
Interview: Ben Swan

'Deal with Sudan based on equity'

Massachusetts State Representative Ben Swan, a Democrat from the Springfield area, was interviewed in November 1996, by Debra Hanania Freeman, concerning his visit to Sudan as part of a fact-finding delegation with the Schiller Institute.

EIR: From Sept. 13-23, you had the opportunity to do something that most elected officials in America have not done—travel to the Republic of Sudan.

Swan: That is true. It was a very interesting trip, very educational; it was my first trip to the continent of Africa. I had an opportunity to go on a fact-finding tour—a fact-finding mission—to look at some things very specifically. I was familiar with charges that have been made against the Republic of Sudan, charges alleging certain activities on the part of the Sudanese government, and I had read a story about the practice of slavery. I read stories about genocide existing—being practiced, in essence, as an official governmental policy by the central government.

We were greeted warmly by government officials, and by non-government officials—by everyone that we encountered. I was most impressed by the fact that we were told, clearly and specifically, by representatives of the government, that we would not be restricted, in terms of our contact. We stayed in a commercial hotel staffed by general workers. We were told, specifically, that we would be free to visit any parts of the country under the control of the central government. The only part of the country in which they could not guarantee our safety, was that part under rebel control.

EIR: These are virtually war zones?

Swan: Right. But, anywhere else in the country that we thought we might want to visit, or that we had the time to visit, the transportation would be arranged; and, we were free to speak with people from any segment of the population: people on the street; people in any facets of the society; people in social service agencies; people in various religious groups.

On the second day we were there, we had an opportunity to make two visits to a church. We visited one church that was Episcopal—I have to get these churches correct, now—where there was a service in the Arabic language, and then we visited one where the service was in English.

We were told that we could visit any church, or talk to any minister. We did have a chance, on our second day, to talk to parishioners of one church, where people at the service

were told the reason for our being there, and that we would be present if they wanted to talk to us. There were people who talked to us who were not in synch with the central government, who voiced concerns about some things. When I asked three gentlemen who were speaking to me directly about some of the allegations, they had a position on this. When I asked them, where they had gotten their information from, they explained that, hadn't I read the *Baltimore Sun*?

EIR: Oh, come on—this is in Khartoum? It's incredible, you know, people in Khartoum who allege slavery in their nation based on reading a Baltimore newspaper.

Did you have any indication that Christians were, for instance, discriminated against in public office? Are they able to run for office if they want to?

Swan: I had a chance to meet some members of the central government assembly who were Christians. We met with members of the state councils (which are the equivalent of our state legislatures). We met with different members of the national assembly (which is like our Congress). We met with the head of what would be the equivalent of the Justice Department. And, we had a chance to ask questions, to ask probing questions, to seek answers, and to seek other sources for the same information. So, and, in fact, in most cases, the individuals whom we met with, gave us other individuals whom we could use to cross-check the information given to us.

I asked for, and received, a copy of their proposed system, the document under which they are organized in the National Assembly. They don't call it "affirmative action," but it amounts to affirmative action. It's a 400-person assembly, and they have 125 seats that are not elected in direct elections, but as representatives from certain segments of the population. That is to assure that women are included, in the event that they don't get elected in direct elections. And it's also to make sure that different religions are represented. There were women playing major roles wherever we went.

Outside of the formal meetings that we held, a lot of the informal activities that we were involved in, where you could strike up a conversation—like chance meetings with people in the lobby of the hotel, or somewhere in the street, as we were walking or going different places—I didn't get the impression that people were living in fear.

It is my understanding that—and, in fact, I saw a little bit of this in the 1960's when I was involved in the civil rights movement, working in certain parts of the United States: There were certain people in certain communities who were a little bit leary about talking to strangers. But I didn't get any of this [in Sudan].

EIR: You were in the city, in the nation's capital, and I want to talk about whether there was evidence of slavery *there*. But you also did something that no one has done before, which was to take a rather rugged journey into the Nuba Mountains.

