

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

Interview # 53 –Executive Summary

Interviewed by: Sam Westgate
Initial Interview Date: January 17, 2007
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The interviewee is a U.S. official and Africa area expert engaged with Sudanese affairs in the mid 1990s. She was involved with the embassy in trying to encourage civil discourse in an unfavorable environment in which implicit U.S. policy was regime change in Khartoum. The goals of the embassy team at that time were to encourage a North-South dialogue and to encourage Sudan to repair its relations with its neighbors, in which it was engaged in a “proxy war.” The U.S. government and the embassy were also trying to discourage Sudan from harboring terrorists, the most infamous of whom was Osama Bin Laden.

The informant noted that while she was in Khartoum, IGAD was a drought and disaster relief agency (IGADD), but that the neighboring countries, which formed what was to become IGAD, were a tightening noose around Sudan. The U.S. embassy had a delicate balancing act of trying not to appear to be aiding the “enemy gang of neighbors” who were attempting to “surround” Sudan in attempts to keep lines of dialogue open in Khartoum. Relations between Khartoum and Washington essentially went into a “freeze,” because “attitude trumped interest,” and the agenda of issues, including the North-South conflict and human rights, could not be pursued.

Overtures by Sudan to help combat terrorism were rebuffed, including the overture to turn over Osama Bin Laden to U.S. authorities. According to the informant, the FBI and CIA were intrigued by working with Sudan on antiterrorist cooperation, but they were checked by the State Department. Instead after the embassy bombings of 1998, and another offer of help by the Sudanese, the U.S. responded by bombing a Sudanese pharmaceutical factory. The interviewee laments the lost opportunities and the lives that would have been saved with a different approach. “It really was a very shortsighted policy that cost American lives, and it was not even an official policy.”

In terms of the CPA, the informant finds the key issues unresolved. Position sharing in the central government, wealth sharing, and the demarcation of internal borders continue to be unresolved. The interviewee did note that at least there has been an improvement in U.S.-Sudan relations with the change of administrations from Clinton to Bush, and that a policy of engagement bore some policy fruits. She opines, however, that with the rise of influence of the evangelical community in the U.S., aligned with Southerners, that “our maneuverability to do anything is severely constrained....”

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Q: We are trying to collect viewpoints surrounding the CPA and Sudan and the North South peace process. At what point did you become involved, either with the negotiations or as an observer of the negotiations?

A: I was in Sudan from 1995 to 1997.

Q: Since the CPA process, in a way, has roots back into the mid-Nineties, what would you describe as your role, as an observer at that point? There were preliminaries to making this happen.

A: At the time that I was in Sudan, our policy was officially based on three or four matters. The first of them was to try to find peace between the North and the South, which had been the goal of the United States since the troubles started between North and South again, after many years of peace. This happened when there was a rebellion within the army, started by John Garang. That was several years before I came on the scene and every embassy that followed up until mine, and my ambassador was the last sitting ambassador in Khartoum. That was a pillar of our effort, was to try to make peace.

The second effort was to discourage the Sudanese from their support for international terrorism and to try to get them to stop various nefarious activities. We also sought to get the Sudanese to stop their human rights abuses, not just in the South but in the North. And finally, the Sudanese government, a government that came to power via a *coup d'etat*, a military coup in 1989. We tried to get them to repair their relations with neighboring countries, such as Uganda, Ethiopia, Eritrea with which they were in, if not a real battle, certainly a rhetorical battle. There was a low-level proxy war going on, where Sudanese were clearly supporting rebel groups in some of these countries including, most troublingly, the Lord's Resistance Army -- the Ugandans in that border area.

So those were the goals of our time there. My first ambassador I only really overlapped with for a couple of months. When the second one came on the scene and we were all new, our attempt was to start a dialogue with the Sudanese on issues with which we hoped to engage them. Prior to that, frankly, we had a spitting contest and a dialogue of the deaf, who could out-word the other, and there was no contact at all with the government of any substance. There was, obviously, solace to the opposition and to people who had been misused by this regime. So, on one hand that had been very good but we had no real alternative, because we had no real access to the government.

