
Interview: Mahdi Ibrahim Mohamed

Sudan is entering a new era

Ambassador Mahdi Ibrahim Mohamed, the Sudanese ambassador to the United States, was interviewed by Linda de Hoyos on Jan. 7 by telephone in Khartoum, where he was recalled after the U.S. air bombing attack on the Al-Shifa pharmaceutical plant in Khartoum in August.

EIR: John Garang is coming to the United States and will be addressing a closed conference of the U.S. Institute for Peace. In September 1997, the Institute held a conference on Sudan, where Garang's backers here called for a full war against Khartoum by the United States. If you were able to address the U.S. Institute for Peace conference this time, what would you say about the war in southern Sudan?

Mahdi: It is important that the war in the south be perceived in its historical context. This war started when the British were there, and continued for four decades. There have only been ten years of peace in southern Sudan, from 1972 to 1982. So this war started well before this government in place came to power. It is not the responsibility of this government. Since this government assumed power [in 1989], it has taken very seriously the task of bringing the war to an end. The initial thrust of the government was to try to do that through negotiations. But unfortunately, at the time John Garang felt that he was supported by the then communist President of Ethiopia, Haile Miriam Mengistu, and his only way of addressing the issue with the government of Sudan was to use force. Because of that, he undermined all the serious attempts to negotiate faithfully and seriously with the government of Sudan. It is because of that, that the last ten years have witnessed a terrible suffering of the people of the south, and the people of the whole country.

The government continued with its efforts. After lengthy deliberations and wide discussion, the government established a federal system, which is already implemented. There are now 26 states with elected parliaments and elected governors. This is a major devolution of power.

We then went beyond the expectation of any sitting government in Africa to accept an internationally monitored referendum, to give the people of the south the right to decide what their choices are. The referendum allows the southerners to choose even secession, separation, if they want it.

So, this government has gone the extra mile to prepare the seed for ending the war. But unfortunately, what we witness

is that the U.S. administrations have continuously supported John Garang, a rebel who lost elections and who is still a hostage to foreign powers. The administration is supporting John Garang, who does not intend any real peace for the country. He fought the Numeiry government, the Swaredahab transitional government, the elected government of Sadiq al-Mahdi, and now the Beshir government. He has never compromised in negotiation with the government.

We believe that the United States has an important role to play. The United States is trying to pursue peace in different parts of the world—we see the United States' positive efforts in Bosnia, Kosovo, in Ireland, in the Middle East. If they are genuine in this pursuit of peace, they should take up the issue of peace in Sudan. I think peace in Sudan is very much within reach. Because the basic grievances of the people in the south have been resolved for the first time in our history—with the creation of the federal system and the agreement for a referendum that will allow secession if the people of the south so choose.

The government of Sudan is ready; it has participated in each and every negotiation, from Nairobi and Addis Ababa, all the way to Abuja and back to Nairobi. But we need the United States to demonstrate its seriousness for peace in Sudan by ending its provision of military hardware to the neighboring countries to instigate insurgencies against Sudan.

The United States is crucial to peace. That requires a new vision. The policy of the administration was designed to overthrow the government of Sudan, rather than to help the two parties reach an amicable agreement. I think it is high time for a change in the U.S. government's policy toward Sudan, and toward Africa generally. We know very well that fighting between Africans has destroyed the African continent. The divide and rule policy of the colonial powers should never be pursued by the U.S. administration. There is no way for Africa, and Sudan particularly, to establish peace and development in the absence of negotiated settlement. We think the time is ripe for that, and we hope the United States will come forward without bias to any party, to help this war come to an end.

EIR: My understanding is that the war was winding down in the first half of the 1990s. But in 1995, the war escalated

from the side of John Garang and his allies, particularly Uganda and Ethiopia and Eritrea. What has been accomplished by them militarily since that time?

