



‘TAKING SIDES IN SUDAN’:

**THE DAILY TELEGRAPH’S
SUPPORT FOR CONTINUING
WAR AND STARVATION
IN SUDAN**

**A statement of concern by the
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An occasional paper published by:
The Sudan Foundation
212 Piccadilly, London WC1V 9LD,
United Kingdom.

Telephone: 0171 917 1854

Fax: 0171 439 0262

E-mail: msf@msf.demon.co.uk

Web Page: <http://www.sufo.demon.co.uk/>

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‘Taking sides in Sudan’: *The Daily Telegraph*’s support for continuing war and starvation in Sudan

The Daily Telegraph published an editorial on 20 July 1998 entitled ‘Taking sides in Sudan’. In this, the newspaper’s second foray into Sudanese affairs recently, it came out against the idea of a ceasefire within those areas of Sudan affected by famine, claimed that the famine within Sudan was “the direct consequence of oppression” on the part of the government of Sudan, described the Government of Sudan as “an Iranian-style fundamentalist dictatorship” and stated that the shooting down of resupply flights into government-held towns within southern Sudan would be the solution to the war. Interestingly, it also described the Sudan People’s Liberation Army (SPLA), the rebel movement in Sudan, as being “Christian-led”, and claimed that the Sudanese government is “losing the civil war”. It is worth examining several of these assertions, and indeed prescriptions, in some detail.

A Ceasefire in Sudan?

On 15 July 1998, the SPLA eventually agreed to a temporary ceasefire, called for by the international community in order to increase food delivery to famine-affected areas of southern Sudan. *The Daily Telegraph* has rejected even this humanitarian ceasefire. In doing so it is tenaciously out of step with the British government, the United Nations, the regional Inter-governmental Authority on Development (IGAD), the IGAD Partners and the European Union. More importantly, however, the paper is out of step with the clear wishes of ordinary Sudanese people. Both the Sudanese government and the rebel movement have accepted the ceasefire. It is worth noting that in its editorial *The Daily Telegraph* blamed at least some of Sudan’s present problems on British colonial administrators. It appears that middle-class white men continue to believe that they know what is in the best interests of the Sudanese - in this instance continued war and starvation.

The 1998 Bahr al-Ghazal famine

The famine to which *The Daily Telegraph* referred has its roots in the drought of 1997 and early 1998. The newspaper’s somewhat bold assertion that the famine is the “direct consequence” of government activity is not supported by the evidence. In point of fact, the very “Christian-led” movement whose side *The Daily Telegraph* has taken, appears to have been largely responsible for this catastrophe.

Most independent observers have stated, for example, that the famine was precipitated by a rebel SPLA offensive in the Bahr al-Ghazal area. In late January 1998, Kerubino Kuanyin Bol, a SPLA commander who had previously supported the Sudanese government’s internal peace process, led a rebel attack on the city of Wau, in Bahr al-Ghazal. Wau is the second-largest city in southern Sudan. This attack, and the rebel SPLA offensive that followed it, led to a drastic deterioration of the security situation in that region. More than one hundred thousand people fled Wau, and other towns such as Gogrial and Aweil, as fighting intensified. Kerubino’s responsibility in large part for the crisis situation was touched on by CNN reports in early April which stated that “aid agencies blame Sudanese rebel who switched sides”:

Observers say much of the recent chaos has resulted from the actions of one man, Kerubino Kwanying Bol, a founding member of the rebel movement...Two years ago, some SPLA leaders, including Kerubino, signed a peace agreement with the government...But earlier this year...Kerubino rejoined the SPLA. He aided rebel forces in sieges of three government-held towns, which sent people fleeing into the countryside.¹

Newsweek magazine also found Kerubino’s involvement clear: “Aid workers blame much of the south’s recent anguish on one man: the mercurial Dinka warlord Kerubino Kuanyin Bol.”² Drought and a clear lack of international funding in 1997 and 1998 for Operation Lifeline Sudan (OLS) all played their part in the famine.

