

# Distributing Food Aid as a Civilization is Dismantled: The Case of Sudan

John K. Morris

## Résumé

Cet article examine la situation des "réfugiés de l'intérieur" dans un pays où la guerre civile oppose depuis de nombreuses années le Nord contre le Sud et où la famine menace constamment les plus pauvres. Au-delà des effets de la guerre et de la famine, l'auteur évoque les changements dans les droits fonciers qui, dans l'ensemble du pays, ont privé des agriculteurs et des éleveurs de leurs terres au profit de grandes plantations mécanisées privées. L'extension et la multiplication de ces vastes domaines, très visibles dans le paysage, sont fortement encouragés par le gouvernement en raison de leur contribution aux exportations des cultures de rente. L'auteur décrit ensuite les événements qui jalonnent la période récente du conflit et les succès et obstacles que rencontrent les organisations humanitaires pour distribuer l'assistance dans un pays déchiré par la guerre civile.

## Introduction

The rains in southern Sudan usually begin in April. They mark the end of the government's annual military offensive against the Sudanese People's Liberation Army (SPLA) in the south. This past dry season—from about January to March—was a bloody one in southern Sudan. The armed forces of the government were able to get the upper hand against the SPLA, which has been embroiled in infighting. Reports of new assaults appeared in the western media in mid-February this year. Fighting led to a large movement of refugees travelling toward the Ugandan border. This latest assault was accompanied by a drought that put 1.5 million people at risk of starvation in southern Sudan. Aid workers say that unless food comes quickly, they can "contemplate the worst famine in Sudan since 1988, when up to 300,000 people died" (*Economist* 1994, February 12).

This article considers the internally displaced in Sudan, the context of these displacement, and the difficulties international nongovernmental

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organizations (INGOs) have faced in trying to get aid to those who are in need. The displacement of people in Sudan occurs in a cycle of war, dislocation, drought, flood and famine, along with the effects of pushing/pulling peasants off common lands. This movement off land is accompanied by a move from sustainable agriculture to unsustainable monoculture. Following this introduction is a description of the land and situation in Sudan which is strongly affected by mechanized farming. This is followed by a description of the reasons for displacement in the country. The last section recounts Operation Lifeline Sudan (OLS), an agreement between military groups and aid agencies for the free passage of aid to those affected by drought and famine.

## The Current Situation

There are an estimated 28 million people who belong to 132 distinct ethnic groups in Sudan, the largest country in Africa. People of Arabic race and Muslim religion/culture live in the north and dominate the capital, Khartoum. They are also found in central Sudan where they are mainly riverine farmers, pastoralists or rain-dependent farmers. Camel breeders live a nomadic life in the scrubland of the north and west, and to the south, the Baggara Arabs herd cattle.

The southern Sudanese comprise 30 percent of the population consisting of two main groups: the Nilotic group of cattle-herding Dinka, Nuer and Shilluk whose animals graze the central grassland of the south; and the Christians and animists, who cultivate the wooded lands along the borders of the country.

Sudan has a complex demographic make-up that has been reduced to a North-South dualism supported by racial, ethnic, cultural and religious differences, with corresponding political and economic disparities. The north comprises two-thirds of the land mass and population of the country, and dominates the south, which remains largely undeveloped. Tensions which naturally occur between north and south are further inflamed by a process of Islamization that has become very aggressive in the latter part of this century.

Half of the people who live in the south of Sudan have been uprooted. They left their homes primarily because of war and drought, and 1994 marks the eleventh year of war between the government of Sudan and the southern Sudanese who are currently on the defensive. Besides 600,000 displaced in the south, some two million others have moved north—many migrating to the squatter settlements around Khartoum. Four hundred thousand others have left the country for refugee camps in Uganda, Zaire, Kenya, Ethiopia and the Central African Republic (*Economist* 1994, February 12). Most of these people originated from the hardest hit regions of Western and Eastern Equatoria (ibid; see map).