Mahdi: Sudan used to have extremely positive relations with Ethiopia and Eritrea. But in 1995, we started to see a decline in the relations among our countries, because of the pressure that was mounted by the U.S. administration on these neighbors to distance themselves from Sudan, and to give their full support to the rebels and to the National Democratic Alliance opposition with the purpose of overthrowing the government of Sudan. As a result of that, these neighboring countries engaged with the rebels and the NDA in military attacks against Sudan all along our borders. This has been going on since then. The United States administration declared very openly that it is providing military hardware—they call it non-lethal, but we know it is beyond that—to these countries against the Sudan. Fortunately for Sudan, these invasions have all failed. Despite the support of the United States and the neighboring countries, the rebel movement has been pushed back in many areas in the south. All the important sites, citadels, and garrisons have been recaptured by the government and are still under its authority. It was not our purpose at all to engage in fighting to establish peace, but it was the other party, the rebels and the neighboring countries, who thought that the only way for John Garang to come to power was through force, by taking Khartoum militarily, or by at least taking [the city of] Juba in the south. But the net result of all the aggression and mobilization of neighboring countries and manipulation by the U.S. administration has come to complete failure. Garang has been trying to capture Juba since 1983, and particularly since this government assumed power in 1989. They have failed. Even Torit, Kapoetan, and Bor, which are extremely important places that John Garang, supported by the Ugandan and Eritrean armies, has been trying time after time to capture, remain in government control. Only small pockets along our border are still under rebel control. The country is basically intact. I assure you that the Sudanese as a people and a government, are not going to allow this negative effort to succeed. But we still stretch out our hand to see that a peaceful negotiation and settlement is ultimately reached.

I think this is a lesson itself to the neighboring countries and to the rebels, to the NDA, and to the U.S. administration—any attempt to overthrow a government by force is ultimately bound to either fail or to inflict untold suffering upon the people of the country. This is exactly what we see. The government is stable and it is moving forward in its reforming attitudes. But the people in the south are suffering tremendously from this war incited by the U.S. administration.

We are ready to establish a positive relationship with the neighboring countries. We have tried and succeeded considerably with Ethiopia. We hope that this will be pursued

by Eritrea and Uganda. As neighbors we gain a lot by cooperation and coordination, rather than hostilities and aggression.

EIR: Could you go into more detail on how the issues of distribution of power and wealth are corrected through the federal system now, and what other measures the government is taking to address the issue of economic disparity between north and south?

Madhi: The basic issues that constituted the grievances of our people in the south are the sharing of political power and distribution of wealth. They are the reason there was a war and why it has continued for the last four decades. The previous governments were not able to address adequately these issues. It is this government that addressed both issues by establishing a federal system, which devolves power and wealth to the ten states of the south.

We are also establishing a fund from the central government to help the southern states engage in a balanced development. We give them funds to expand the levels of development in these states of the south particularly. There are some states in western and eastern Sudan which are also poor and even less developed than the south, but they have been stable. But this fund is created purposely to address the imbalance in our development in the south because of the four decades of war, which hindered any programs of development. It is amazing that still John Garang is pursuing a policy that closes the south and puts it under extreme emergency conditions. Not only are schools and hospitals not being built, but those facilities and projects that existed were destroyed by the rebels. All the projects that were going on in the south when John Garang started the rebellion in 1983 were targeted. We are extremely conscious of the need to generate funds in order to provide the south with the necessary funds for its development.

If the war comes to an end, certainly the huge natural resources of the country can be managed in a manner which will provide the ten states of the south particularly, and the other states of the country, with the necessary funds that will help them to engage in programs of development, which the people of the south are desperately in need of.

All Sudan is not developed, actually, if we look at it objectively. All the country is underdeveloped. But in the south, it is more than underdeveloped because of the war. This is why we are establishing this fund to address the needs in particular of the people in the south.

EIR: There is oil that has never been developed in the south. Under conditions of peace, how would that oil be developed and utilized?