Prior to my arrival the Secretary of State, Madeleine Albright, had come through town and threatened the Sudanese with God knows what about terrorists she claimed they were harboring. When they asked who those terrorists were, she said, basically, “you know who they are.” And she went away and they were there, rather dismayed.

Now I said this was the official policy, and in fact that was the policy that we were pursuing. We were doing real work to get the dialogue going with the Sudanese government so we could engage on these issues. In fact, we were quite successful in getting that civil discourse going on a number of levels, on a number of subjects. However, in Washington, there was certainly in the Africa bureau an unstated policy goal, and that was regime change in Khartoum, and that policy went at odds with our ability to offer any carrots. We had no real sticks, anyway, but to have no carrots, either, [was unfortunate] in terms of what the Sudanese were seeking from us, which was to repair their broken relations with us. And it was very clear that if we were in a position to do that, to repair relations, we had to offer that as a possibility, which we did rhetorically, but quite frankly we really did not have anything to offer.

There were all kinds of indications that they did want to work with us on these issues, most notably on terrorism, because we felt, I think correctly, that the revolutionary stage of the Nation Islamic Front, having come to power, was over, and they realized that on a number of serious levels they had goofed, starting with not supporting the Gulf countries during the Iraq invasion of Kuwait. That hurt them financially very badly. It also sent tens of thousands of Sudanese who had been laboring in the Gulf back; that hurt them very much. It isolated them within the Arab world.

They had poor relations with many African countries as well, because they had claimed that they were sort of the vanguard of bringing Islamic revolution to other parts of Africa and the Middle East, which obviously did not go down very well. They had an organization, the PAIC, the Popular Arab and Islamic Congress, which was meant to be an alternative to the Organization of Islamic Conferences, which dealt with recognized nation states and legitimate insurgencies. This was meant to bring together everybody’s bad guys to talk and presumably plot bad things. I do not think much went on, but it was a very bad image for the Sudanese, and this was promoted by the good Doctor Tarabi, which I am sure right now you know a lot about.

But the wiser people in the government, which included a lot of the acolytes of Dr. Tarabi, were ready to change, including the person who was then prime minister, who is now vice president, Ali Osman Mohammed Taha, and they were ready to engage on these subjects. And in fact on certain things we went quite far, starting with a dialogue that we launched on one of their favorite subjects, which is that the United States hates Islam. We had a very private, intensive set of meetings with some senior, albeit young, members of the party that actually went a long way to breaking the ice on the other subjects, as well.

Q: In other words, not on just religious issues, but on other issues?

A: Yes, this “United States hostility” was based on something like religious issues, whereas we were able, once we got beyond, we were able to explain where we were coming from on matters of Islam, and that that was not the issue but that terrorism was, human rights abuses were. then we were able to get down to a discussion on those things that were the substantive issues the United States had with the regime.

Q: You have mentioned the American role and you are talking of the official role. What, at that period, or since, were the roles of some of the international organizations, for example, IGAD, the UN, the EU, even the AU?

A: On the AU, I am not sure of the history of this, whether at that point, I think they were the OAU (Organization of African Unity)..

Q: They were the OAU.

A: And that they were not really much of a player, to my knowledge. The UN was very active.

Let me say one other thing about what was going on atmospherically in Sudan at that point. When I arrived, it was just a few months after the attempt on the life of President Mubarak, who was in Addis Ababa for a meeting of the OAU. And it was immediately determined that the people who were involved in that, who were not Sudanese, were actively supported by or even encouraged to do this by various people in the Sudan, if not the government itself. So we held the government of Sudan responsible for that and in fact demanded that there would be sanctions if we did not get satisfaction on these matters.

In terms of organizations, the United Nations had a very limited role in Sudan. It was an important one, though. It had to do with dealing with, along with NGOs, with humanitarian relief. You had their work in the South, which was operated out of the closest Kenyan city to southern Sudan, which was Lokichiokio. Lokichokio became a huge base for operations for relief in the South. That was where they set up this framework, and you had the European Union efforts from there. It was a staging point for some of USAID’s programs for the South. Their base for dealing with Southern Sudan was in Nairobi. They had a Sudan office there and when they would bring things to stage and to go the base where the planes would take off, it was Lokichokio. That is where the International Red Cross had their operations, all the NGOs, etc. So that was one thing--the South was sort of being dealt with--and our political officer who dealt with the South was then based in Nairobi.