## The Land

The White Nile runs through Eastern Equatoria, feeding the largest swamp in the world. This mosquito and crocodile-infested expanse known as "The

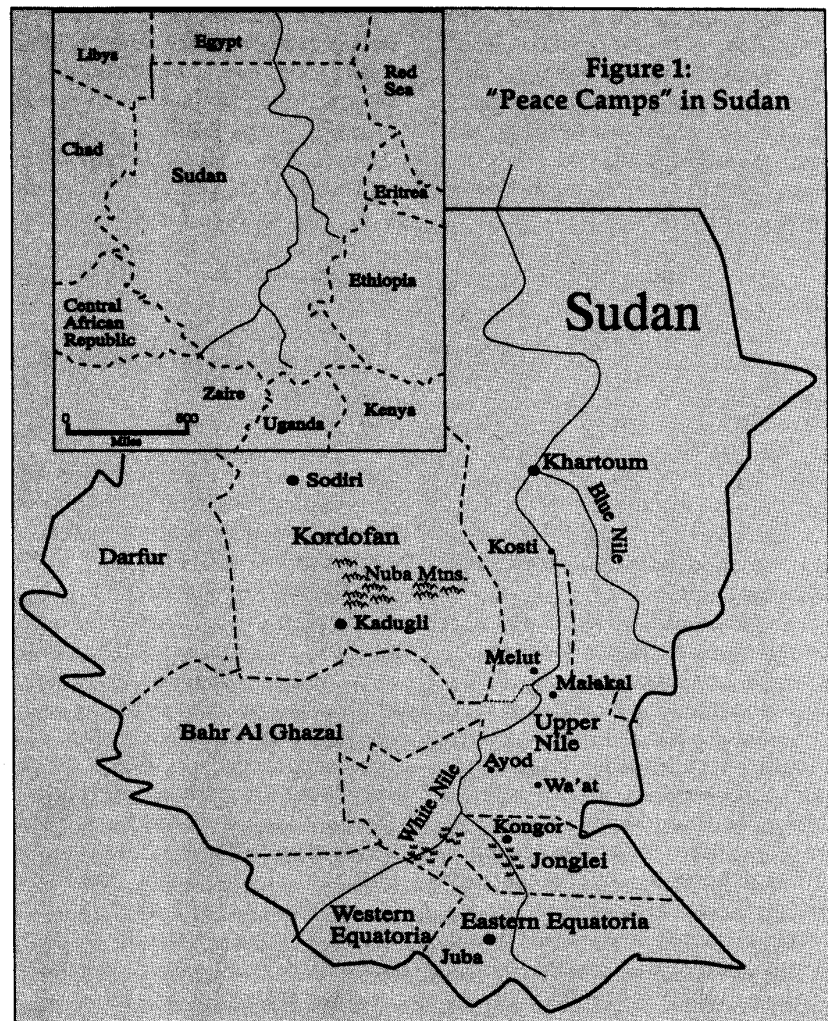
Barrier" is one of the SPLA's major strongholds. In the dry season, however, some of the swamp dries, making it accessible to the military, and forcing many people to flee.

In the province of Bahr el Ghazal to the southwest, relief officials report that more than 200,000 people have been surviving by gathering wild food. In the same region, United Nations officials estimate that since 1989, a wasting disease carried by a sand fly has killed more than 60,000 people trapped by fighting. The disease, *Kala-Azar* or visceral leishmaniasis, can be cured in thirty days by proper medical attention (Lorch 1993).

Sudan is a fertile country, but the areas from which people are being displaced, and the areas in which the government is building "peace camps" for their forced resettlement, tend to be incapable of supporting life. Some of these are located in the desert 30 km west of Khartoum. The wind there never stops blowing; it is abrasive to exposed skin and eyes. Under the sand the ground is so rocky that latrines cannot be dug deep enough to guard against diseases (Flint 1993, March 13).

Further south and west of the Nuba Mountains (see map), food shortages have led the government to relocate the Nuba to peace camps. One-sixth of the Nuba population (163,000) are now held in one hundred "peace villages"—a number of which are in Kordofân's provincial capital of Kâdugli. In these camps, men are conspicuous by their absence. Reporter Julie Flint of the *Manchester Guardian* spoke with women about the absence of men. They said that their husbands were either shot by government forces before the relocation, or later, after having arrived in Kâdugli. Other reports suggest that some of the men have been taken from Kâdugli to Nahud—a groundnut farming area outside the Nuba Mountains that suffers from chronic labour shortages (ibid).

Some of the peace camps are in northern Kordofân, while others are even further afield. The Nuba are not allowed to leave the peace villages



Map by J. Morris

under threat of being shot. The camps are located in the precarious geopolitical boundary between north and south Sudan. A relief worker commented:

Look at the location of these peace villages: most are in insecure areas. The Nuba are being used as human shields [by the government] (Flint 1993, April 24).

Many of the peace villages are also in the vicinity of large mechanized farms where Nuba land has been sold to the *Jalleba*—the urbanized, Arab trading class—who exploit the camps for cheap labour. Health conditions in the camps are dreadful.

