



IRRESPONSIBLE JOURNALISM: BRITISH MEDIA REPORTING OF ALLEGATIONS OF CHEMICAL WARFARE IN SOUTHERN SUDAN

**The European Sudanese
Public Affairs Council**

1 Northumberland Avenue
London WC2N 5BW England

Telephone: 44 0207 872 5434
Telefax: 44 0207 753 2848

Email: director@espac.org

Irresponsible Journalism: British Media Reporting of Allegations of Chemical Warfare in Southern Sudan

In August 1999, several British newspapers, and the BBC, published unconfirmed allegations that the Sudanese armed forces had used chemical weapons in attacks on Sudanese rebels in Lainya and Kaya in southern Sudan. The **Financial Times**' 5 August 1999 report was headlined 'Sudan Chemical Attack Inquiry', the **Guardian**'s 6 August 1999 article 'UN To Check Chemical War Claims', and the **Independent**'s prominent 4 August, 1999 article was entitled 'Briton Taken Ill After Sudan "Chemical Raid"'. The BBC Online Network published no less than six articles mentioning the allegations in July and August, with headlines such as 'Sudan "Chemical" Attack on Rebels', 'UN Investigates "Chemical" Attack', and 'Warning on Sudanese "Chemical Attack"'.¹

These British media outlets repeated claims made by the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) and Norwegian People's Aid (NPA), a non-governmental organisation closely associated with the SPLA.² Norwegian People's Aid went so far as to issue a press release on 2 August headed 'Confirmed Chemical Bombing in Southern Sudan'.³ These allegations were also subsequently repeated by SPLA supporter Baroness Cox, President of Christian Solidarity Worldwide, in the British House of Lords on 13 October, 1999. Cox specifically claimed that the after effects were identical to symptoms associated with poisoning by compounds such as Lewisite.⁴

The Sudanese government categorically denied any such use of chemical weapons. The Sudanese Foreign Minister, Dr Mustafa Osman Ismail, stated on 5 August, 1999 that the Sudanese government was "ready to receive any impartial and credible quarter to investigate this [matter]... Sudan does not possess chemical weapons... the allegations made by the Norwegian People's Aid... are mere lies".⁵ Sudanese diplomats also pointed out that the Sudanese government had also recently signed the Chemical Weapons Convention outlawing any such weapons.⁶ The Sudanese army spokesman, General Mohamed Osman, said the allegations were a smear against the Khartoum government.⁷

The Sudanese government agreed immediately to a United Nations investigation of the claims made by Norwegian People's Aid. This took the form of an Operation Lifeline Sudan medical team which travelled to the area in which it was claimed the chemical weapons attack took place. A Spokesman for the United Nations Secretary-General stated that this medical team had:

¹ See, 'Sudan "Chemical" Attack on Rebels', News Article by BBC Online News on 31 July, 1999 at 09:57:51 GMT; 'Sudan Denies "Chemical" Attack', News Article by BBC Online News on 1 August, 1999 at 12:28:27 GMT; 'UN Teams Investigate Sudan Gas Attack', News Article by BBC Online News on 5 August, 1999 at 09:05:41 GMT; 'UN Investigates "Chemical" Attack', News Article by BBC Online News on 5 August, 1999 at 14:03:37 GMT and 17:16:55 GMT; and 'Warning On Sudanese "Chemical Attack"', News Article by BBC Online News on 23 August, 1999 at 22:15 GMT.

² See, for example, 'Norwegian NGO Says Khartoum Bombed South Sudan With Chemicals', News Article by Agence France Presse on 3 August, 1999 at 09:24:35.

³ 'Confirmed Chemical Bombing in Southern Sudan', Press Release by Norwegian People's Aid on 2 August, 1999, carried on ReliefWeb at <http://www.reliefweb.int>

⁴ **Hansard**, House of Lords Debates, 13 October, 1999, col. 444.

⁵ 'Minister: Sudan Ready For Probe Into Claims Of Chemical Warfare', News Article by Associated Press on 5 August, 1999 at 09:09:48.

⁶ 'UN Body Seeks Inquiry On Sudan Chemical Arms', **International Herald Tribune**, 4 August, 1999.

⁷ 'Briton Taken Ill After Sudan "Chemical Raid"', **The Independent**, 4 August, 1999.

gathered medical samples (blood and urine) from 13 of the 35 people who had reported symptoms. The samples were sent for analysis to the Centre for Disease Control (CDC), an independent laboratory in Atlanta.

The United Nations further stated that the tests run on the samples had included, amongst others, a test for Lewisite:

The results... as reported to the United Nations, indicated no evidence of exposure to chemicals.⁸

The British media have been irresponsible in that despite having been made aware of the findings of the United Nations medical tests, none of these newspapers, nor the BBC, published the fact that the allegations they had carried had been shown to be groundless.⁹ This despite the fact that the BBC, for example, had specifically mentioned “chemical” or “gas” attack in all six of its reports.

