

United States Institute of Peace
Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training
Sudan Experience Project

Interview # 79 - Executive summary

Interviewed by: Barbara Nielsen
Initial interview date: April 11, 2007
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The two interviewees, leaders in the Sudan trade union movement, describe the difficulties that trade union organizers continue to have in Sudan, despite the signing of the CPA. The union they represent, the New Sudan Workers Trade Union Federation, is a member of the SPLM, and shares John Garang's vision of the New Sudan. They agreed that the most important contribution of the CPA was an end to the fighting in some areas, but stressed that fighting was ongoing, not only in Darfur, but in other areas where the government had armed militias (e.g. the LRA in the South). They both agreed that the government is not acting in good faith to implement the CPA. Rather, having signed the accord because it did not see a way to win militarily, the Khartoum government continues to follow a strategy of "stirring up" one ethnic group or community against another.

Both interviewees praised the leadership of Salva Kiir, and claimed he, along with other leaders such as Pag'an Amum and Yasir Arman, has been able to unite the various factions within the SPLM. They are skeptical that the Khartoum government will actually allow the elections scheduled for 2008 to occur. They claim that since very little political or economic progress has taken place in the South since the signing of the CPA, the Khartoum government knows that free and fair elections would result in their defeat, an outcome it is not willing to accept. These interviewees are convinced that the agenda of the government of Sudan continues to be one of Arabization and Islamization, and that the government continues to provide support for various Middle Eastern terrorist groups. They also consider that both China and Egypt present dangers to the vision of the New Sudan inherent in the CPA.

They suggest that more involvement on the part of the international community is required to ensure the successful implementation of the CPA. Both of the interviewees see a need for greater funding for their trade union organization. Rather provocatively, one expressed the desire for U.S. or European military assistance to these groups as well, while the other preferred assistance that would allow them to strengthen their media and educational efforts within Sudan.

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Q. How long have you been in the U.S.?

A. Nine Years.

Q. How did you end up in the United States?

A. I came from Cairo, from Sudan to Cairo, Cairo to the U.S.

Q. Where is your home in Sudan?

A. I am from Blue Nile.

Q. And interviewee number two, you said you have been in the United States for how long?

A. The same time; it comes up to nine years. I came from Egypt, and had been in Egypt for 7 years.

Q. You are the president of the New Sudan Workers' Party?

A. No, the New Sudan Worker's Union. It's not a political party, it's a trade union.

Q. And what are its goals?

A. It's a trade union. Before 1989, we led trade union resistance in Sudan to the Islamist system, which came and destroyed everything in Sudan. Some of our people left Sudan; others remained. The people out of Sudan formed the New Sudan Workers; people who were thrown out of work in Sudan started working with other political groups in Cairo, some of them in Kenya, some of them in London. We continued this job, after starting in Cairo, when we came to the United States. We have other colleagues in other states. We have 12 people here.

Q. How many workers do you represent then in your union?

A. A hundred thousand.

Q. And the workers are presently in all of Sudan?

A. Yes.

Q. Are they concentrated in any particular sector, for example in the oil sector? In other words the trade unions we have in the United States are segmented by industry, the auto workers, the truckers, the agricultural workers, the mineworkers. In Sudan, is every industry represented in your trade union?

A. Yes. In the same way. We have a lot of unions. We have unions for people working in boats, transportation, oil fields, etc.

Q. You said you left Sudan in 1996. What happened in 1996 that caused you to have to leave?

A. What happened with me in Sudan?

Q. Yes, did something in particular happen that you had to leave or you just felt that it was better?

A. Yes, that is what happened. I had some problems with the security over there in Sudan. And it first, it didn't bother me a lot, but after that, I have a lot of friends who told me: "There are better things in this country (the U.S.), because you cannot stay here in Sudan with these guys."

Q. That could be a difficult situation.

A. And then I was sick; my eyes had some problem. Then someone told me it was better to go out, that it was a little better for the eyes. And then I tried this process, when I made a visit to Cairo, and I just stayed in Cairo. Then I went to the United States.

