

Debate erupts on option for U.S. supply to Garang's war against Sudan

by Linda de Hoyos

President William Clinton signed a bill on Nov. 29 which authorizes the United States to directly supply food to the Sudanese People's Liberation Army (SPLA) of John Garang, now waging guerrilla war against the government of Sudan. The authorization contravenes previous laws, which forbid the funding of belligerents in conflicts.

The provision was supported by the State Department, led by Secretary of State Madeleine Albright and Assistant Secretary of State Susan Rice, and supported by Sen. Sam Brownback (R-Kan.) and Rep. Donald Payne (D-N.J.) on Capitol Hill, and by the U.S. Committee on Refugees of Roger Winter, and Nina Shea of the Institute for Religious Persecution. These forces, along with the Christian Solidarity International of British Baroness Caroline Cox, the foremost lobbyist for a U.S. war against Sudan, are now leading a campaign to move the authorization to supply Garang into the implementation stage.

However, the authorization to supply Garang immediately set off a storm of protests—from the United Nations and U.S.-based relief agencies that are involved in the UN Operation Lifeline which airlifts food to the civilian population of southern Sudan in the war zones; from human rights organizations such as Human Rights Watch; and from sections of the American governing elite as represented in editorials in the *New York Times* and the *Boston Globe*. None protesting the direct backing to Garang's SPLA could possibly be labelled friends of the Sudan government. The question being called, however, is whether the United States should continue to pursue a war policy against the National Islamic Front (NIF) of Sudan, or whether it should seek to bring about a peace settlement to end the 16-year-long war in southern Sudan that has brought no military progress, but left 2 million southern Sudanese dead and another 3 million displaced.

That war is clearly not in the interests of the southern Sudanese people, nor in the interest of the United States. With France being Sudan's third-largest trading partner, with the Canadian firm Talisman now working Sudan's oilfields, and with Great Britain's reestablishment of diplomatic ties with Sudan, the continued U.S. hostility toward Sudan keeps American business out of Sudan.

The purpose of supplying food to the SPLA is purely

military. John Prendergast, a special adviser to Susan Rice, told the Nov. 29 *New York Times* that the food aid will enable the SPLA to maintain positions "in the parched territory" in which they are fighting. "This is so forces can eat more easily and resupply forces in food deficit areas," he said, allowing the SPLA to "stay in position or expand positions in places where it is difficult to maintain a logistical line." Garang has been demanding this direct supply from the United States for years, and asked for it again when he visited Washington in mid-September. But the United States, up to now, has refused to provide it, leaving Garang to be supplied indirectly through Uganda. Garang's major military problem has been the SPLA's inability to counter Sudan's Air Force. Albright's highly publicized meeting with Garang in Nairobi, Kenya, was the signal, said the Sudan government, that the United States was moving toward direct involvement in the war as a belligerent. The Clinton administration is now authorized to take that option by the bill the President signed on Nov. 29.

The U.S. supply line to the SPLA would circumvent the UN's Operation Lifeline Sudan, with presumably U.S. planes delivering aid from a base in Kenya. Mohamed Osman Yassin, spokesman for the Sudan Armed Forces, said on Dec. 11 that the Sudan government "had prepared specific measures for dealing with U.S. planes violating Sudanese airspace for the delivery of direct food and military assistance to the rebels in the south. It is a set policy and will be implemented immediately when required."

Pretense of negotiations dropped

With the backing he hopes now to finally receive from the United States, Garang has dropped all pretense of participation in serious negotiations for peace through the Inter-Governmental Authority on Development (IGAD), the regional body that is Washington's chosen channel for talks between Sudan and its opposition. "The National Democratic Alliance was not formed for the purpose of reconciliation with the bloody NIF regime, but rather for its removal," Garang declared to a meeting of the NDA in Kampala, Uganda on Dec. 8. "The NIF cannot be improved; it must be removed."

Garang has already rejected all measures taken by the Sudan government in the April 1997 peace charter signed

by other southern leaders, including the establishment of a federalist system, a multi-party electoral system, and an internationally supervised referendum in the south on the issue of secession. He has also rejected a bid by Egypt and Libya to negotiate an all-party settlement.