While the government of Sudan did partially restrict aid flights into the new combat zones in February and March for security reasons, it is also clear that Operation Lifeline Sudan, co-ordinating the delivery of food aid, either chose for its own security reasons not to fly the flights that had been agreed or did not have the resources to mount such flights. For example, the government agreed 14 World Food Programme (WFP) flights during February, WFP only sent two flights. Similarly, although during the same period the government gave permission to UNICEF for twenty flights to Bahr al-Ghazal, UNICEF sent only three flights. The flight restrictions were lifted on 31 March once the situation had stabilised itself. Even after the lifting of restrictions, Operation Lifeline Sudan

flew to less than half the sites they requested in April.³ This was clearly due to a lack of resources on the part of the aid agencies, and not access into the affected areas.

Operation Lifeline Sudan

Moving on to the broader issue of humanitarian assistance within Sudan, *The Daily Telegraph* appears to be unaware of the mechanics of Operation Lifeline Sudan, and the Government of Sudan's role within it. The present government was the first since the recommencement of the civil war in 1983 to agree to the structuring and streamlining of humanitarian assistance to southern Sudan. OLS is unprecedented in post-war history in as much as it is the first time within a civil war that a government has agreed the delivery of assistance by outside agencies to rebel-dominated parts of the same country. Operation Lifeline Sudan began in 1989, within months of this present government coming to power. It is a matter of record that the government has agreed the increase of the number of delivery sites in the south from 20 in 1993 to over 180 during the recent crisis, the vast majority of which are within rebel-held areas - in the full knowledge that perhaps more than half of such food aid never reaches the civilians for whom it is intended, being diverted by the SPLA for its own use.

Food as “an instrument of war”

The issue of the use of food as “an instrument of war” is central to the editorial in question, and at the same time highlights some of the deep faultlines, inconsistencies and contradictions in *The Daily Telegraph's* stated position. The newspaper, for example, publicly deplores that “food supplies have been used as an instrument of war to subjugate the black Christian and animist population of the South” and that:

it must be considered the most pressing moral outrage in the world today.

There are two points which must be made here. Firstly, in the very same editorial, some paragraphs later, *The Daily Telegraph* itself advocates the very same use of food, or more accurately the withholding of food, as an instrument of war. The paper states the following:

If (the SPLA) were to acquire anti-aircraft missiles, it could prevent the aerial resupply of fortress towns that remain in government control. The war, as we have known it, would be over within months. Khartoum would be forced to deal

The Daily Telegraph is perhaps unaware, or has conveniently chosen not to note, that hundreds of thousands of southern civilians have fled the countryside, at least in part to escape the attention of the SPLA, and have flocked to towns in southern Sudan, the “fortress towns” referred to by the newspaper. UNICEF workers stated in July that up to 2,000 starving southern tribesmen are arriving each day in Wau, the government-held centre in Bahr al-Ghazal, a “fortress town”.⁴

Wau is a case in point. By mid-July, the WFP was said to be feeding 50,000 southern Sudanese civilians who had fled to Wau. The WFP was flying 300 tons of food into Wau every week, double the amount it had previously been bringing in.⁵ Between 40 and 50 people per day were said to be dying of starvation in Wau. Some 62,000 people were said to have entered Wau in recent weeks.⁶ The WFP stated in July 1998 that Wau had a population of about 250,000 and that the situation there was critical.⁷ There are hundreds of thousands of other southern civilians living in similar circumstances in other towns such as Juba, for whom air-delivered food and medical resupply is all that stands between them and death by starvation or disease.

In its calls for anti-aircraft missiles to shoot down resupply flights into these towns, *The Daily Telegraph* has amply illustrated the inconsistency and hypocrisy that permeated its leader. On one hand the newspaper attempts to take the moral highground by condemning the use of food supplies “as an instrument of war to subjugate the black Christian and animist population of the South” as the “most pressing moral outrage in the world today”, while in virtually the same breath urging the denial of food to those hundreds of thousands of black Christians and animists who either live in, or have sought refuge in key Southern towns such as Juba and Wau. The burgeoning refugee population are being supplied by air with food and emergency aid by the international community. Amongst the first airplanes that would be shot down by the SPLA, at the suggestion of *The Daily Telegraph*, would be Operation Lifeline Sudan airplanes. Would *The Daily Telegraph* not consider this premeditated starvation of these black southern civilians a “pressing moral outrage”?