Swan: We actually took *two* rugged journeys. We visited the



Massachusetts State Representative Ben Swan, speaking at an FDR-PAC policy forum on Africa in Washington, D.C. on Nov. 16, 1996. Swan visited the city of Kadugli, in the Nuba Mountains, during a fact-finding mission to Sudan sponsored by the Schiller Institute in September 1996.

Gezira Scheme, and getting there was not a simple matter. We didn't just take a plane and fly in and fly out: We drove there, and we drove over local highways, and local roads, and we had a chance to spend time with people there—women, men, and children. We visited people at work in the fields; we gained an understanding of the citizens' participation in that process. We had an understanding of who was involved, and there were both Christians and Muslims involved there.

EIR: Just for the benefit of our readers, the Gezira Scheme is actually the largest agricultural complex in the world that functions under one centralized management. And, I understand, that it produces about 60% of the food for all of Sudan, which actually has achieved food self-sufficiency. One thing that is very striking about the whole Gezira Scheme, is that—here you have a nation, a very young nation, not a nation without problems but a nation with a certain amount of internal strife, which does appear to be provoked by outside forces. Yet, despite all of that, they managed to maintain their concentration on infrastructure, on providing fresh water, on attaining food self-sufficiency.

One would think, that, given the general problems of agricultural production, people would be *looking* to this country, right? Here's an African country with a significant population, which is able not only to feed itself, but to export food. But, somehow it doesn't seem that these are aspects of life in this young republic that are brought to people's attention.

Swan: Well, I really wouldn't have known it, had I not vis-

ited the country. And, so, I assume that others, who have not visited, don't know about this.

EIR: Certainly, they don't know it. Now, before you headed out for the Nuba Mountains—when you were in Khartoum, did you see any evidence, in Khartoum itself, of people who were, who could be considered slaves? Or, indentured servants? For example, among the people who served you at various meetings, or in the hotel. Did these appear to be paid employees? Because I would assume that there are two places where slaves, if there were slaves, would be employed: either as hotel help or domestic help, or in the Gezira Scheme, where there is a large agricultural operation.

Swan: In the farms where we went, we were taken on a tour to show us what they were doing. We had been provided with literature and had seen a film, and we had discussed the idea of it. Incidentally, women *were* in those meetings. We were even shown plots that were like what you could call, in some sense, "sharecropping"—in other words, individual families or individuals, who were allocated land that they could farm, with technical assistance from the managers of the scheme. It was kind of a cooperative farming: They could handle it all by themselves, or they could allow it to be processed in collaboration with the total scheme.

EIR: So they're essentially like tenant farmers?

Swan: In essence, right. And, so, we saw that, and then we saw people working in their fields. They have a choice, of growing what they want to grow. Then—

EIR: So, they weren't slaves.

Swan: They weren't slaves. The people in the hotel weren't. I had no evidence, none whatsoever, to suggest that they were working against their will. When you say slaves, I assume this means people who would not want to do what they're doing, that it's against their will, that they have no other option.

I saw poverty. I'm not sure that I saw any more poverty than that you normally see in a city that size, but I did see poverty. I saw some infrastructure that had not been developed to the extent that it is in Washington, D.C., or some other American cities. But, I saw great potential. I saw great willingness on the part of many people in public life to make things better. I saw people crying out to be allowed to develop their economy, to be listened to, to explain the great potential they have for providing food for the rest of Africa—including all of Sudan and the rest of Africa; because, they recognize the wealth, the potential resource in fertile land and water. Because it is a fertile valley. It reminds you of the Mississippi Valley—Arkansas, Mississippi, Tennessee, Louisiana, and other places that are a part of the Mississippi Valley.

EIR: I think it's clear that Sudan is not a nation without problems, but, do you, as an elected official, a government

official from the United States, do you think that Sudan is in any way a threat to the United States?

Swan: No. I can in no way sufficiently explain, or convince you that there's no way that I can consider Sudan a threat to the United States—or, for that matter, to any part of the Western world.

EIR: Was it your impression, that the people of Sudan, and the government of Sudan—and, if your view is that each has a different view, feel free to say so—but, was it your view that they were desirous of cooperation with the United States?