Garang's vow for more war came just as Presidents Omar al-Bashir of Sudan and Yoweri Museveni of Uganda had met in a summit hosted by Kenya and mediated by former American President Jimmy Carter. The summit emerged with an agreement that both countries would take steps toward the eventual reestablishment of diplomatic ties, which were severed in 1995 by Uganda. The agreement calls for the "respect of the sovereignty and territorial integrity" of each country, and pledges that each country will "make every effort to disband and disarm terrorist groups and to prevent any acts of terrorism or hostile actions that might originate in our territory that might endanger the security of the other nation." The agreement further stipulates that "we agree not to harbor, sponsor, or give military or logistical support to any rebel groups, opposition groups, or hostile elements from each others' territories," and notes that each country "will offer amnesty and reintegration assistance to all former combatants who renounce the use of force."

The Ugandan government has, throughout the decade, supported the SPLA, while since 1994, the Ugandan rebel group, the Lord's Resistance Army, has found safe haven in Sudan. Without the direct involvement of the rebel groups in the negotiations, the Bashir-Museveni agreement, while establishing a vehicle for communication between the two governments, will be difficult to implement. From Kampala, Garang indicated that the agreement made no difference to him, as "we are already very deep inside Sudanese territory"—although his soldiers are known to be barracked in the northern Ugandan district of Gulu.

Carter told the *Boston Globe* on Nov. 8, "The people of Sudan want to resolve the conflict. The biggest obstacle is U.S. government policy. The U.S. is committed to overthrowing the government in Khartoum. Any sort of peace effort is aborted, basically by policies of the United States. The recent bill the President has signed is a devastating obstacle to any furtherance of peace. For the first time, we have authorized food aid just for the revolutionaries in southern Sudan. . . . Instead of working for peace, the U.S. government has basically promoted a continuation of the war."

Strong opposition

The authorization of U.S. direct funding to the SPLA therefore sparked a debate and public divisions even within the administration. "This is a departure from the way we should be using food aid," Julia Taft, Assistant Secretary of State in the Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration, told the *New York Times*.

The option has also drawn fire from the UN, whose World Food Program, the backbone of Operation Lifeline, said that

such a plan would jeopardize all relief work in Sudan, because it compromised the neutrality of the relief agencies. World-Vision and Care have announced that they will not cooperate with direct U.S. supply to the SPLA.

In October, according to the *Times*, ten relief agencies met with Secretary Albright and asked her to pursue a policy of peace toward Sudan, an option she rejected. In early December, eight relief agencies sent a letter to Albright stating that direct food aid to the SPLA "could damage the reputations of American non-governmental agencies which act as implementing partners in the distribution of humanitarian assistance and could restrict their access to populations in dire need." Such backing for the SPLA, they said, "would be a most unwelcome departure from the policies and practices of successive administrations." Not the least of the reasons for rejecting such an option is the record of Garang himself (see *Documentation*).

Documentation

Opposition grows in U.S. to direct aid to SPLA

The following are excerpts from an Open Letter, dated Dec. 13, by Human Rights Watch, to U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, opposing direct U.S. food aid to the Sudanese People's Liberation Army (SPLA):

The SPLA has a history of gross abuses of human rights and has not made any effort to establish accountability. Its abuses today remain serious. This record makes any form of U.S. support—food or otherwise—wholly inappropriate and wholly out of step with the values that you have tried to inject into U.S. foreign policy.

Illustrative of the SPLA's human rights record was its summary execution of three captured Sudan government employees and one Red Crescent tracing officer in March 1999, an act which the U.S. government rightfully condemned. The SPLA refused all requests to turn over the bodies. It falsely claimed that the four were killed in a crossfire during an abortive government attempt at rescue. It flatly rejected international protests, including one from the UN Commission on Human Rights. It never conducted a review of the incident or accounted for its crime. Instead, its representatives excoriated anyone who mentioned the incident.

Similarly in Chukudum, SPLA abuses—including summary executions, arbitrary arrests, and the theft of food—have been so widespread and persistent that they have alienated the formerly loyal local Didinga population. In January

1999, the situation came to a head, with the locals literally up in arms against the occupation of their territory by the Bor Dinka, who make up the majority of the SPLA troops and officers in Chukudum and whose families reside in nearby camps for the internally displaced. There has been intermittent fighting, with civilian casualties, ever since. Some of the civilian casualties have been from antipersonnel land mines which the SPLA has liberally used in the area. Several peace missions have come to Chukudum and made recommendations for the SPLA to rein in its abusive troops — to no avail.