The Daily Telegraph's apparent attitude of “kill them all, God will recognise his own”, or rather in this instance “starve them all to death”, while in keeping with its clear Crusader mindset, would condemn hundreds of thousands of civilians, animists and Christian, to death by slow starvation, the very people *The Daily Telegraph*

professes to be concerned about. *The Daily Telegraph* is perhaps a “friend” the southern Sudanese might wish not to have.

The Daily Telegraph is possibly unaware that the SPLA already has a large stock of anti-aircraft missiles, in large part supplied by Libya. Perhaps *The Daily Telegraph* is also unaware that the SPLA did indeed shoot down two resupply planes in southern Sudan in the late 1980s, and attempted to shoot down several more civilian aircraft and food relief flights, all at the height of a similar famine. This did indeed have the desired effect of grounding all food relief flights by the international community throughout southern Sudan, with the exception of Juba, for two years. Hundreds of thousands of southern civilians either starved to death or were severely affected as a result of the two year ban on food relief by air. The SPLA did thus isolate government-controlled towns, at a tremendous price both in terms of human suffering and in terms of the displeasure of the international community. It did not bring down the government of the day, and it did not end the war. For such an idea to resurface twelve years later is a further marker of the newspaper’s paucity of original thinking.

Secondly, it is also clear that whilst articulating moral outrage at the alleged use of food as a weapon of war, *The Daily Telegraph* is deafeningly silent on the SPLA’s blatant and extensively documented diversion of food aid away from those hungry and sick communities for whom it is intended. It may well be that *The Daily Telegraph*’s editorial and foreign staff are simply unaware of the SPLA’s atrocious record in most things, particularly its theft of emergency food aid. Or it may well be that it would be somewhat inconvenient, if not embarrassing, to take a position on this issue at this moment in time.

Fortunately, someone has had the intellectual honesty and moral courage to raise the issue of the SPLA’s most recent theft of food aid. The Roman Catholic Bishop of the famine-affected diocese of Rumbek, Caesar Mazzolari, has recently stated that the SPLA is stealing 65 percent of the food aid going into rebel-held areas of southern Sudan. *Agence France Press* has this to say in July 1998:

Much of the relief food going to more than a million famine victims in rebel-held areas of southern Sudan is ending up in the hands of the Sudan People’s Liberation Army (SPLA), relief workers said Tuesday.⁸

Perhaps *The Daily Telegraph* doesn’t read news agency reports. The SPLA is quite literally taking the food out of the mouths of starving men, women and children. Even the BBC has reported on that. That the SPLA has practised a systematic and deliberate diversion of food and humanitarian assistance for several years has even been confirmed by a member of the SPLA’s own executive. Dr Peter Nyaba, a current member of the SPLA National Executive Committee, is well placed to describe SPLA policy in respect of the theft of food aid by the SPLA from civilians. He had previously served as a SPLA military commander in southern Sudan. In his 1997 book, *The Politics of Liberation in South Sudan: An Insider’s View*, Nyaba quite openly states that:

(S)ince humanitarian assistance is only provided for the needy civil population, the task of distribution of this assistance fell on specially selected SPLA officers and men who saw to it that the bulk of the supplies went to the army. Even in cases where the expatriate relief monitors were strict and only distributed relief supplies to the civilians by day, the SPLA would retrieve that food by night. The result of this practice led to the absolute marginalisation and brutalisation of the civilian population.⁹

It may now also become apparent, even to *The Daily Telegraph*, why the SPLA is perhaps not as enthusiastic as *The Daily Telegraph* to shoot down resupply flights. To shoot down, or even attempt to shoot down a single food resupply plane going into a government-held town or district in the south would almost certainly result in a lengthy ban on food aid flights throughout southern Sudan - imposed by the relief agencies themselves. This in turn would disrupt the SPLA’s theft of food aid delivered by air to their areas.