Madhi: We think Sudan is extremely rich in oil and we know that the U.S. administration is fully aware of that. There are many international companies, from Asia, from Europe, and from the Middle East, who want to develop our oil, and this

is a serious sign that there is enough oil in the country to help our development considerably. But we have also looked in detail to see what we can do with our oil, which is now extracted from southwestern Sudan. If peace prevails, then the other fields which are in the south can be also developed in a manner that will contribute remarkably to the development of the south particularly and to the development of the country as a whole. Sudan is a very big country and we have huge natural resources—oil, strategic minerals, arable land, forests, animal resources. We have huge resources, but the war is draining our resources on the one side, and prohibiting us from developing them. This is why the United States could play a very constructive role in establishing peace in Sudan. Then the American companies could come and join us in a partnership that would continue for decades, and this would benefit each side.

EIR: Would the oil revenues from the south, under conditions of peace, be utilized for the development of the south in particular?

Madhi: There are certain resources that are considered as national or federal in nature. We have established a council where the southern states are well represented, to see how we manage the resources in a manner that will apply the necessary funds to the most poor areas, so that ultimately there is a balanced development. This is a federal committee, but the south is well represented to ensure that ultimately the allocation of funds is fair and aids the less developed areas of the country to join the others.

EIR: John Garang constantly says that he cannot come to peace because of the Islamic shariat laws in Sudan. Could you explain the government's position on that?

Mahdi: When the first war in the south started in August 1955, when the British were still there, there was no issue of shariat law, because the British were ruling us the way they wanted to rule us. Even after the British left, there was no implementation of any shariat law and the war was continuing and raging across the country. It is not the shariat law that caused the war in the south. It was the issue of sharing the power and the question of balanced development that created this war. There are other elements that aggravated the situation, but these are the major issues. Within the federal system that we have developed, states have the right to exempt themselves from any laws that relate to shariat, theoretically. But practically, there is no implementation of shariat laws in the south whatsoever. So, theoretically we have a system that gives the states the right to establish the kind of laws they want, and practically, as I told you, the south is exempted from shariat law. This is now part of the agreement that has become part of the constitution, which is already now in implementation.

EIR: John Garang has never himself come to peace talks in

Nairobi. But if you were able to see him face to face, what would you say?

Mahdi: I would say to him that if the cause of the war was the demand for a federal system or a referendum that will give the southerners the right to secede, if these are the causes, these issues have been addressed adequately by this government. This agreement is now part of the constitution that was passed in a national referendum. So if this is the reason, please come back and join your people in trying to make sure that the referendum that is coming will be real and genuine and will give the people of the south what they choose. And if you are concerned about the people of the south particularly, and the people of Sudan generally, then you must know that the war waged in the last 15 years has caused tremendous suffering, particularly to the people of the south. If you are genuinely concerned about the people of the south, you have to stop this war immediately and engage the government seriously. We are ready to listen to whatever ideas you have to offer. But we don't think there is any reason for this war to continue, because it is only devastating the people of Sudan generally and the people of the south especially.

I would also tell him that it is important for you not to be part of the war of foreign forces. We feel that there is a foreign element in this war. It is not the war of the people of Sudan. It does not serve any people in Sudan, so we want him not to be hostage to foreign powers or an extension to foreign agendas, because they are not beneficial to the people of Sudan.

There is a very serious transition taking place in Sudan. Now we are on the threshold of legitimating our constitution, which is a historic development. It is the first constitution of the country that was discussed by an elective body, the National Assembly, and that was passed in a referendum by all the people of Sudan. This constitution guarantees all the freedoms of the press, religion, political ideas. This constitution enshrines multi-party democracy in the country. Yesterday seven parties registered themselves. So the country is open. We are a country of institutions; we are a country of a constitution; we are a country of law where freedom prevails, and the freedom of the press particularly. There are 15 newspapers privately owned which are expressing themselves freely.

We are on the threshold of a new era. By June of this year, our oil will go to the international markets from Sudan out along the Red Sea. We think that this is a very rare opportunity for the people of Sudan to see their history: peace, stability, development and the full use of their national resources and potentials. We hope that John Garang will come back, along with the parties who are now outside the country and are engaged in a process to overthrow the government by force. We see this as an opportunity for all of them to come back and to contribute to the peace, stability, and development of the country by establishing their parties and being part of an open competition in a bid for power.