RELIGIOUS PERSECUTION

Sounding the alarm on Sudan

Jane Lampman, Staff writer of The Christian Science Monitor, THURSDAY, MARCH 2, 200

The story has slipped from TV screens, but it remains by far the world's greatest humanitarian crisis. While attention focuses on Kosovo and Chechnya, the people of Sudan, Africa's largest country, struggle with an ethno-religious conflict that has spawned more war-related deaths (2 million) and a greater uprooting of people (5 million) than any other nation on earth. And thousands have been enslaved.

Since 1989, the population of Christians and traditional believers in the south has resisted imposition of Islamic law by a fundamentalist regime, whose goal has been "creation of an ethnically and religiously homogenous Sudan," in the words of a former UN official.

Now the new United States Commission on International Religious Freedom has made Sudan its first order of business with public hearings held earlier this month. Composed of religious leaders and legal and human rights experts, the commission advises the president and Congress on religious persecution in other countries and recommends US actions.

Sudan was one of five "countries of particular concern" named last fall in the State Department's first annual report on religious persecution abroad. Many, including the US House of Representatives, have termed this war "genocidal."

Daniel Eiffe, a representative of Norwegian People's Aid who has been on the front lines in Sudan for 13 years, told the commission: "For 10 years, I worked for justice and peace as a Catholic priest in South Africa.... The worst excesses of apartheid are like a tea party in comparison with the suffering Sudanese."

As relief agencies work to keep the people from starving, and some religious groups and US school children pursue a controversial campaign against slavery (purchasing slaves to free them), the war and political situation have simmered on the world's back burner. Those waving warning flags insist the US and other governments must take urgent action.

With neither side able to win the protracted war, a group of East African countries has been spearheading peace negotiations. But surging new oil revenues have given the Khartoum regime new life.

"The government supports Islamization and Arabization by any means," says Gaspar Biro, a former UN representative who dealt with the regime on human rights issues. Now "they have two choices: to fundamentally change their political agenda and proceed ... toward national reconciliation, or intensify the military efforts to crush the rebellion.” The current picture suggests the second scenario, he says.
The hearings come as American and Canadian religious and human rights groups are mounting a campaign to bring maximum pressure to bear on Khartoum. The commission itself has created a task force to study possible capital-market sanctions on firms that invest or do business in nations that severely violate religious freedoms.

While the Sudan conflict stems from a religious issue, it's not simply Islam versus other faiths. Adlan Abdelaziz, a Muslim who has been arrested and tortured three times, testifies to the religious intolerance of the National Islamic Front, the political party behind the regime. "The NIF considers itself, contrary to other Islamic orders, as having the better understanding of Islam," he says. "They are the new fascism of the century."

The regime's insistence on an Islamic state remains the prime stumbling block in the long-stalled peace talks, where its neighbors have been pushing for agreement on a secular government and on self-determination for the south.

Sen. Lois Wilson, Canada's special envoy on the peace process, says in a phone interview, "The more I look at the role of religion in this, I don't know whether it's possible to reconcile the two stances."

But she says the need is to work with fresh language and concepts. Since "secular" is a red flag to the regime, the effort should be not to remove religion altogether but get laws that reflect the religious beliefs of all citizens. And "self-determination," which the south thinks of as independence, could take a form similar to what aboriginal people have worked out with Canada.

For many, the only hope for keeping the regime at the peace table is economic pressure. Eric Reeves, a professor at Smith College, testified that the Greater Nile oil project - a joint venture of China, Sudan, Malaysia, and a Canadian energy firm - will generate $300 million to $400 million in annual revenues for Sudan. "This has clearly provided a profound disincentive for the Khartoum regime to negotiate a just peace." He also talked of evidence of Chinese military aid and logistical support for the war. "There is no other way to account for Khartoum's ability to conduct a war that has been repeatedly characterized as costing $1 million a day."

Meanwhile, the international community allocates $1 million a day in humanitarian aid. A major frustration for relief agencies has been the regime's practice of keeping some areas off bounds. The UN-directed Operation Lifeline Sudan only delivers to areas approved by Khartoum. But not all groups comply. Baroness Caroline Cox of the House of Lords in London has visited 25 times in her work with Christian Solidarity Worldwide. In prohibited areas, she says, "we have witnessed massacres on a huge scale, walked for miles among corpses, seen scorched-earth policy with systematic burning of homes, churches, mosques, shrines, clinics, schools, and crops."

"The status quo is morally unacceptable," says Roger Winter, executive director of the US Committee for Refugees. "The world should not tolerate a military and diplomatic stalemate in which an average of more than 60,000 people die each year."
The URL for this page is: http://www.csmonitor.com/durable/2000/03/02/fp18s1-csm.shtml