“An Iranian-style dictatorship”

The Daily Telegraph stated in its editorial that the present “Islamic” government had “seized power from an elected government in 1989 and installed an Iranian-style dictatorship”. To draw any comparison between the *Sunni* Islamic tradition in Sudan and Iran’s *Shia* Islamic system displays almost breathtaking theological illiteracy on the part of *The Daily Telegraph*. It is on a par in theological terms with equating Martin Luther and John Calvin with the Pope. Perhaps *The Daily Telegraph* is unaware that Sudan’s Islamic leader, Dr Hassan al-Turabi, is theologically and political at odds with the Iranian model. He rejects the *fatwa* on Salman Rushdie, and holds views on apostasy, the giving of evidence and the emancipation of women which run contrary to Iran’s version of

Islam. The widely-respected veteran Jewish *New York Times* journalist Milton Viorst, has compared the Sudanese model to others in the Middle East:

By the standards of other Arab societies, Turabi's concept of Islam is open-minded and tolerant. Though he sees no reason to emulate Western liberalism, few would contradict his assertion that "we do not advocate a very strict form of Islam"...The signs are plentiful, in a visit to Sudan, that the Islam practised there is less strict than that of Egypt, to say nothing of Saudi Arabia. One scarcely sees the hijab, the head-covering that makes many women in Egypt appear so forbidding, much less the Saudi veil...Most Sudanese reflected Turabi's preference for a genial, non-rigorous Islam, more in keeping with Sudan's special experience within the flow of Islamic history.¹⁰

Nothing even remotely approaching the rigid Iranian clerical structure that forms the basis of government in that country exists in Sudan. For historical reasons the *ulama* in Sudan were the weakest within any of the Muslim countries. Interviewed by *New York Times* journalist Judith Miller, Turabi pointed out some of the differences between *Shia* and *Sunni* Islam. He hoped, for example, that in the future "all the titles of the Shiite church - the ayatollahs, or marjahs, or hajatollahs, or whatever, will disappear from their society". Miller points out that *Shiite* religious leaders would "undoubtedly find this view obnoxious and heretical".¹¹

There seems to be an unwillingness on behalf of some commentators to concede that Sudan is a Muslim country, and that the Sudanese people have a sovereign right to decide their own government. This unwillingness is perhaps at the heart of *The Daily Telegraph's* stance on Sudan. What Christian activists such as those at *The Daily Telegraph* must learn to accept is that just as they see may see Britain as a Christian country, there is an equally vigorous perception within Sudan, and amongst a majority of Sudanese, that Sudan is very much the result of Islamic teachings, history and ideals, and that a logical extension of this is to govern those areas of Sudan that have a Muslim majority through Islamic law.

The "Christian-led SPLA": a protégé of the Ethiopian Mengistu regime

This is a surprising, if not totally out of character, statement by *The Daily Telegraph*. The newspaper appears not to realise that if this was actually the case then the SPLA would indeed be a minority within a minority. According to various independent sources between 85 and 90 percent of the population of southern Sudan is non-Christian.¹² It is difficult to see how any "Christian" or "Christian-led" movement could claim to be truly representative of the southern Sudanese population in that case. To have made such a statement is either yet another example of poor research on the part of *The Daily Telegraph*, or a deliberate attempt to square the circle, to force the southern Sudanese situation into a distorted and artificial context in which the paper is able once again to return to its somewhat discredited position that the Sudanese conflict is about religion, a case of Islam versus Christianity, another opportunity to revisit the Crusades. At the very least it is certainly wishful thinking of *The Daily Telegraph* to claim either the leadership or membership of the SPLA as "Christian".

The SPLA, for example, has long had a questionable attitude towards Christianity in southern Sudan. This is not surprising given it was a *protégé* of the Mengistu *regime* in Ethiopia. Despite the SPLA's "irrevocable" 1984 commitment to "religious freedom", the human rights group African Rights records that:

In the early years of the war...the SPLA...actively repressed the Church. This paralleled the campaign against the Church being waged in Ethiopia at the time...In the late 1980s, paralleling similar developments in Ethiopia, the SPLA abandoned much Marxist orthodoxy and became more tolerant of the Church. According to Bishop Nathaniel Garang, in the early days many SPLA soldiers "smoked the Bible" - they rolled their cigarettes in pages torn from copies of the Holy Book.¹³