In as-Salaam, two clinics treat three hundred children everyday, despite

a shortage of medicine. In a nearby squatter settlement, Dar-as-Salaam, there is only one functioning bore hole for 218,000 people (Flint 1993, April 30).

The need for camps is partly the result of a change of land tenure endorsed by the government that has resulted in the development of many large mechanized farms.

#### Mechanization of Farming and the Loss of Soil/Nutrients

Mechanized farms now dominate agricultural land in Sudan. Since independence, the *Jalleba*, who have dispersed throughout Sudan and the neighbouring countries, have focused

on large-scale rain-fed mechanized farms. The 1970 Unregistered Land Act facilitated a restructuring of land tenure by evicting or buying off peasants and ignoring traditional rights to common grazing lands. The establishment of mechanized farms has been strongly supported by the government since the 1970s because they provide cash crops for export, particularly sorghum (83 percent of total cropped area) and sesame (16 percent). Mechanized farming, as practised in Sudan, is really *tractorized* farming as it involves no other machines. Usually only ploughing and seeding are mechanized, while land clearance, weeding, planting and harvesting continue to be done by hand. These practices create high demands for a mobile wage labour force.

There are 34 million hectares of rain-fed arable land in Sudan. Mechanized farming is consuming this land at a staggering pace, a trend observed since the late 1960s. In 1968 there were 2.5 million hectares of land under cultivation, today there are 7.5 million hectares. This doubled the amount of land under traditional rain-fed agriculture to 3.8 million hectares (Suliman 1993a, 6). These farming practices are far from sustainable: quick economic returns are emphasized with the knowledge that there is still yet more land to plant when the present land becomes depleted; fallow periods and crop rotation tend not to be practised. Shrinking yields render land under mechanized farming unprofitable after about seven years. With the particularly marginal soils and low rainfall of Sudan, soil degrades quickly and is slow to rejuvenate. The effect is that the topsoil on approximately half of the rain-fed arable land in Sudan, or seventeen million hectares, has been lost (Suliman 1993a, 19). Loss of plant cover, particularly of trees used for gum arabic or fuelwood, also contributes to topsoil loss. Almost all of the forests in eastern Sudan have been cleared for mechanized farming. If this trend continues, there will be no forests in northern Sudan in the next decade (*ibid*).

Mechanized farms account for the bulk of cash crops available for export from the country, although these farms are controlled by just one percent of farmers. Some 8,000 largely absent leaseholders, tend to be horizontally structured in the production, distribution, and trading of their cash crops. Meanwhile, traditional subsistence agriculture still forms the basis of livelihood for two to three million peasant farmers (Suliman 1993, 106).

Sudan has been partially forced into the production of cash crops through mechanized farming. In the twenty year period between 1972 and 1992 Sudan's foreign debt increased from \$298 million to \$14 billion. Exports totalled \$315 million while imports were valued at \$1.3 billion. Its GDP in 1992 was \$5.2 billion with an inflation rate of 150 percent and unemployment at 30 percent. This economic situation allowed the World Bank to impose structural adjustment plans over the twenty years of borrowing. In turn, these plans have encouraged the export of produce from mechanized agriculture. The International Monetary Fund's pressure for Sudan to export continues unabated. Even during the famine years of 1982-85, Sudan exported 621,000 tonnes of sorghum to pay creditors. The country's debt has altered the pattern of land tenure in the country leaving large numbers of displaced with resentment toward the *Jalleba*.

#### Reasons for Displacement

By 1984, some 4.5 million people had become displaced. Their only alternative was to move to towns and relief centres where food aid was available. This created dependency on begging, charity, occasional labour, theft or prostitution (Suliman 1993, 107). The country's situation is worsened by the move to a cash crop export economy making it vulnerable to international markets and the country's well publicized famine of 1984-85.<sup>1</sup>

While there has been nearly continuous fighting since independence in 1956, this past decade has been most destructive: claiming one million lives

and uprooting perhaps three million southerners—roughly half the southern population—from their homes. Piece by piece, an entire civilization is being dismantled. The most recent escalation of civil war in Sudan has continued uninterrupted since 1983, when the civilian government in Khartoum adopted a program of Islamization for the whole country—a policy which resulted in the formation of the SPLA. The situation worsened with the military coup in 1989. General Omar Hassan al-Bashir seized power with the support of the National Islamic Front, a party resistant to any conciliation with the SPLA. The coup occurred just hours before government representatives were to meet with members of the rebel SPLA, and was staged to prevent the talks (Burr 1993, 3). At stake was the question of regional autonomy for the African peoples that inhabited the three southern provinces: Western and Eastern Equatoria, and Jonglei. The new military regime imposed a stricter Islamic Law, silenced or eliminated opponents in the North and forced the SPLA out of most of the areas it had previously controlled. In subsequent peace negotiations between the SPLA and the government, the unresolvable issue has been the government's unwillingness to repeal imposed Islamic Laws for non-Muslims.