We also had, though, UN activities in the North, because there were huge displaced person camps of Sudanese, Southerners, around the capital, refugees also from the fighting who chose to go north rather than south, and they were mainly women and children. The men in their families probably, most likely, in fact we know in most cases, were in the rebel units. So that was what they were doing there.

The UNDP also had a modest program to deal with northern Sudan and they dealt with certain kinds of social issues like female genital mutilation, other kinds of development issues, reconciliation programs, etc. The European Union, ECHO, which is their relief operation, was again very, very active in the South and they also had a representation in the North. The League of Arab States had an ambassador there, but it was only when Sudan starting making direct bilateral improvements in its relations with Egypt and with the Gulf states, that [outside relations] grew a considerable amount. The Europeans, various Europeans, had missions there, as did relief organizations from all over. We had one or two Irish relief organizations, secular ones in addition to the White Fathers.

And lots of Americans as well, with organizations like ADRA, the Adventist group. We had Mennonites. And we had a slew of others--we had Norwegians there, with Norwegian Aid. And then we had World Vision and a number of organizations like that involved in relief. But the UN was the only one, really and the Mennonites who were really paying any attention to the Northerners.

Q: How about the role of IGAD? Did you get a chance to observe their activities?

A: IGAD, when we were, back in my time, IGAD really was in its infancy, and it was focusing, at that point, on its initial mission. It used to be IGADD, with two "d's." Its first goal was to be an advanced warning system for droughts and disasters. In fact that was the original intent of IGAD, and it involved particularly those kinds of humanitarian disasters that all of these countries had confronted, but especially in the Horn of Africa.

Q: You have already touched in some ways on some of the non-state actors, both local and international. How do you think that they helped to set the stage for, ultimately, those North-South negotiations? Were they significant players in any way in getting the peace process going?

A: Not at my time, no. I think I would assume, as history went on, that their advocacy for the South and the southern cause, or causes, because different groups had different agendas, probably became much more political in the United States.

Q: And how about the role of the regional states surrounding Sudan? Were you able to observe that they were having significant influence? You did touch on this a bit, when you discussed...

A: We viewed favorably at that point, the leaders of three of those countries -- at that point we barely talked about Chad, because Darfur was not the issue -- the new generation of African leaders, the great Museveni, Isaias, Meles, (some of the people we still adore except for Isaias). They were our allies and among the things that were said by some of our leadership in Washington was that we were using them to "surround Sudan," which of course did not help us in dealing with the government of Sudan if we were posing ourselves as part of this enemy gang of neighbors. At that point they were all governments that would have loved to see the regime in Khartoum go away for their own

interests, because there was of course this, as I said, proxy stuff going on. And, indeed, when Sudanese northern opposition politicians vanished, they tended to show up in Addis or in Asmara. If you notice today, the same is true about rebel groups, they head out in that direction. Now all of this is a bit ironic, because during the Mengistu era the rebel groups that are now the governments there of Meles and Isaias were treated very warmly and helped by and had refuge in Sudan by the government of Sudan. And so it was a great irony that the sense of accommodation slipped so quickly after they got into power. And in fact, if you notice, for a number of reasons, including geography and education, the leaders in Ethiopia and Eritrea do speak very good Arabic, some of it from those long years in Sudan.

Q: What do you think the results were of some of the military interventions and activities of the neighboring states?

A: There was not much in terms of real interventions at that point. There were border skirmishes.

Q: You mentioned LRA activity.

A: The LRA was a problem for the Ugandans, so even though the government of Sudan was allowing them to use Sudanese territory to do horrible things like kidnapping kids and all kinds of terrible things, they still were not a real threat, as I would say they are today, to the people of northern Uganda. They are certainly not a military threat to the regime in Uganda.

Q: But do you find them to be really of insignificance as far as moving the peace process in any one direction or another?

A: No, they had nothing to do with that, but in terms of Uganda, they were absolutely animals. They are animals. They are led by a crazed guy who, on the days he does not think he is God, thinks he is God's messenger.