Q. Okay, And (to second interviewee): You left Sudan in 1992; was there something particular that caused you to leave at that time?

A. In 1998, when they brought back Prime Minister Sadiq Al-Mahdi, my name was not on the list. I worked in the mechanical transportation department.

Q. Mechanical transportation department?

A. Yes. The mechanical transportation department in Port Sudan. I was arrested and jailed for a long time, and my parents were not informed.. Sometimes they didn't know where I was. After that, I was told that I have to go to Darfur. So I was in Darfur.

Q. Darfur?

A. Yes, I had to go over there. And after that, they said “choose either your own village or you will be sent to Darfur. Choose one of them,” they said. I said: “I choose my village in the North.” But I cannot work, of course; the Communists said: “No. You cannot work here.” After that, one day, when I had come to Khartoum to see if I had any money in my department, I went to the cross the street, when Salah Gosh, chief of security, tried to hit me with his car.

Q: He almost hit you with his car?

A. Yes he was driving. He knew me very well; he lives in Bakhlan, also he’s from the North.

Q. Okay, then after that you decided it was a good idea to leave.

A. To get treatment, and because I could not continue working in my position, because government officials have been known to come and address our leaders and they kill.... If you have money, you’d be killed in prison.

Q. Killed in prison?

A. Yes. A lot of people die by punishment you see.

Q. Yes, I can understand.

A. The rulers are attacking Sudan; they kill in punishment. They sent in thousands to regulate the mechanical transportation department, the railways and trains. One day, they fired 70,000.

Q. 70,000?

A. Yes.

Q. And what did they do with them?

A. Firing.

Q. All the 70,000....

A. Yes, for just driving trains. They fired workers all over Sudan. And also no communists are allowed to sit down. They don’t organize or meet with our 10,000 working homeless. And our company, with more than 20,000 transportation workers, the government sold it.

Q. The government sold it?

A. Yes, only to the people of the government.

Q. I see.

A. For money, they sell everything for business. Now we have nothing; the money doesn't go to those running the businesses. It's all being destroyed. Long-time workers in their own business were told they have to pay a heavy tax. A tax is legal, but after that they have to pay zakat, and economically it is too much, it closes businesses.

Seventy percent of our new workers in Sudan are laid off or they cannot sit down, they have no job. Some of us, some of our economists went to Egypt, and are working with Egypt Union and other unions, and they are trying to meet with our leaders in Sudan. They are trying to really help our people over there. We try to help our people when they are sick, when they have no job, have kids. But we do not have the means now, so no financial support is going to Sudan.

Q. No financial support is going to Sudan?

A. Yes, well, we get nothing; we are working for that. We get a lot of calls from Sudan, our brothers in our Union, others in Egypt being punished in prison. We do what we can from our own pocket.

Q. Now that you have explained some of the background, I want to relate this to the CPA. When the CPA was enacted in 2005, I imagine your organization would be supporting the new vision, the vision for the new Sudan. Since the time that the CPA has been in force, what would you say about the attitude of the Khartoum government in implementing it, about implementing it in good faith?

A. Okay, one problem we have is we also have another SPLM.

Q. Is your organization a member of the SPLM?

A. We are working for our people, and for our Union, the New Sudan Workers Union and also we are part of the SPLM. [shows a certificate indicating he is Secretary of External Affairs in the state of Texas, given by the Chairman of the SPLM state chapter of Texas.]

Q. Okay, I see, you are part of the SPLM. Tell me from your point of view: I'm interested to know how both sides have managed to implement the CPA. It was clearly spelled out but some things have been implemented, some things have not. How would you characterize the attitude of the government, the Khartoum government on the one hand, toward implementing the provisions of the CPA?

A. Okay. First of all, it's about our history and concept of our civilization. We would never go to war, in our long, deep history. Throughout the history of the Nubian kingdom, our entire civilization, we have been good people. We didn't attack anybody

until Islam and the Arabs came to attack us. The Nubian kingdom was established in the 8th century, long before the Arabs came.

And now the Arabs want to come and attack us in the name of Islam, and want to control all of Sudan, including the tribes in the South and in Darfur. The problem in Sudan is the government stirs up different communities against each other.