There have been efforts to bring peace between the SPLA and the government. A negotiated agenda was resolved between SPLA factions at a meeting convened by government ministers from Uganda, Kenya, Eritrea and Ethiopia in January of this year, and SPLA negotiations with the Sudanese government were to follow in Nairobi. Khartoum had supported these talks, but since February has taken a different course—war (Scottish Churches, 1994).

Khartoum's failure to negotiate with the SPLA after neighbouring countries intervened in preparations for peace talks adds further support to the image of Khartoum as pariah. Most observers note that the government is more influenced by international than

internal pressure. But recently Khartoum has cornered itself into a reliance on the members of the Islamic Conference by alienating the rest of the world. Worse yet, its support for Iraq during the Gulf War created rifts within the Islamic Conference.

The United Nations Human Rights Commission has accused Sudan of widespread executions, torture, detention and expulsions, and voted to appoint a special investigator. Last year the United States accused Khartoum of having close ties with Iran and Libya and harbouring known "terrorist groups," including the Palestinian group *Hamas*, Islamic Holy War and the Party of God (Lorch 1993). More recently, the United States placed Sudan on its list of countries that engage in terrorist activities. In early March 1994, the UN special envoy to the country submitted his report which has poised international human rights instruments against Islamic law. Sudan responded by attacking not only the report but also the envoy—making him a minor Salman Rushdie (*Economist* 1994, March 5).

Since 1991, the SPLA has become a less effective opposition due to a split into at least three different factions. This dissension seems to have eased the government's intention to plunder the south. Consider recent infighting between SPLA factions in the context of the Government's role in the south. At the beginning of the present dry season, in December 1993, a stalemate occurred with John Garang's SPLA-Mainstream holding most of Equatoria and Riek Machar's SPLA-United holding the Upper Nile. At this time the government held several of the main towns. In January it built up troops and supplies in Wan and Jûbâ, and in February began aerial bombardment of remote SPLA-held towns and villages. This turned the stalemate with the SPLA into a major dry season offensive with the intention of cutting off Garang's Ugandan supply lines. Camps for the displaced and refugees have been targeted as well as towns and villages. In the offensive against John Garang's SPLA-Mainstream,

SPLA-United is reported to have colluded with government troops (Chazan 1994, February 10). By February 2, 280,000 people had fled to Kenya, Uganda and Zaïre. The SPLA called for the UN to impose sanctions on Khartoum and to establish an air exclusion zone in the south.

Few observers believe that a military solution is possible in Sudan. While the government may currently control more of the south than a few months prior, the rainy season will again stop major military operations. The difficulty of maintaining this control, given the long supply lines and deep antipathy of the region's population, has been proven in the past. In this situation aid agencies struggle to prevent mass deaths of people with no food supply. Fortunately, Western attention is increasingly being focused on Sudan. Christian leaders have visited to help bring attention to the human destruction that is occurring in the south: the Pope visited in 1992 and the Archbishop of Canterbury visited in late 1993/early 1994. There is a continuing opening and closing of famine-affected regions to journalists and international aid agencies which shows that the government does indeed respond to Western pressure. The following considers the struggle which aid agencies have experienced in the past few years in Sudan.

#### International Aid Agencies in Sudan

The massive famine due to civil war and drought in 1984-85 was followed with an even worse famine between 1986 and 1988. In this latter period the UN estimates that three million Sudanese were displaced. Between 400,000 and 500,000 persons died during this period (Minear 1991, 6). Inadequate rainfall followed this tragedy. In 1990-91 there was again crop failure and the numbers of destitute and dispossessed continued to grow. In November 1991, it was reported that "even the birds have moved south" from northern Kordofan and Sodiri, a town of 20,000 people, was nearly deserted.<sup>2</sup> Similarly in 1993, a report by USAID-Sudan

noted that observers flying over a vast area around Ayod and Waat, where some 300,000 head of cattle had been enumerated in the early 1980s, sighted "not one single cow."<sup>3</sup> For the Dinka, a people for whom cattle is the basis of commerce, there could be no greater tragedy (Burr 1993, 24).