Q: Now we could move to the role of the "major powers." You have already discussed to some extent the U.S. role but what roles do you think the UK and Norway played at this point, that you were able to observe, on preliminary negotiations?

A: Again, when it got into negotiations I was gone.

Q: I think you had some opportunity to note implementation, by virtue of your being in the Africa bureau. What have you seen to be the primary shortfalls in the CPA process, from here in Washington?

A: The weakness of our relations with Sudan, certainly from the time I was there, was one where attitude trumped interest. So we had this agenda of issues, including the North-South conflict but also human rights in the North and getting a lot of things going in terms of democratization and whatever in the North, making peace with the neighbors,

etc, all of which could have been moved along. Because of attitudes towards the government of Sudan, these things went into a sort of freeze, and in fact when my ambassador left to go on to another assignment, the Africa bureau refused to appoint another ambassador, although they remained intent on regime change. Those same people are probably praying for regime change now, and the regime has obviously proved more resilient.

The French kept good lines of communication open with the government. The government of Sudan, in its fawning efforts to improve their relations with the French government, also gave up Carlos the Jackal to the French.

From the time that we were there, the Sudanese government made it clear that they were willing to work with us on terrorism, deliver people we wanted delivered or help us find people that we were looking for. This intrigued both the Agency and later the FBI, who were told by the Africa bureau “no way, no how” and kept them, particularly the FBI, out of all of this. The Sudanese sent emissaries — I am sure you have read this stuff in the newspapers -- offering to open up a channel. By this point the Sudanese had already really rebuilt their bridges with the Egyptians, and in fact were shoveling lots of Egyptian jihadis back, planeloads of them, back to Egypt to meet their fate and were probably doing likewise with others.

Now when it came to Bin Laden, at this point, we were telling them, “You have to get rid of Bin Laden, etc.” This is in 1996. Their attitude was, “Well, we will be happy to do that but does it not make more sense to keep him here so we can observe him, tap his phone, keep up with what he is doing and give you that information?” “No, you are a terrorist country by having Bin Laden.” “Do you want Bin Laden?” We said, “No, we do not have enough evidence against him.” The Saudis would not take Bin Laden, because they would have had to chop his head off, which would not have been very popular at that point in the country, including with his family. So he went away on his own, went to Afghanistan. Now when the embassy was bombed in 1998, the Sudanese offered again to provide information to us, and once again our answer was to bomb their pharmaceutical factory, which was not an appropriate answer to an offer for help.

And frankly, there were lost years in there, in which, had we had this relationship with the government of Sudan, American lives would not have been lost, and that is the thing that I am still very emotional and very angry about. It really was a very shortsighted policy that cost American lives and it was not even an official policy, as I said. It was attitude.

Q: You mentioned the French. How about the UK and Norway, specifically?

A: The UK was a little bit more open to the government of Sudan than we were but every action we took that irritated the Sudanese, the British got paid back for it, too, I think. So if we had somebody thrown out, they had somebody thrown out, too, that kind of thing.

Q: I know that you were not in country at the time, but did you feel that the Sudan Peace Act, the congressional passage of Sudan Peace Act of October 2002, whether that had an effect, one way or another?

A: I think that back in the mid-Nineties, when I was there, I had a very good sense of where the Africa bureau was on things. I really did not know enough about how politics in the United States, particularly in the Congress, were going on Sudan or if they really were active at that point. But certainly in the intervening years a combination of these NGOs plus the Congressional Black Caucus and a number of Christian groups all sort of converged to form a very strong pressure group on the Congress that led to the Peace Act.

Q: The CPA has been described as a very complex document, with clauses, with various commissions of one sort or another. Have you had an opportunity, from this distance, to think whether the structure of the agreement as negotiated is working, whether it is being properly implemented?

A: Whether this process works or not has more to do with the intentions of the parties, not with the structure of whatever is on paper, good, bad or indifferent, what their different goals are. When I was dealing with Sudan, it was very clear that most of the Southerners wanted independence. However, their leader, John Garang, wanted to be president of Sudan and, failing that, to take independence and be president of the South. And so there were different agendas that had to be. In the North there was always an issue of “what we would really like to have is all of Sudan as an Islamic state but if to be a state intact we have to give up our Islamic-ness, better leave the South.” This was one of those debates that went on in the North and I think it is still not resolved. Everybody wants to have their cake and eat it, too.

