

Garang stands exposed as the saboteur of peace in Sudan

by Muriel Mirak-Weissbach

The peace process in Sudan is beginning to bear a striking resemblance to the phenomenon of the same name in the Middle East: As negotiations continue, the truth begins to emerge, as to what party is sabotaging peace. The “Netanyahu” of the Sudanese situation, is John Garang, leader of the remaining rebel forces known as the Sudanese People’s Liberation Movement and Sudanese People’s Liberation Army (SPLM-SPLA). Garang, who has consistently refused to attend any direct negotiation with the government of Sudan, has depended on the same so-called “Christian fundamentalist” forces in Great Britain and the United States who have been feeding into confrontation in the Middle East.

Since the current government of Sudan relaunched a peace initiative, Garang has balked, on grounds that his demands were not being met. When, in 1996 and 1997, the government signed peace agreements with a majority of rebel factions, the texts included those points that Garang had insisted on, among them, self-determination for Southern Sudan through a referendum which would include the option of secession.

Not only were the demands accepted by the government, but the peace treaty of April 1997 was incorporated, part and parcel, into the draft of the Constitution, which, following approval by Parliament and by President Gen. Omar al-Bashir, was submitted to a plebiscite which is now taking place throughout the country. Thus, the entire population, including the exile community abroad, is being called to the polls to vote, not only for or against the Constitution, but for or against peace, on Garang’s terms.

At the same time, peace talks were convened. During May 4-6, just as the referendum was beginning, representatives of the government and of the SPLM-SPLA met in Nairobi, Kenya, under the aegis of the Inter-Governmental Authority on Development (IGAD), a group of neighboring countries. The meeting was chaired by Ambassador Ahmed Issa Gabobeh, representing the IGAD, and Dr. Kinfe Abraham, head of IGAD Political and Humanitarian Affairs. The government of Sudan sent a delegation led by the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Dr. Mustafa Osman Ismail, and the SPLM-SPLA delegation was led by Commander Nhial Deng Nhial, Governor of Bahr al Ghazal.

Although spokesmen from Khartoum had cautioned that it would be too much to expect a breakthrough in such a

short period of time, significant progress seemed to have been made, as the final communiqué was released on May 6. It stated that the parties had agreed to the referendum on self-determination, as well as to the facilitation of humanitarian aid to the civilian population, and to a cease-fire, which would render this possible.

Humanitarian aid, but no cease-fire

But, before celebrating this as a breakthrough, one has to read the fine print. There, it becomes evident that Garang’s forces, using the same methodology of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, have “interpreted” the terms to their liking.

In a background paper, the government of Sudan presented its updated position on the negotiations, which said that it “pledged to respond positively [to appeals] and accept a cease-fire and an immediate cessation of hostilities if the other party will reciprocate.” In the talks, according to the communiqué released by the IGAD ministerial subcommittee, “Without prejudice to the commitment” to facilitate the free and unimpeded flow of humanitarian assistance to all areas affected by the famine in South Sudan, the government of Sudan “offered a cease-fire and immediate cessation of hostilities and expects the other party to reciprocate.” The SPLM-SPLA, however, “is of the opinion that unhindered relief assistance to the needy, should not be linked to a cease-fire and believes that a cease-fire, which it welcomes in principle, be negotiated separately as per the [Declaration of Principles].” In other words, the Garang forces reject a cease-fire but demand humanitarian aid be made available, essentially to supply the forces under their control.

On self-determination, the government of Sudan called for the federal system, which has been a demand of the Southern Sudanese since 1947, and has been institutionalized by this government, to be given an opportunity to be fully implemented in the South. Following an interim period, already agreed to by all the other rebel forces, during which the South can be reconstructed and rehabilitated, and displaced persons can be repatriated, the referendum should be held, “by the people of South Sudan to determine their political destiny on the two options of unity or secession.” The government of Sudan stated further that this referendum should take place in the south, “with the boundaries of the

south as recognized since the independence of Sudan as of Jan. 1, 1956.”

Garang's new ploy

The SPLM-SPLA, which has been pursuing the war explicitly on the basis of its claims that self-determination had been denied, faced with the new situation, came up with a new map of what Southern Sudan is. “The people of Southern Sudan, Abyel, Southern Kordofan and Southern Blue Nile, shall, before the end of the Interim Period, exercise the right of self-determination through an internationally supervised and monitored referendum,” and opt for remaining part of a “single united Sudan” or “statehood, i.e. becoming a separate and sovereign state.” The interim period, for the SPLM-SPLA is to be of two years.

The significance of the SPLM-SPLA's rather original interpretation, is that in one fell swoop, the rebels have redrawn the map of the country, adding entire federal states to what is South Sudan. Not coincidentally, the “Greater Southern Sudan” they would like to claim and eventually have secede, contains the most oil, other precious minerals, and water supplies, in the country.

Finally, on the issue of state and religion, there was not even verbal agreement. This is due to the SPLM-SPLA's insistence that the “legal system . . . in place in Sudan prior

to September 1983 . . . be reinstated by the immediate repeal of *Sharia*-based enactments.” The rebels demand that the Islamic legal code (*Sharia*) be abolished, whereas the government of Sudan has stipulated, and all other rebel groups have agreed, that “religion, custom and consensus of the nation shall be the sources of legislation.” This means, as is spelled out in detail in the Constitution, that Islamic law would prevail only where there is a Muslim majority, and that, in the South, law would be based on custom. It is no wonder, therefore, that the SPLM-SPLA also rejected the Constitution out of hand, demanding that “all the remaining formal measures for adoption of such a Constitution ought to be terminated.”

The talks ended, thus, with an agreement to certain principles, such as self-determination, but with opposing interpretations. Where the sides did not find any common ground, they agreed to meet again, in an effort to thrash out their differences.

As was the case in the recent attempts to bring the Palestinian Authority and Israeli government to a summit, one important feature of the Sudanese talks, was that the war party, Garang's, was put with its back to the wall, and was exposed as the saboteur of peace. If the referendum on the Constitution in Sudan, secures, as is expected, a majority in its favor, this will place added pressure on the Sudanese Netanyahu, to face reality and come to terms with peace.

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