Over the course of time many of the Nilotic peoples from the Upper Nile and Bahr el Ghazal provinces (see map)—the Dinka, Nuer and Shilluk—fled to the squatter settlements that ring Khartoum. The city's Muslim inhabitants have treated these people severely. Over the decade, various governments in Khartoum have instituted campaigns to disperse the squatters and destroy their settlements. In 1990, a displaced southerner living in northern Sudan could hardly expect to

own land, drink clean water, attend school, be vaccinated, vote, or raise objections to the government's prosecution of the war in the southern Sudan (Burr 1993, 2).

Nearly one-quarter of the children living in these encampments are severely malnourished, two-thirds live in unsanitary conditions and only 10 percent of the displaced children attend school (*ibid*, 7). International aid agencies have worked together to form an institution that coordinates aid activities.

#### Operation Lifeline Sudan Formed

In response to the effects of civil war and the famines of the 1980s, the UN, NGOs and International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) successfully negotiated the formation of Operation Lifeline Sudan (OLS) with the government of Sudan and the SPLA. This facilitated a large, coordinated relief effort between ICRC, UNICEF, World Food Program (WFP) and INGOs via negotiated "corridors of tranquillity." The Islamic African Relief Agency, the Sudan Council of Churches and local NGOs also took part in providing aid. Between March 1989 and December 1990 direct contributions to the OLS reached \$200 million and in total, \$300 million of resources were delivered to one and a half million people. War ex-

penditures in the same eight month period, however, exceeded \$400 million for the Sudanese Government (RPG 1992, 38). Generally, it is agreed that this first OLS, or "OLS I," was a huge success. It demonstrated to the aid community that it was possible to provide humanitarian relief in the midst of a civil war (ibid).

Although famine and war continued into 1991, it was not possible to obtain agreement from the government and the SPLA to mount an OLS II, nor the following year's OLS III. Recently, however, a new agreement has been made between the government, SPLA and aid agencies for safe access to provide food aid (*Economist* 1994, February 26).

During the interim when OLS II and III failed to gain endorsement by all parties, aid agencies were treated by both the government and the SPLA with repugnance. An example is a case which occurred in mid-1990 in which USAID attempted to transport food aid by barge southward from Kôstî (see map). An agreement was in effect dating back to 1986, when both the government and the SPLA agreed not to attack barges carrying humanitarian assistance. The barge stood by at Kôstî intending to move aid southward to Malakâl. The government had not been able, however, to dislodge the SPLA from Melut and used "regional security conditions" to block the movement of food aid. The people of Malakâl, who had not received food aid in nearly a year, started to move northward. Military officials, seeking to avoid reports of large numbers of displaced in the area, ordered the departure of the last of the expatriate INGOs working south of Kôstî (Burr 1993, 12). Using aerial attack, the government then attempted to sink the barge. Their effort was not successful, but civilian casualties did result.

USAID, the instigator of OLS, uses satellite technology information to predict food needs in famine prone regions through Famine Early Warning System (FEWS) project (*Nature* 1991, 545). In the winter of 1990, FEWS estimated that five to six million Suda-

nese could starve with eleven million affected in 1991 if multinational assistance was not received. The government, however, seemed unconcerned with the projection and blamed international relief agencies for the domestic food shortage because they had been buying up domestic sorghum.<sup>4</sup> The editor of the government's newspaper made public its attitude toward the foreigners:

The Sudanese people are smart enough to understand that most of the relief agencies have religious objectives and many of the Western agencies understand relief as offering assistance to the rebels in southern Sudan. It is not beyond the Sudanese people's intelligence to know that the problem of the South would not have been so aggravated if the Western agencies had not supplied [the SPLA] with the means of subsistence and added fuel to the fire in the form of arms, ammunition and food.

Planning for OLS III was due to commence during the Gulf War that began in January of 1991. Meetings with high level UN personnel did occur, but Sudan's support for Iraq created considerable tension between the government and the international community. In the end, OLS III could not be negotiated, for as one senior Western official put it: "We don't trust them and they don't trust us."<sup>5</sup> Given the worsening relations in Sudan, USAID/Sudan announced on October 1, 1991 that it planned to cease being the primary implementing agency for food aid in Sudan, transferring that function to the WFP. Further, all economic development projects were terminated for 1992. At the same time, the government restricted INGO access to the settlements it was creating to replace squatter settlements around Khartoum and the Nuba Mountains. The political climate in Sudan continued to decline and by late 1991, INGOs like Save the Children-Canada pulled out of Sudan. In essence, only UNICEF and the WFP, both of which demanded little accountability of the relief supplies provided to Sudanese agencies, were left to service the displaced

around Khartoum by 1992 (Burr 1993, 26). More recently the situation has improved with the signing of a new OLS agreement that gives aid agencies limited access to the country's interior (*Economist* 1994, February 26).

