Religion inflames Sudan war

As civil conflict and famine grip the nation, Christians and other non-Muslims are singled out for persecution in the name of Islam

Tuesday, October 27 1998

By Mark O'Keefe of The Oregonian staff

AWEIL, Sudan -- Geng Kuack Athiang lost a childhood of playing in the trees with friends when soldiers on horseback stormed into his village and captured him. He says he was sent into slavery and given an Islamic name, Ahmed Khalil.

Achol Deng Ngong lost her innocence after a similar attack on another village separated her from her husband and child. As a slave, she says she became the concubine of a master who forced her to face Mecca and pray.

Peter Mayen Akot lost the church he helped build when soldiers scaled its roof and tore down a large cross that was the Roman Catholic community's most sacred symbol. Akot says he watched from a hiding place as the church went up in flames.

Such stories are common in the southern part of Africa's largest and poorest country, where persecution of Christians in the name of Islam has become a hallmark of a brutal civil war.

The Christians don't blame Islam, which, like Christianity, is by definition a peace-loving religion. But they do blame a northern military regime that has turned a decades-old conflict into a "holy war" targeting the black Christians of southern Sudan.

Roman Catholic Bishop Marcus Gassis says the extent of the persecution became evident to him five years ago, when he observed the bruised hands and feet of one of his lay religious leaders, Agostino el-Nur, a catechist who was then 45 years old.

Gassis says the symbolism was unmistakable.

"He was crucified for 24 hours in the Nuba Mountains," Gassis says. "He was not nailed but tied to a pole in the form of a cross, hands and arms outstretched. He was denied food, denied water and beaten with the butt of a gun."
The bishop saw the victim, who lived to tell of his ordeal, a few days after his torture. The bishop's reaction, he says, was, "When will our holocaust end?" In Sudan, the boundary between north and south has long been considered a dividing line between an Arab-Muslim culture and an African one that incorporates Christianity and tribal religions.

In the first half of this century, a colonial British government channeled Christian missionaries to the south while prohibiting Islamic proselytizing. The two sides have been at war almost continuously since the British left in 1956. An estimated 1.5 million people have died in the fighting.

Meanwhile, famine brought on by the conflict has killed or threatened more than a million people. Starvation took an estimated 250,000 lives in the late 1980s. No one knows how many lives have been lost in this year's famine, but at one point this summer, the United Nations estimated that 1.2 million were in danger of dying.

This is a war about culture, language, race, political systems and allocations of natural resources.

It is also, undeniably, about religion.

Scholar describes attacks on Christians as genocide Bona Mawal is an academic expert on African history and a consultant to the Sudan People's Liberation Army, the rebels of the south. He credits Christian nuns and priests with giving him and nearly all the learned people of southern Sudan an education.

Mawal, 60, has degrees in economics, journalism and international affairs. He has taught African history at Oxford University in England.

He says he has lost 19 brothers to the war.

"This is attempted genocide," he says. "It's an effort to wipe out an African group. That African group happens to be largely Christian, which makes their urge to commit genocide even stronger."

Mawal says it dismays him that more Americans don't see this. He and others watched an international outcry for blacks fighting apartheid in South Africa and are waiting for a similar protest on Sudan's behalf.
"We feel like we're marooned by other Christians in other places," says Aleu Akechak Jok, a former judge in the capital, Khartoum. He is now the liberation army official overseeing Aweil, a hard-hit county in the Bahr el-Ghazal region of southern Sudan.

Since 1993, the United States has considered Sudan -- along with such countries as Iraq, Iran and North Korea -- a state sponsor of terrorism. A congressional mandate forbids U.S. economic or military aid to such countries and imposes a variety of other sanctions. Although humanitarian aid, such as airlifts to famine-stricken areas, has not been cut off, the U.S. last year imposed an embargo forbidding most companies from trading with Sudan.

This month, the U.S. Congress passed a bill requiring the president to take action against countries that engage in a pattern of religious persecution. Because heavy sanctions are already in place against Sudan, it's unclear what additional action the president might take.

In 1983, the Arab government of northern Sudan instituted strict Islamic law in the entire country and included black Christians and other non-Muslims of the south in its decree.

Then came a 1992 fatwa, a religious decree that gave theological justification to the extermination of non-Muslims. Gaspar Biro, special investigator for the United Nations, says the northern government publicly supported this.