SPLA intolerance has continued. In August 1996, for example, SPLA forces detained six Catholic missionaries at Mapourdit mission station, 35 kilometres from Akot. Four of those detained were under arrest by SPLA gunmen, and included two Australians, Sister Moira Lynch, aged 73, and Sister Mary Batchelor, aged 68, and Father Raphael Riel, the Vicar-General of Rumbek Diocese. The charges against these missionaries were said to be: "hindering SPLA recruitment, being found in possession of documents proving that they were spies from foreign countries, working for the spread of Islam under the disguise of the Cross."¹⁴ A Sudanese priest, Father Raphael, received 64 lashes from the SPLA gunmen. One of those imprisoned, Father Mike Barton, described the SPLA commander as "mad and dangerous": the same commander later accused him of "drinking the blood of children". When Father Barton protested at the SPLA beating up a pregnant women and an old man at the mission, he too was beaten up. The Sudanese Catholic Information Office also reported that the mission was looted. The six missionaries were eventually released. The cause for their ordeal was that they had expressed concern at the

SPLA's continuing abduction of Sudanese boys as young as twelve years of age for use as forced labour or child soldiers.

The SPLA: ethnicist and tribalist

The Daily Telegraph speaks of the "moral duty to protect the tribal populations of the Dinka, the Nuer, the Anuak, and their cousins, from oppression", and yet at the same time unhesitatingly supports the SPLA, a Bor Dinka-based and Dinka-led organisation with an appalling record of tribal repression against other tribal populations. SPLA executive member Dr Nyaba has confirmed the stark ethnicist origins of the SPLA:

Initially, political mobilisation for the SPLM/A in 1983/4 was along the lines that the Bor and the people of Kongor would have an opportunity to acquire weapons they needed to fight back, or revenge the cattle rustling practised against them by the Murle. This mobilisation that took more than ten thousand Bor youth to SPLA training camps in 1983 was not for the national agenda of liberation but to settle local scores with their neighbours, the Murles or the Nuers.¹⁵

The essentially tribalist nature of the SPLA has been confirmed and commented upon by various human rights organisations. African Rights recorded that "Many Nuer had long felt themselves to be oppressed by the Dinka in the SPLA".¹⁶ Dr Nyaba also clearly describes how the SPLA is seen in parts of southern Sudan:

In Equatoria...the SPLA was perceived as a Nilotic or Dinka movement whose objective was to reverse the division of the southern region, and to destroy the 'Equatoria Region' and impose the Dinka hegemony.¹⁷

Nyaba's study also describes tribal tensions between the SPLA and the Anuak, Shilluk, Mandari, Taposa, Murle and Nuer communities. He states, for example, that:

Many communities had been completely alienated by the action of some SPLA officers and men and, in fact, some of them decided to cross over and allied with the enemy. For instance, the Murles rebelled against the SPLA in 1989, the Mandari had done so as early as 1984, the Toposa and the Didinga also turned against the SPLA in 1986 and 1990, etc...the SPLA sometimes posed like an anti-people military machine.¹⁸

American development expert John Prendergast's *Crisis Response: Humanitarian Band-Aids in Sudan and Somalia* clearly states that there had been strained relations between the largely Dinka SPLA and the Nuer tribe as well as communities in Equatoria ever since the SPLA came into being in 1983, with the SPLA showing an "absolute disregard for their human rights"¹⁹:

The SPLA has historically utilized...counter-insurgency tactics against populations and militias in Equatoria considered to be hostile. An important tactic in defeating opposing tribal militias has been to weaken the subsistence base upon which they depend, utilizing village burning, cattle and crop stealing and destruction, denial of food aid, etc. By destroying the subsistence base of certain groups, relations have been destabilized between various Equatorial populations...This has exacerbated relations between certain Equatorial communities.

Prendergast personally observes that the SPLA is seen in Equatoria as "an army of occupation."²⁰

This all presents a somewhat different picture of the Dinka-dominated SPLA in relation to its "cousins" to that touched on by *The Daily Telegraph* in its editorial. It is therefore somewhat disturbing to note *The Daily Telegraph's* public support for an obviously tribalist SPLA. The implications of the SPLA militarily seizing power in southern Sudan, with all the implications for tribal genocide and carnage that such a move would so clearly bring with it, are patently obvious. *The Daily Telegraph* has clearly learnt nothing from the lessons of the genocidal events in the Great Lakes area in the 1990s.

False consciousness?

Staying briefly with the issue of *The Daily Telegraph's* perception of southern Sudanese life under the Sudanese government, the newspaper declared that:

We would not suffer such rule. Why on earth should Africans be expected to endure it.