Q. So you would say that the Sudanese government wants to make the entire country Islamic.

A. Yes. Through Arabization.

Q. Arabization as well?

A. Because the government allows Arab businesses, Libyan business, Islamic banks, Bin Laden.

A. In the east of Sudan also we have another culture. And Sudan is very important for the Bush administration, because of its location. My own idea is that Sudan is a more important country than Iraq. Sudan has been more useful than Iraq is. In some years, Sudan will be the biggest country in population in Africa.

Q. So you would say Sudan is actually more important to the US than Iraq?

A: Yes!

Q. The Khartoum regime, historically, has not been a friend of America. At the moment that the peace accord was signed, I guess there were reasons why the regime wanted to sign it.

A. Yes, because, also, in the east of Sudan, they were fighting, and Darfur was starting. We had to organize ourselves, because we needed to be able to speak our language, we needed to write our history, we needed to make our own tests. Now there is talk about stealing, about the Blue Nile, Abyei, and Nuba Mountains. This is what Salva Kiir was telling the government of Sudan.

Q. The problems have not been resolved?

A. Yes. And you can see the government is still not doing good. Nothing good is going into the South, not elections, no schools, no money. The South produces the oil, but the government doesn't give them the oil money. No. You see, they need to live, and the government won't hold the elections next year. I'm sure.

Q. Oh, you don't think they will have elections next year?

A. No. Because, you see what happened, they didn't fix the border, and there is still war going on in the biggest state in the west, and in the east of Sudan also. There is also the problem with Eritrea, and with America.

Q. Are the problems with the CPA because the Khartoum government really doesn't intend to implement the agreement?

A. Yes, this is the reason. The government, they need that Islamic regime, I think they need that. They said they are against the CPA; they said they are against the peace agreement. Every day they say in the daily newspaper (called *Intibaha*), the uncle of Bashir says in the daily newspaper, that they should make Jihad in the South. This is Atai Mustafa saying that.

Q. They are saying they should make Jihad in the South?

A. Yes, and we have *Intibaha*, the daily....

Q. It's called "Intibaha?"

A. Yes. And every day, they talk about Osama Bin Laden.

Q. So, you don't think they will have the elections, that they've got no interest in having the elections, even though they might win these elections?

A. No, they know that we will defeat them. The people are poor.

Q. The people throughout Sudan, not just in the South, but even in the North?

A. Yes. And the people think they are supporting the Lord's Resistance Army in the South.

Q. I wondered about that. I know that the government is supporting the LRA ...

A. And they are supporting other militias in Upper Nile, in the north of Azad. Big money is involved, you see.

Q. Where do they buy the arms to support those militias?

A. They have some people outside, if they go to London or Europe. It's easy to meet somebody from the LRA, give him 10 million or 100 million dollars. It's easy to transfer money to many countries around, to Sudan's neighbors.

Q. And the SPLM, although they have a military background, they are not really able to fight the LRA?

A. They do not want to fight.

Q. They don't want to, I can understand that, because they have a peace accord, but...

A. Our neighboring country, remember, is hosting negotiations between the LRA and the government, trying to fix things this way. But the government, they don't really need to do that, they need to solve the problems with SPLM in the South, and concerning Abyei, the problem with the Masseriye tribe, which the government armed and supported.

Q. Apparently, the Masseriye tribe, an Arab tribe, would not accept to give back the area of Abyei to the Dinkas, who are historically more settled there. These are very difficult problems; of course the CPA established the Abyei Boundary Commission. The Commission said the land should be returned to the Dinkas, but the government said "no, we won't do this?" Why did they say that? Are they not afraid to refuse?

A. No, because first there was the oil. They have longed for the oil in the Abyei area. Also, Turabi said we need to Islamicize. We have to give everyone a Quran.

Q. But isn't Turabi now marginalized?

A. Marginalized? No, no, no. We are marginalized. He's not marginalized. He's a power.

Q. Wasn't there a power struggle, whereby he then fell out of influence?

A. He's not acceptable to the West, to Egypt. Okay. And then they drove him out so as to continue their policy; they removed him. They removed him for a little bit, but then he came back again. He and all his students, they've been working together for something like 30 or 40 years. I want to say something also about Egypt.

