org/asi/submit5.htm>

¹³ **The Times**, (London), 30 January 2001, p.27.

¹⁴ Letter from Bona Malwal to Baroness Cox, 23 January 2000 posted on South Sudan Net (http://southsudanet.net/baroness_caroline_cox_1_arnellan.htm).

Malwal's standing within the southern Sudanese community is unassailable. Malwal is the publisher of the **Sudan Democratic Gazette**. He is a former Minister of Information and Culture and was the editor of the **Sudan Times**, the largest English-language newspaper in Sudan before 1989. He went into exile when the present government in Sudan came to power a decade ago, and teaches international affairs at Oxford University. Baroness Cox has herself previously described him as "one of the well-respected elders of the Dinka tribe".¹⁵ The implications of Bona Malwal's letter to Baroness Cox are clear and it is for the reader to draw his or her own conclusions.

Why then did the BBC allow Baroness Cox what was to all intents and purposes an unchallenged opportunity to make controversial and deeply questionable claims? Was the BBC not aware of Bona Malwal's challenging of Cox's claims? Surely the BBC had a professional duty to be even more careful in dealing with such very delicate and controversial issues. No such caution or professionalism was evident.

Leaving aside the clear criticisms of Baroness Cox with regard to her claims about "slavery" in Sudan, her track record of making other unreliable claims concerning Sudan is a clear one. On 17 February 1998, in the British Parliament, for example, Baroness Cox claimed that four hundred Scud missiles (including support vehicles well over one thousand vehicles) had been secretly transferred to Sudan from Iraq since the Gulf War in the face of unprecedented satellite, electronic and physical surveillance of that country by the United States, the United Nations and other concerned members of the international community. It is a matter of record that Reuters reported that on the same day that Baroness Cox made this claim, the White House clearly stated: "We have no credible evidence that Iraq has exported weapons of mass destruction technology to other countries since the (1991) Gulf War." The British government stated in relation to these claims that: "We are monitoring the evidence closely, but to date we have no evidence to substantiate these claims.... Moreover, we know that some of the claims are untrue...".¹⁶ The British Government Minister also cited UNSCOM, stating that: "Nor has the United Nations Special Commission reported any evidence of such transfers since the Gulf War conflict and the imposition of sanctions in 1991."¹⁷

In May 1998 Baroness Cox claimed that genocide was taking place in the Bahr al-Ghazal region of southern Sudan. She was commenting on inter-tribal fighting.¹⁸ When the British government was asked in Parliament if they had any evidence to verify Baroness Cox's claims of genocide in Bahr al-Ghazal the government replied: "The situation was very complicated and the picture unclear, making it difficult to verify facts...these killings should be seen in the context of a long history of tribal conflicts. It would appear from the information available to us that no one side was entirely to blame."¹⁹

In October 1999, Baroness Cox stated that Sudanese Government forces had used chemical weapons in locations in southern Sudan in July 1999. On 17 October the United Nations revealed that tests conducted by the laboratories of the Center for Disease Control in Atlanta on medical samples taken by Operation Lifeline Sudan members in the areas cited by Baroness Cox "indicated no evidence of exposure to chemicals".²⁰ Baroness Cox supplied further samples which she claimed proved her case. In June 2000, the British government revealed the results of the "very careful analysis" of the samples provided by Baroness Cox and all other evidence. The samples had been tested by the British Defence Ministry's world-renowned chemical and biological weapons establishment at Porton Down (CBD). The results showed that the samples provided "bore no evidence of the CW [Chemical Weapons] agents for which they had been tested". The British government also pointed out that in addition to the American tests, further samples had been tested by the Finnish institute responsible for chemical weapons verification. These too had been negative. The Government commented on the "consistency of results from these three independent sets of analysis".²¹

¹⁵ 'A Response to the Sudan Foundation's "Questions" and Criticisms of CSI's Work in Sudan', CSI Magazine, Issue 90, December 1997 available at <http://home.clara.co.uk/csiuk/90page4.html>.

¹⁶ House of Lords **Official Report**, 19th March 1998, cols. 818-820.

¹⁷ House of Lords **Official Report**, 19th March 1998, cols. 818-820.

¹⁸ **Daily Telegraph**, (London), 26 May 1998.

¹⁹ House of Lords, **Official Report**, 10 December 1998, written answers, column 103.

²⁰ Note by the Spokesman of the United Nations Secretary-General handed to the Sudanese Ministry of External Relations by the UN Resident Coordinator in Sudan, Philippe Borel.

²¹ Letter from Baroness Symons, Minister of State for Defence Procurement, to Baroness Cox, (Reference D/MIN(DP)/ECS/13/3/3), 5 June 2000.