### **The Sudanese Government, SPLA and International Involvement**

The events that led to the decision of many aid agencies to leave Sudan in late 1991 were characterized by the government and SPLA using their power to frustrate relief efforts. Both groups at times blocked, diverted and/or destroyed aid and assets, such as the senseless bombing of ICRC's food aid barge.

In the fall of 1990, for example, when drought and war led to dramatic increases in the price of cereals in Khartoum, the Minister of Commerce ordered the sequestration of all food stocks held outside government warehouses. Both the UN and U.S. Ambassador to Sudan raised strong objections to the government's behaviour but could not persuade al-Bashir to release the relief food or admit publicly that there existed the possibility of a famine in Sudan. For a short time in November 1990, Washington cut off food aid passing through Khartoum, instead diverting maize supplies from Kenya to southern Sudan. Later in the month, the government's representative at the United Nations quietly appealed for "immediate food assistance of 75,000 tons for urgent delivery to drought stricken areas."<sup>6</sup> Donors quickly came forward.

The government has attempted to rectify its food dependency through a number of national campaigns. In January 1990, it made the elimination of wheat imports a national goal when it ordered an increase in wheat cultivation to 255,000 hectares. In a speech made by al-Bashir in North Darfur people were told,

Because we do not want to beg for our food and we do not want the relief agencies to humiliate our dignity, through you the homeland and through your production, we will rid ourselves of this bitter humiliation.<sup>7</sup>

Translated into action, Bashir's pronouncement became a desperate situation when the government decided not to send aid in the months following the region's poor harvest. Later, the IMF commented that the precarious state of food reserves in 1990 was caused by the sale of "large stocks" of grain abroad. Even more sickening, the *New York Times* noted that the foreign exchange earned was "spent on weaponry from China to continue the civil war."<sup>8</sup>

## Conclusion

The problems in Sudan seem resolvable only through increased toleration on the part of the government and the SPLA factions. A mixture of human induced problems, including the IMF's loan policy, has made Sudan an economic basket case—a condition that will continue for many years to come. Beyond ethnic tensions and efforts to impose Islamic hegemony, changes in land tenure have marginalized farmers and nomadic peoples to the point that their lives may never resemble what they were in the past. Further, the accompanying destructive farming practices are ruining the fragile soil of an unnecessarily poor nation.

Efforts to provide aid have continued in Sudan, even with the frustration of the government's contrary policies and practices. Aid agencies seem able to rise above the mayhem and focus on the marginalized who regularly starve. At times the need for aid calls into question the government's claim to legitimacy and sovereignty. If Sudan were more geopolitically, or economically interesting to the West—particularly the United States—a *military challenge* might be levelled against the government. Yet, as recent history shows, Western military intervention is rarely effective and civilian casualties are often higher than expected.

Viewed historically, and optimistically, the current condition in Sudan might be viewed as a Western-style evolution from subsistence farming to an industrial economy. What further

complicates this transition in Sudan, however, is the presence of civil war, massive debt burden, and a worldwide recession that when considered together leave the resultant displaced labour out of the economy. The situation for these former subsistence farmers and nomadic peoples is grim. What makes their situation worse, from an outsider's view, is that this displacement is indirectly supported by the international economic system that is insensitive to the repercussions of loan repayments. So while economic resources have been made available to Sudan, life for a large part of the population is desperate. ■

## Notes

1. Suliman (1993a, 107) citing Duffield, M. (1990, 8).
2. Burr (1993, 16) citing AID/OFDA (1990, August 24).
3. Burr (1993, 16) citing Lautzse and Wagner (1993).
4. Burr (1993, 16) citing *New Horizon* (1990, November 3).
5. Burr (1993, 16) citing *Washington Post* (1991, February 23).
6. Burr (1993, 16) citing *Washington Times* (1990, November 2).
7. Burr (1993, 4) citing Radio Omdurman, 1715 GMT, February 4, 1990.
8. Burr (1993, 4) citing *New York Times* (1991, May 12).

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