Q. Go ahead.

A. It is a big problem for Sudan, a big problem to us you see. And, you have the Nubians in east, they are suffering heavily right now. And the Christians, they are suffering a lot now in Egypt.

Q. The Christians in Egypt?

A. Yes. Fourteen kids have been killed in the churches. And they are supporting the Khartoum government. They go to Sudan and make good business deals. The government gives them diplomatic passports. These Egyptians are terrorists; they are Islamic. They stay in Sudan. They have support from the Gulf states and all these countries are supporting the Sudanese Government because they think if this regime changes, the Africans will take over, because the Arabs are a minority. The Egyptians come to take our land, its water and resources, and to establish an Arabist state.

Q. They think they can establish an Arabist state?

A. Yes.

Q. That may be what they would like, but if the people don't support them....

A. No, some tribes, Arab tribes support them.

Q. Some Arab tribes? How many? There are you said a hundred different tribes in Sudan? How many of them support the government?

A. A lot of them support it. The government pays some people money. About 30 percent.

Q. Thirty percent. So if they have elections sometime, if they are fair elections, the government will not win those elections. And presumably the opposing parties like the SPLM would be in power in Khartoum. Can you imagine that this government would be peacefully voted out of power?

A. No.

Q. You don't think that would ever allow it?

A. No, the majority of people are suffering; they have no food. And all the oil wealth, the millions of dollars, the Chinese are taking all the money outside. But the government cannot measure their power. The Chinese try to stay forever.

Q. They don't want to leave, of course. Let me ask you about Salva Kiir. He recently moved back to the South from Khartoum. How would you evaluate how well he has done as a leader. Has he been a good leader; has he united all of the SPLM factions?

A. Yes. He united the militias. Yasir Arman, he came from the government and joined the SPLM; now he is staying in Juba. We have several leaders, several general secretaries: Yasir Arman, Pagan Amum, Dr. Masur Khaled. These are all educated persons. And Salva Kiir said he needs the SPLM to work all together. He said "I cannot do everything by myself, single-handedly, but together." And the other leaders agreed with that.

Q. So, in the absence of John Garang, the SPLM is able to carry on his vision, reflected in the CPA. However, some people have asked whether the CPA is too complicated, too difficult an agreement to implement. Do you think it should have been different, without so many side agreements, or so many details? Or maybe it's a good thing that it has so much detail?

A. Yes, because something like the Nuba Mountains is not the same as the South or the Blue Nile.

It's difficult but, in the SPLM, we try to work with the people on the ground, to give them a chance to make their living. The government tries to give different groups money, as in Nuba Mountains, and divide them from each other.

Q. What is happening in the Blue Nile province? You mentioned some militias were being armed there and there is a separate agreement about the Blue Nile, part of the CPA. To what extent is the peace being broken in the Blue Nile by these militias.

A. In the Blue Nile and the Nuba Mountains, the Khartoum government is trying to destroy the peace agreement. The reason the Khartoum government signed this peace agreement was so it could take a rest, stop fighting and reorganize. But I think we can do something during the election time, working together with the Trade Unions. We need to get help from many, many organizations, because we haven't had many donations. Maybe we can do better now because we have only a short time, like seven or eight months, before the elections. We're trying in many ways to get funding, but we don't have much power, and whoever has the most money usually wins the elections.

We don't have enough funds, we don't have money also, so we pay out of our pocket to do anything. We need to organize our people in Sudan, America, the community here. Our Union over there in Sudan, they are still struggling. They had a really big meeting in Albarrah, a very important workers city.

Q. Albarrah?

A. Albarrah. Yes, our goal was to have a meeting of more than 10,000 workers gathering to listen. We have the vision of the New Sudan, but we have no resources. So we have secret meetings. We need help.