A northern political party -- the Umma Party, made up mostly of Muslims -- is aligning itself with the rebels of the south while accusing the government of distorting Islamic principles.

Mohammed Abdglrhman Salih, an Umma Party official, shakes his head as he inspects a southern Sudanese village recently attacked in the name of his religion. "They just talk about Islam to gain support from the Muslims in the north," Salih says. "We condemn this."

Abdullahi An-Naim, an expert in Islamic law from northern Sudan who now teaches at Emory University's law school in Atlanta, says: "To call it jihad does not make it jihad in Islamic terms." He says the use of the term doesn't meet either the classic military definition or the common usage of jihad, which for most Muslims means "struggle" or "effort" on behalf of Allah, and has nothing to do with war.
"Using the language of jihad is really a very devious practice that undermines the legitimacy of Islam itself," An-Naim says. "It's dishonest."

That may be true, Gassis says. But it doesn't negate the fact that Christianity and its followers have been singled out for destruction in the name of another religion.

"How can they say it's not a religious war when people speak of a 'holy war' against the 'infidels'?" Gassis says. "Who are the infidels? The Christians. Why do they target the churches? Why do they target the catechists? These people who say this isn't a religious war are senseless.

"It's religious persecution."

Christian group works to free 231 slaves In this civil war, slavery is a weapon.

One recent day in the village of Malual Kon, John Eibner and Gunnar Wiebalck of Christian Solidarity International address 231 slaves sitting under the shade of a fig tree in 100-degree heat.

Some are Christians. Some are animists, people who practice traditional African religions that assert everything in nature has a soul. Some sit wide-eyed and cross-legged. Others grind their knees into the dusty soil.

All are charcoal-skinned women and children from the Dinka tribe, obtained by an Arab trader willing to sell them to Christian white men for the right price.

Christian Solidarity International is a Swiss-based organization that 21 years ago began to highlight the persecution of Christians in the former Soviet Union. In recent years, the group's focus has been Sudan, where it says it has bought and freed more than 1,400 slaves.

The United Nations and human rights organizations have documented slavery in Sudan for years. The Sudanese government blames it on tribal disputes over which it has no control. Some doubt that the captives' fates amount to slavery.

In a 1995 report, Human Rights Watch/Africa agreed that the atrocities in Sudan don't fit every definition of slavery. But it asserts that it's nonetheless fair to call the victims slaves.
"They were taken as war booty," the reports says. "They ended up far from their villages of origin, performing unpaid household labor and herding animals; some were sexually abused by their masters."

Biro, the U.N. investigator, says that such enslavement is being "carried out by persons acting under the authority and with the tacit approval of the government of the Sudan" -- a judgment with which the U.S. State Department agrees.

Gassis also thinks that it's slavery and that it's widespread. He says what human rights organizations and media reports often have overlooked is the increasingly religious aspect.

"Slavery is now occurring in a holy war," Gassis says. "Anything they get from holy war is their property, including the human person. This is their interpretation of jihad."

Emancipated slaves urged to pray for those still in bondage The Arab trader sits in a rickety wooden chair, wearing a turban as vultures and herons circle overhead. He covers his face with sunglasses and a scarf to conceal his identity. He says if fellow Muslims from the north find out he is dealing slaves back to Christians, he's a dead man.

A baby boy, eyes closed, sucks on the shriveled right breast of his mother, who wears two beaded necklaces and a sad look. A shirtless and shoeless girl, no older than 5, sits on her knees, watching the cash transaction that shapes her future. Her head swivels from side to side as if she is watching a tennis match.

In the past, the trader received about 50,000 Sudanese pounds a person, the equivalent of about $73. He asks for more this time. His task, he says, is becoming more difficult.

He says sometimes he stole the slaves from their northern masters. Other times, he conspired with the masters' jealous wives to let concubines go. He says he had to buy some slaves outright, and they didn't come cheap.

But Eibner, sensitive to charges that buying slaves increases the market for them, doesn't budge.

"The one thing we cannot do is to increase the price," he tells the trader, who reluctantly agrees to take the equivalent of just less than $17,000, most of it in wads of tattered Sudanese bank notes, the rest of it in U.S. currency.
Eibner stands before the women and children and delivers a message, translated by a Dinka tribesman.