Obviously different people will choose different things in the North, whether it would be unity or press their own Islamist agenda, and it was an amusing case when I was there, the Sudanese government concocted a peace with its own Southerners whom it was paying. There were many, many war lords, it was not one group against another. There were multiple warlords with their own agendas, some of whom would be in alliance with the government of Sudan periodically. So the government of Sudan cooked up this thing called “Peace From Within,” and they celebrated their great peace with themselves, and that included people who are now part of the government of the North and the South, like Riek Machar, who is a Nuer leader. But I was amused how many Muslim northern Sudanese were saying, “Oh my God! If this is going to be this horrible Islamic cloister up here, do you think the Southerners will let us go down there and live a normal life without all of this religious extremism?” So that will give you a flavor of some of the contradictions that went on at that time.

One thing I have read is that the CPA is an agreement within the SPLM, Garang’s group, and does not necessarily include all the other Southerners. I know a lot of people joined them to get on the winning bandwagon and get jobs, including people that in my time were against Garang and were actually for the government. But those people have made peace with the National Congress Party, which is the party of Bashir. In fact, what you

have is not a peace between the North and the South, you have basically an agreement with two political parties. And one explanation for this peace agreement was that the government has been maneuvered into having to hold real elections and so together with the North, I am assuming they can cobble together some people from here and there, and they can win the elections, and so it is in their interests to keep these two parties as one voting bloc. Now whether they can do that and continue to be so two-faced...

Q: Which two parties, now?

A: The SPLM and the party of the president. And that is why Darfur threw a real wrench into this, because I think they had calculated on what votes they could get in the West and in the East, because they have also had outbreaks over there, too. And while I have not followed what agreements were made with the tribes in the East, along the Red Sea, I would assume probably some of it has to do with who is going to vote for whom.

Q: In that regard, you have mentioned 2009, but in 2011 the CPA foresees a referendum. What is your prediction, in terms of what will happen?

A: Depends on what happens in the intervening years, whether we even make it to that point. From the cursory readings I have seen of it, everybody is trying to do as little as possible. You are really blending two very, very different agendas, two very different people with different goals, [regardless] whether it is going to work or to work temporarily. One problem with the northern Sudanese that we always noticed is that they are tactically brilliant and strategically stupid. So what they are doing right now is tactical: give a little inch here, do this, appoint someone here, but then drag feet on this commitment, this sort of thing. Whether at a certain point that all adds up to something that the Southerners say, "forget it!" who knows?

I did read somewhere that there was a ceremony, I can not remember whether it was for the anniversary of Garang's death or whether it was the anniversary of the CPA, whatever, there was a big ceremony down in the South. Bashir pops down to the South for this happy, joyous festival, and Salva Kiir, who is simultaneously the vice president of Sudan and the president of Southern Sudan, lit into him and the North and insulted them and called them liars and said that they had reneged on everything, and all the mess is their fault, and blah, blah, blah. Bashir was stunned but he was pressed to go through the rest of the events. He did say something in response. So it was an example where somebody felt strong enough in front of him to express their extreme frustration with what has been going on.

Q: How about border issues? There is a commission for border issues. Do you see any progress being made in that area?

A: Borders between?

Q: Between North and South.

A: Well, it is not borders between two countries but rather the borders of the various internal Sudanese states. The understanding is that certain states go to the North, certain states go to the South, and a lot of that has to do with oil and what states have the oil physically within their states, though there are other agreements about the oil. I think the biggest controversy is about an area called Abyei, which in fact is traditionally part of Kordofan, which is one of the northern states but is one that has traditionally been populated by a lot of Southerners. So it really is a transitional area, and I guess that's one of the sticking points.

Q: As you look back on the process that led up to the CPA, what do you think have been the greatest mistakes, or what can we learn from that whole process?