Swan: We were told continuously, by people who were in official capacities, about development opportunities, investment opportunities. Sudan, being the nation with the largest land-mass of any country in Africa, has a lot of land. In terms of agriculture, you can grow almost any crop, literally, somewhere in Sudan—from those that grow in tropical climates, to those that grow in the mountain plains, such as tea—any crop.

We didn't go all over Sudan, but we know that the southern area is tropical rain forest. And we know that you have the Nile, not only the White Nile, but the Blue Nile, that allows for irrigation. And we know that they have developed an irrigation system, in parts of the country, that is based on gravity; and, this lessens the susceptibility to drought that exists in much of Africa. We know that Sudan has a potential of feeding the entire continent, if the agricultural potential is developed.

We know that there's a great willingness to cooperate with other parts of the world, specifically the United States. I, as an American, was treated like I was at home. A lot of the people we met, had travelled in the United States. Many of them went to school here.

And, they know about our Constitution. They can talk to you more intelligently about our Constitution than a lot of Americans can—even a lot of Americans in public life. And, in fact, they have taken some of our notions. And, I don't know if this can be underscored sufficiently: They do not have parties. Now, we know that there are African nations and Asian nations and other nations, Western even; Caribbean, Central and South American, that have operated on a one-party system, and some with multiple parties. But, Sudan's system speaks against party politics. And, I am convinced that they are proper in doing so. Their notion is, that if you're going to have party politics, that's when religion will become more significant in terms of national politics. Because the parties are going to have divisions based on religious or ethnic lines. And then you're going to have the *head* of the tribe, or the *head* of the religious group, running the government.

I've seen that happen in other countries, and it only has created confusion and division.

EIR: One of the things that I understand about the nation of Sudan is that, while she is a nation of many ethnic groups,

and of people who speak many different languages, that the people really do consider themselves as Sudanese.

Swan: That's true.

EIR: It must be very frustrating for the British?

Swan: I came out of a culture that was not too different, I mean, that was not far removed, from Africa. And, my father was born to a person, my grandfather, who was born into slavery in the United States of America. And, so, in my early childhood, a lot of the learning, in many ways, was directly African in nature. One of the things that taught me, is to look at your world, look at your surroundings, and try to understand them based on your own logic.

If you look at Sudan, its location in the world, its location on the continent of Africa, its location in proximity to the rest of Africa, to the Nile. The Nile, historically has been the milk for the bread-basket for the world, which was the lower Nile Valley.

If you look at that and if you take the whole globe, and you do a similar thing—and if you say that there are people somewhere in the world, on a global scale, who want to control the world, or to manipulate the world, where would their points of concern, or points of interest be?

If left alone, if Sudan is able to avoid external manipulations, I think that Sudan will offer an exemplar for the world. This is a country where the central government allowed a delegation from one of its states to go to another country, in the interests of attempting to negotiate a peace in the conflict in southern Sudan.

EIR: What would your recommendations be, not only to the Congressional Black Caucus, but to other committees of the U.S. Congress? I would think that there are things there to be learned by the Agricultural Committee, by the Commerce Committee. Would you encourage your fellow elected officials, to visit this nation? And, do you think they'd be welcome?

Swan: I *know* that they would be welcomed, and I would encourage them to visit this nation. I will do everything within my power, to convince the Massachusetts delegation—which has no member in the Congressional Black Caucus—to attempt to deal with Sudan, in a very practical manner, based on equity: Deal with the country as an *equal*. Don't just accept what you've heard, but deal with the country based on *our* reality. I think that the way the United States *can* deal with Sudan, might offer a model for the United States to deal with all the continent of Africa, and, maybe, a lot of the rest of the world.

One of the things that we have to stop doing, is going along with programs that allow for destabilization, that allow for food to be used as a weapon. We have to stop that: That's inhuman to do that. That *is* genocidal; and, if I can do nothing else but to speak out in that fashion, that is what I gained from that trip to Sudan.