It was not the first time that false claims alleging Sudanese involvement with weapons of mass destruction have been made. In August 1998, the United States government launched a cruise missile attack on the al-Shifa medicines factory in Khartoum, claiming that the factory produced chemical weapons. The Clinton Administration failed to produce any evidence, and blocked any United Nations inspection of the factory. Independent tests carried out on the factory by a distinguished American chemist showed no traces of anything associated with chemical weapons.¹⁰ It is now accepted that the attack was a disastrous blunder by the American government.¹¹

It has to be said that allegations of involvement in weapons of mass destruction technology are amongst the most serious that can be levelled at any government. Reporting on sensationalistic allegations such as the use of chemical weapons against any target, and particularly civilians carries with it a responsibility. Running unconfirmed stories about weapons of mass destruction in Sudan has to be approached with particular caution given the al-Shifa incident, an incident which was obviously the result of unfounded allegations. These particular allegations are unusual in that the United Nations was able to scientifically collect samples from the area concerned and from the people said to have been affected. Usually the claims are made and there is no way of independently verifying what has been alleged.

It may well be argued by journalists that the allegations were sufficiently important for them to be carried in the public interest by newspapers and by media outlets such as BBC News Online. This is of course true. But at the same time, and by the same argument, it is in the public interest that the conclusion of any neutral scientific investigations into such claims are reported - and with the prominence with which they were carried in the first place.

This incident clearly demonstrates the danger of accepting at face value the claims of organisations such as the SPLA. The SPLA has a well-documented history of making claims which have not been truthful. A serving member of the SPLA's National Executive Council, Dr Peter Nyaba, placed what he termed the SPLA's “sub-culture of

⁸ 'Note for the Spokesman of the Secretary-General on Sudan', Note delivered by the United Nations Resident Coordinator, Mr Philippe Borel, to the Sudanese Foreign Ministry, 17 October, 1999.

⁹ See Press Release by the Embassy of Sudan, S/50/17/99, London, 20 October, 1999. This press release contained a copy of the Secretary-General's note, and was very widely distributed within the United Kingdom.

¹⁰ See, 'U.S. Evidence of Terror Links to Blitzed Medicine Factory Was “Totally Wrong”', Andrew Marshall, *The Independent*, London, February 15, 1999; 'No Trace of Nerve Gas Precursor Found at Bombed Sudan Plant', *Chemical & Engineering News*, February 15, 1999.

¹¹ 'Clinton bombed civilians on purpose. American tests showed no trace of nerve gas at “deadly” Sudan plant. The President ordered the attack anyway', *The Observer*, August 23, 1998. Front-page.

lies, misinformation, cheap propaganda and exhibitionism” very much on record in his 1997 book, **The Politics of Liberation in South Sudan: An Insider’s View**:

Much of what filtered out of the SPLM/A propaganda machinery... was about 90% disinformation or things concerned with the military combat, mainly news about the fighting which were always efficaciously exaggerated.¹²

Similarly, accepting allegations from groups such as Norwegian People’ Aid, Christian Solidarity International and Christian Solidarity Worldwide, organisations that are unambiguously supportive of the SPLA, is questionable journalism. NPA’s unequivocal claim that there had been a “confirmed” chemical attack has been shown to be little more than a propaganda exercise. A 1997 Norwegian government report into Norwegian People’s Aid’s relationship with the SPLA, **Evaluation of Norwegian Humanitarian Assistance to the Sudan**, documented stated:

NPA’s intervention is that of a solidarity group. It has taken a clear side in the war. It supports the causes of SPLA/M and its humanitarian wing SRRA. NPA’s solidarity approach means that in practice the activities of NPA are closely related to the political and military strategies of the rebel movement.¹³

The report placed on record that Norwegian People’s Aid’s activities were said to “support the political and military struggle of the SPLA/M”.¹⁴ It was also clear that Norwegian People’s Aid also serves as propagandists for the SPLA. The Norwegian government report stated that:

The publicity, which NPA has been able to supply in favour of the Movement, has... been significant. NPA briefed journalists and guided them in the field.

This was said to have been “decisive” on several occasions.¹⁵ In the case of groups such as Christian Solidarity International, its reliability as a commentator on Sudanese affairs has been questioned on numerous occasions. Many of the claims made by Baroness Cox have also been shown to be questionable.¹⁶

It has been frequently stated that the first casualty of war is the truth. It behoves all journalists dealing with the sort of civil war that has been raging in Sudan since 1955 to approach the partisan claims of either side with a degree of caution.

In the case of the allegations made by the SPLA and its allies that the Sudanese government has used chemical weapons in southern Sudan, it is clear that the British media has failed to exercise even a semblance of caution or objectivity. One can only hope that British journalists covering Sudanese affairs will exercise more professionalism in the future. Equally important is a sense of proportion. Having carried serious allegations in their newspapers, the fact that these allegations proved to have been baseless should be reported and not ignored. Not to do so is simply unethical.

¹² Peter Nyaba, **The Politics of Liberation in South Sudan: An Insider’s View**, Fountain Publishers, Kampala, 1997, pp.55, 66.

¹³ **Evaluation of Norwegian Humanitarian Assistance to the Sudan**, A report submitted to the Royal Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, COWI, Royal Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Oslo, November 1997, p.27.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ See, for example, **Baroness Cox and Sudan: How Reliable a Witness?**, The British-Sudanese Public Affairs Council, London, 1999.