The SPLA has even undercut the prospect of the local justice system addressing such abuses. One example is the case of SPLA Maj. Marial Nuor, who was investigated by the SPLA after he detained elderly foreign nuns and a priest for two weeks in 1996, causing an international uproar. Major Nuor, in charge of SPLA recruitment in Yirol, also in 1996, killed two soldiers and three recruits, and tortured an old man to death. He was convicted by an SPLA court-martial (but only for mutiny when he evaded arrest), imprisoned briefly, and then placed under “open arrest.” At the request of the old man’s family, Major Nuor was sent back to Yirol in 1999 and tried in a civilian court. He was convicted and sentenced to five years in jail and fines. Several months later, however, the SPLA ordered him to conduct more recruitment in Yirol. After he threatened his fellow officers, bragging of his untouchability, he was transferred from Yirol. To our knowledge he suffered no other punishment.

This pattern makes the provision of any aid to the SPLA wrong, because it would support an abusive force and make the United States complicit in those abuses. Moreover, what makes supplying food aid to the SPLA particularly inappropriate is the group’s routine diversion of relief food away from starving civilians. The SPLA diverted relief food even during the 1998 famine in Bahr El Ghazal—indeed, even from its own civilian supporters. Some of this was done by individual soldiers and officers and local officials for their private profit, but the SPLA did not punish this behavior. At a meeting in May 1999 with UN officials and others in Mapel, Bahr El Ghazal, in southern Sudan, SPLA officers admitted that both SPLA and rogue commanders had diverted relief food during the 1998 famine. To provide food aid under these circumstances is to reward this unacceptable and deadly behavior.

Some argue that the SPLA would stop diverting relief food if it were to receive food from the international community. Past practice suggests that this is a naive belief because it discounts the private-profit motive that lies behind much of this diversion and the SPLA’s unwillingness to rein in such ventures. Moreover, providing food aid to a rebel force as a way of stopping its unremedied diversion of food aid to starving civilians would set a terrible precedent. It would encourage rebel groups throughout Africa and around the world to duplicate the SPLA’s inhumane practices, knowing that the reward might be free U.S.-supplied food.

***Boston Globe*, excerpts from a Nov. 30 editorial:**

There are four good reasons why the administration should not use its newfound option.

1. Using food as a weapon is a bad principle and will undermine efforts by the United Nations and non-governmental agencies to get food to starving civilians caught up in war.

2. The United States should not take sides in civil wars or in Christian crusades against Muslims, nor should it revive the Cold War practice of using surrogates to undermine governments unless there is an overarching national security reason for doing so. Sudan is a nuisance, not an Iraq-sized menace to world peace.

3. The Sudanese government has behaved abominably against the Christian and animist south, but the Sudanese People’s Liberation Army is equally ruthless and brutal and unworthy of U.S. support. Our own State Department has denounced rebel atrocities.

4. Any move to support the rebels directly will most certainly hamper efforts to bring peace to the troubled country and may make things worse for Christians in the south as well. The Sudanese government would be able to portray its fight as an anti-neocolonial struggle as well as a defense of Islam and national sovereignty.

***New York Times*, excerpts from a Dec. 6 editorial entitled “Misguided Relief to Sudan”:**

Now the Clinton administration is edging toward deeper engagement in this conflict as it debates sending food aid to rebels in southern Sudan. This is likely to prolong the war, ally Washington with one of Sudan’s pre-eminent war criminals, and enlist America in the conflict’s most pernicious tactic—the use of food as a weapon of war. But providing direct support for Khartoum’s armed opponents is likely to strengthen its hand. This was the unintended consequence of the American bombing last year of a pharmaceutical plant in Khartoum, which galvanized popular support in northern Sudan and across much of the Arab world for the regime. Moreover, channeling assistance to southern rebels would ally Washington with a brutal and predatory guerrilla army. One of the tragedies of Sudan’s war is that John Garang’s SPLA has squandered a sympathetic cause. Though its members claim to be “Christians” resisting Islamization, they have behaved like an occupying army, killing, raping, and pillaging.

Both sides have used food as a weapon, taxing, stealing, blocking and diverting emergency deliveries in order to control people and territory. The international agencies that provide food to the south under the United Nations’ Operation Lifeline Sudan have long anguished over the inescapable fact that their well-intentioned efforts were fueling the war by feeding its armies. But their alternatives are limited. Now Washington is poised to promote this distortion of humanitarian purpose. In doing so it would forfeit its ability to criticize those who use food as a weapon.