Q. Did you say, you had not been back to Sudan for some time, but you are planning to go now?

A. Yes. I'm not very sick now.

Q. I have spoken to some NGOs and to some people like USAID who say there are resources especially in the South for doing any number of projects. It would seem that your group needs to tap into those resources, in order to mobilize the people as you are saying, for the elections, to teach them the principals of democracy, and to make sure they are informed about the CPA.

A. Yes, but the SPLM now have no media. It's a problem because we have big ideas for the media.

Q. I have heard that there is money available, but I don't know how you can tap into these resources. Since you are living here, I suppose you would want to talk to USAID. What have they said when you meet with them?

A. We haven't met with them; maybe later we can get the telephone numbers.

Q. Yes, I think you would need to talk to the headquarters, perhaps in Khartoum and they have many projects in Juba area. Returning to the CPA, we know that there is fighting in Darfur and then in the other places you have mentioned, the Nuba Mountains and Blue Nile....

A. And Khartoum too...

Q. In Khartoum too?

A. Yes, in Khartoum too, a lot of people get killed. It's a racist government. They kill the races, they kill members of congress. All the women, they shoot them.

Q. What should the international community be doing to ensure that the CPA is implemented properly? Are you thinking that more action should be taken by the UN, by the US, by Britain, by Norway?

A. Yes, first of all, I'd rather think they are supporting the peace, but these people are disagreeing. Now, if we have support, support for a resolution, you can make war. You would need to offer military support, from here or from Europe.

Q. Military support?

[His colleague strongly disagrees that military support is the answer]:

A. We can use other support. You can have good media; that is strong support too. When we have our TV channel, our radio channel, our newspaper, all this is powerful.

[The first speaker supports a military solution]

A. No, brother. This regime cannot lose power from a media campaign. People are dying; people are suffering. There is no water in Khartoum sometimes. And in Khartoum sometimes people are forced out of their homes at gun-point. We have to reorganize our Union in Darfur. In five months we are starting fighting. We have three movements; we have union people now training to fight.

Q. You do?

A. Yes we have that now.

Q. Where are they training?

A. Inside Sudan. Also, the SPLM supports our movement in the North. We want one country, one Sudan, with African Sudanese, Arab Sudanese.

Q. Yes, would you want all of Sudan to be united if you were to take power, one way or another?

A. This regime has support from everywhere; terrorists from Algeria, from Tunisia, from Morocco, are all gathering together in Sudan. Yes. From Jordan, from Palestine, from Pakistan. Hamas in Palestine, they get cash from Sudan, with a big office in Palestine and a big office in Sudan. Jihad al-Islami, in Hamas, their first office after the Palestinian area is in Sudan. All are training in Sudan. Businesses, restaurants, etc. in Khartoum are from Hamas.

Q. There are Hamas businesses in Khartoum?

A. Yes, big businesses; when you see a big restaurant, a very nice restaurant, or a very big supermarket, all this is Hamas owned in the Khartoum area. In a lot of towns, big towns, they have a lot of land.

Recently, a big delegation came here from Sudan; they are criminal people. They go to all the states and give them money. People in Sudan are suffering, people have no food, no medicine, and they give them money here to build a mosque. The leader of that delegation was Dr. Madraff Sadiq. He's the head of the delegation of Islamic Relief. He also gave a thousand dollars to the church to balance his gift to the mosque.

And Salah Gosh also comes here.

Q. did you say Salah Gosh?

A. Salah Abdullah Mohamed Saleh. Gosh is an important guy.

Q. Yes. Just to bring things to a conclusion here. We started by looking for lessons learned from the CPA and it sounds as if CPA's greatest success is to have brought some peace to the country, which is a good thing. But...

A. There is still war...

Q. There are still wars going on, as you point out, and so what do you think is the most important lesson to be learned?

A: If we can get help, our group will mobilize our forces, and we can help the South. I'll just mention that nothing is good, and the South has been suffering for 50 years. We are not seeing any benefit from the peace. No construction, no houses, no schools, no medicine. We still have a lot of problems.

Q. Well, thank you for sharing all that. It's not so encouraging, but it is certainly based on the reality you were able to observe. I appreciate your input and your projects and I hope you have a chance to meet with others who may be able to provide some funding.