It has to be said that *The Daily Telegraph* appears to be edging towards somewhat unconservative methods of analysis. When pressed to explain why most of the working class did not enthusiastically embrace scientific socialism, Marxists would claim that they were suffering from “false consciousness”, they simply did not know what was in their best interests. The more than two million southern Sudanese, half the population of the south, who have voluntarily journeyed well over one thousand kilometres northwards to live in Khartoum and other northern cities (and refusing to leave), and the hundreds of thousands of southern Sudanese who have flocked to areas of southern Sudan administered by the government, would appear at face value to drive a coach and horses through *The Daily Telegraph*'s claim of endemic oppression. As the Sudanese ambassador stated in his response to such claims, “not many people volunteer for enslavement or oppression.” Even less people would make a difficult, dangerous and lengthy trip of more than one thousand kilometres to experience it. Perhaps *The Daily Telegraph* would claim they too are suffering from “false consciousness”?

Additionally, Prendergast has also provided outside observers with a glimpse of life in SPLA-controlled areas:

The human rights abuses of the SPLA are by now well-documented...What is less understood is the abuse and manipulation of humanitarian assistance, the undermining of commerce, and the authoritarian political structures which have stifled any efforts at local organizing or capacity building in the south. These are the elements which have characterized the first decade of the SPLA's existence.²¹

For all its bluster about “why on earth should Africans be expected to endure” living under government control, *The Daily Telegraph* appears to be content that hundreds of thousands of southern Sudanese continue to live under the repressive and authoritarian SPLA regime of which we have seen but a glimpse of above.

Fighting for what?

Perhaps the most irresponsible aspect of *The Daily Telegraph*'s editorial is that while it enthusiastically advocates war, indeed it advocates an intensification of the war, with all the suffering that comes with it, it does not define at any point what the objective of such bloodshed should be. The most it says in this respect is that “Khartoum would be forced to deal”. In this respect the editorial has a distinctly Colonel Blimp-esque feel to it. *The Daily Telegraph*'s statement that if the SPLA acquired anti-aircraft missiles, “the war, as we have known it, would be over within months” is starkly reminiscent of similar claims made during the First World War. These claims have been heard at least every six months since 1984; “next year”, “one more push”, “one more offensive”. Perhaps the arm-chair warriors believe as a previous generation of Colonel Blimps did, that the war will be over by Christmas. Leaving *The Daily Telegraph*'s Colonel Blimps aside, it is all very well enthusiastically supporting war, but without clear objectives the projection of armed force becomes the warlordism we have already seen of the SPLA in Sudan. The arm-chair warriors at *The Daily Telegraph* appear not to have absorbed what every first-year American college student has learnt about contemporary war, courtesy of the Vietnam war. Military projection without clear objectives is at best futile and at worst deeply irresponsible.

On this very issue, one simply has to ask of *The Daily Telegraph* what would constitute “winning the war”? Given *The Daily Telegraph*'s stated concern for the “black Christian and animist population of the South”, given its statement that the Sudanese state is “an artificial construct”, and in the absence of any guidance by *The Daily Telegraph* - apart from the need for escalating carnage and starvation - one presumes that *The Daily Telegraph*'s ideal would be a separate and independent South. If this is the paper's position, then once again it appears to be doggedly out of date. The simple fact is that an internationally-supervised free and fair referendum, whereby the people of southern Sudan will be able to settle this issue once and for all, enabling them to opt for a united Sudan or for secession, was written into the 1997 Khartoum Peace Agreement, has been restated during peace talks between the government and the SPLA, and has been recognised by the international community. It has even been reported on by *The Daily Telegraph*. Perhaps *The Daily Telegraph*'s silence on this issue is a reflection of that fact that the SPLA has repeatedly stated that it is committed to a united Sudan and is against an independent south. The first bullets it fired were aimed at southern separatists.

Or perhaps *The Daily Telegraph* wishes to see the SPLA shoot and bomb its way to national power in Sudan. Given that Christians account for less than five percent of the Sudanese population, and considerably less than a fifth of the population of southern Sudan, the concept of a “Christian-led” southern minority within a minority coming to power is quite simply a non-starter. It is perhaps on a par with the Reverend Ian Paisley and his Democratic Unionist Party forming the next government in the Republic of Ireland. While both may be attractive ideas to *The Daily Telegraph*, they are somewhat unrealistic.