A: We can learn that we could have been there many years earlier, had we been willing to engage, had we not made this totally a good guys versus the bad guys and isolated the government of Sudan. It was sort of one of these things, kicking your own toe. We wanted a goal and again I think part of the confusion was that in the United States, among the lobbying groups that supported the Southerners, I think a lot of them were aiming for separation, which is something that none of the countries surrounding them wanted to have. I think most of the people in Africa and the Arab world understood that if tomorrow the South broke up, the SPLM would not get all of it, and you have all these other tribes that are not Dinkas and they are all going to want their own fiefdoms and it could be a bloody mess. Historically, when the Dinka and Nuer were at each other in the Nineties, it was a bloodbath beyond comprehension. And so that would not have been a happy ending. I think the hope now is that if they have enough years of institution building, and if the SPLM is wise enough to broaden its horizons to include, among other things, the sedentary tribes, the farming tribes, like the Zandi, etc., and to bring everybody in, then everybody will have a stake in the southern system. I cannot evaluate whether they are doing that or not. I do not see the SPLM being that way, but maybe they are growing up. I do not know. But I think that held up things for a long time too, that we were doing everything basically through sticks at the government of Sudan and no carrots, except for a vague notion of restoring relations with us. And they were almost there, because they were doing everything humanly possible to help us on terrorism, but then the Darfur thing provided anti-government people here with an excuse to say, "no!"

Q: The loss of years. How about some of the other international players? Norway, the UK?

A: Well, we are the lynch pin. We were the only ones who could deliver the Southerners, especially because the Southerners, seeing all this support in the United States, it was sort of like, "well, why do we have to compromise?" And so whenever you have that kind of thing it is very difficult and a lot more human lives were lost, a lot of years of potential development and a number of years of serious counterterrorism cooperation between the United States and Sudan [were lost], which, as I said, cost American lives. It could have been different.

Q: We have only touched on Darfur a little bit.

A: But as a Chad person, here I can tell you what it looks like from the other side of the war.

Q: To what extent did the process, peace process, the process of negotiation, lay any foundations for violence in Darfur?

A: I do not know if it was the process in the South, but I do know that the SPLM was highly complicit in establishing the SLM. Along with JEM the SLM now is fragmented into various different parts, but that was meant, from the point of view of the Southerners, not as being helpful to their brothers in Darfur but rather to create another line of pressure against the government of Sudan. So, in that sense it is very related. It also created among the Darfurians, who decided to rebel, a sense of expectations about what they could demand, in terms of wealth sharing, in terms of role in the government, etc., etc. If you look at the different parts of the DPA and the things that the rebels who are denouncing it are demanding, they all circle around the same kind of issues that were part of the CPA and they are not getting as much as they had wanted.

Q: Which issues, specifically?

A: Wealth sharing, for one. Position sharing in the central government. And they also want compensation and where it is broken down right now is, the groups that are the signatories have agreed to collective compensation, and the holdouts want individual compensation for individuals who have lost their livelihood, etc, among other things. Now, on a bad day, some of the rebels also say “forget it! We want an independent Darfur.” But that is not really part of it. There are a couple of other elements here and that is that the good, the evil Doctor Tarabi is, of course, part of this because his party, the Islamicist party, split, and he and the real ideologues went their own way and he, even though he was under house arrest, comes in here to stir the pot. And a lot of the people who are the founders of JEM are in fact Tarabi-ite Islamicists. Now they will deny that and their followers are not necessarily so, but that is where JEM came from: Justice and Equality are the terms that the Mahdi used.

Q: Do you have any other, additional comments on the whole CPA process and American policy? Has there been any maturation in its development?

A: No, there has not been, because while I think there has clearly been maturation within the U.S. executive branch, and the credit really goes to the Republican administration for having taken another look at this when they came in. It was only when the new Assistant Secretary came on board and the former one vanished, that there was another look at this policy and the fact that there has got to be a way to do this, other than bash, bash, bash, because we were not getting anywhere. And so the U.S. engagement really got started, on the political level with the new U.S. Administration. Our intelligence services had already elbowed their way in and sort of said, “to hell with the State Department” by that point. But the bloc that supports the Southerners, which now includes the evangelical community, is a very powerful political bloc that has developed and flourished, and so

our maneuverability to do anything is severely constrained because of that. You really have to try to do as much as possible to offer carrots to the government of Sudan, knowing that you really do not have any sticks readily available.