In October 1999, Baroness Cox claimed that the Sudanese Government had been involved in the 1993 bombing of the World Trade Center in New York.²² Any Sudanese involvement was unambiguously denied in 1996 by Ambassador Philip C. Wilcox Jr., the Department of State's Coordinator for Counterterrorism when he stated: "We have looked very, very carefully and pursued all possible clues that there might be some state sponsorship behind the World Trade Center bombing. We have found no such evidence, in spite of an exhaustive search, that any state was responsible for that crime. Our information indicates that Ramzi Ahmed Yousef and his gang... did not rely on support from any state."²³

As a general view on Baroness Cox's reliability, it is worth noting that in Andrew Boyd's sympathetic biography of her, **Baroness Cox: A Voice for the Voiceless**, Dr Christopher Besse of Medical Emergency Relief International, a humanitarian aid organisation with which Cox is closely associated (Dr Besse and Baroness Cox are both trustees of Merlin), is quoted as saying:

She's not the most popular person in Sudan among the humanitarian aid people. She has her enemies, and some of them feel she is not well-enough informed. She recognizes a bit of the picture, but not all that's going on.²⁴

It must be emphasised that Dr Besse was referring specifically to the "humanitarian aid people". That the BBC chose to rely upon claims made by Baroness Cox, of whom even her friends say that she only "recognizes a bit of the picture" with regard to Sudan is disturbing.

It is not just Baroness Cox's credibility as a commentator that is deeply questionable. She is a self-evident partisan for one side of the Sudanese conflict. Even, the BBC stated that she was off to "help the rebels". It should be noted that **The Economist** has summed up the general image of the SPLA rebels in question:

[The SPLA] has...been little more than an armed gang of Dinkas...killing, looting and raping. Its indifference, almost animosity, towards the people it was supposed to be "liberating" was all too clear.²⁵

The **New York Times**, a vigorous critic of the Sudanese government, states that the SPLA: "[H]ave behaved like an occupying army, killing, raping and pillaging."²⁶ It also described the SPLA leader John Garang as one of Sudan's "pre-eminent war criminals".²⁷

Why No Regard for the BBC Code of Ethics?

The BBC has a clear code of ethics for programme makers. This is the **Producers' Guidelines** and it advises on issues such as fairness and impartiality.²⁸ It is worth outlining what these guidelines are in order for **Everyman: The Dangerous Adventures of Baroness Cox** to be assessed with them in mind. With regard to "impartiality", they declare that:

Due impartiality lies at the heart of the BBC. All BBC programmes and services should be open minded, fair and show a respect for truth. No significant strand of thought should go unreflected or under represented on the BBC.

The **Producers' Guidelines** state that:

²² In correspondence with Lord McNair, 14 October 1999.

²³ **Patterns of Global Terrorism: 1996 Briefing**, Press briefing by Ambassador Philip C. Wilcox Jr, Washington-DC, 30 April 1996 on US Government Home Page, at <http://www.state.gov/www/global/terrorism/960430.html>

²⁴ Andrew Boyd, **Baroness Cox: A Voice for the Voiceless**, Lion Publishing, Oxford, 1998, p.324.

²⁵ **The Economist**, March 1998.

²⁶ 'Misguided Relief to Sudan', Editorial, **New York Times**, 6 December, 1999.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ See 'Producers' Guidelines', BBC Online, at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/info/editorial/prodgl/>

The Agreement accompanying the BBC's Charter specifies that the Corporation should treat controversial subjects with due accuracy and impartiality both in news programmes and other programmes that deal with matters of public policy or of political or industrial controversy.

With regard to "accuracy" the **Producers' Guidelines** state:

We must be accurate and must be prepared to check, cross-check and seek advice to ensure this. Wherever possible we should gather information first-hand by being there ourselves or, where that is not possible, by talking to those who were. But accuracy is often more than a question of getting the facts right. All relevant information should be weighed to get at the truth of what is reported or described.

With regard to "Giving a Full and Fair View of People and Cultures", the **Producers' Guidelines** state that "When portraying social groups, stereotypes should be avoided".

In what could at best be described as lacklustre reporting on an intensely sensitive subject, is for the reader to decide whether the producers of **Everyman: The Dangerous Adventures of Baroness Cox** followed the **Producers' Guidelines** or exercised anything like the requisite caution necessary in making this programme. There are a number of questions that need to be answered:

- Why was the clear issue of exactly what constitutes "slavery" not examined?
- Why were clearly articulated international concerns about the possibly fraudulent nature of precisely the sort of "slave redemption" claimed in the programme not discussed?
- Were the BBC aware of the public challenging of Baroness Cox's claims by southern Sudanese politician and Dinka elder Bona Malwal? If not, why not?
- Why were those who held legitimate opposing views to Baroness Cox only given 60 seconds of air-time in an hour-long programme? Does this constitute "due accuracy and impartiality" as outlined in the **Producers' Guidelines**?
- Can the BBC categorically state the "slave redemption" it claimed to have been party to was not one of the "staged redemptions" as outlined in the Harker Report?
- Can the BBC categorically state that thousands of dollars it filmed being passed to "traders" for "slave redemption" was not simply a kidnapping for ransom scheme or part of a deeper fraud?
- Could it be that the BBC was "misled" in believing that they were witnessing a "slave redemption"?
- Was the BBC not concerned that it was fuelling undeserved prejudice against Arabs and Muslims in its stereotyped portrayal of "Arab slave traders"?
- Was the BBC not concerned that Baroness Cox had repeatedly made unsubstantiated or untrue claims with regard to Sudan? She has made very serious claims about Sudan and the Sudanese government which have been dismissed by sources that cannot be described as being supportive of the Sudanese government.
- Given that they may have self-evidently been "overeager or misinformed" in accepting questionable claims about Sudan and that they may have been guilty of "lazy assumptions" with regard to the country, how does the BBC intend to address this issue?
- Does the BBC really think that such unquestioning acceptance of claims described as being rooted in "lazy assumptions" is really the best way of covering events in Sudan?