"You are all free now to go back to your homes, to your mothers, your fathers and your loved ones," Eibner says.

"But before you go, I just want to share a simple message with you. It's that there are many, many people who pray for you every day. They believe God is a loving God and cares about you. Please pray for them and for the remaining people that are in bondage, so they can come out of slavery soon."

The slaves show no emotion but clap politely when Eibner finishes his sermon. They slowly rise to return to their villages. Some have a walk of several days in front of them.

Catholic boy given new identity after capture as a slave Geng Kuack Athiang, 15, is on his way home.

His ordeal began three years ago, he says, when he and his friends, playing in the trees, heard machine guns. They scattered.

Athiang ran into three soldiers on horseback. Whether they were from the National Islamic Front or from a tribal militia group doing the army's bidding, Athiang does not know.

Athiang says he saw more than a dozen men older than 20 executed on the spot.

He also saw the skulls of children younger than 5 crushed with a tool the villagers normally used for pounding sorghum. Their screams, he says, still haunt him.

He says he saw about a dozen older boys amputated at the arm and leg by soldiers. A soldier put a knife to Athiang's left wrist and drew blood, says Athiang, who shows a 3-inch-long scar.

But another soldier protested, yelling, "Stop. This boy is too small."

When compared with people in accounts compiled by Christian Solidarity International and other human rights organizations, Athiang appears fortunate. He was taken into slavery and forced to look after cattle. His master rarely beat him, he says. And he wasn't forced to memorize the Koran and learn Islamic prayers, as many slaves are.
The Roman Catholic Athiang was, however, given an Islamic name, Ahmed Khalil. According to Paul Marshall, a Canadian scholar and expert on religious persecution, renaming slaves is a common practice that qualifies as persecution. "To change a name doesn't always mean too much in North America," says Marshall, who recently returned from Sudan. "But it does mean a lot in Africa. It would mean you're trying to force someone to identify themselves as a Muslim."

Bol Bol Makiew, 13, says he doesn't remember much of the day he was captured, but he does remember his master naming him Mohammed. He doesn't know where his parents are but says he thinks he was born in Bunkor, a two-mile walk from here.

When asked whether he is a Christian, Makiew touches his forehead, chest, left shoulder and right shoulder, making the sign of a cross he learned long ago from people he only vaguely remembers.

"My father was a Christian," he says. "My mother was a Christian. So I am a Christian."

Achol Deng Ngong, 30, also saw her Christianity as part of her identity, an identity that her captors tried to take away.

When told to face Mecca and pray five times a day, Ngong says she played dumb and refused to participate. But she says she couldn't refuse her master, who once stabbed her in the right shoulder when she tried to resist one of his late-night sexual advances.

"I am a Christian," she says. "All my family is Christian. I couldn't be forced to become a Muslim."

She bore two sons to her master, she says. They were given Muslim names, Bashir and Ali.

Some see link between Sudan's civil war and famine Famine is a man-made weapon of war in southern Sudan.

The problem is not the land. Southern Sudan has some of the most fertile soil in Africa, if only the people, displaced by attacks on their villages, could farm it.
The United Nations has been poised to fly in food, if only the government of the north would allow them. It's enough to drive David Kagunda, field program officer for the United Nations' Operation Lifeline Sudan, crazy.

Kagunda's job is to feed people, not save souls. But as he sees it, religion has as much to do with the starvation as anything.

In his office just across the Sudan border in Lokichokio, Kenya, Kagunda points to the hardest-hit area of Sudan, the vast Bahr el-Ghazal province, on a map on the wall.

The United Nations first wanted to send food in January, Kagunda says, when well-timed shipments could have averted a full-blown disaster. But the food stayed in warehouses in Kenya because the government in Khartoum denied all flights into Sudan.

By May, the government finally succumbed to international pressure and lifted the flight ban. Planes brought thousands of tons of sorghum, a staple in Sudan, to food stations mobbed by thousands of people. For some, it was too little, too late.

According to Kagunda, the delay potentially cost 450,000 lives, nearly all of them Christians and animists.

"We can't say people are being starved just because of religion," Kagunda says. "But if these were Muslims in the south, all these restrictions and denials of access to get food in just wouldn't be there. Everyone to them (the northern government) is an infidel."

Deng Ageny, 5, leans listlessly on his mother's lap under a tree in Bahr el-Ghazal. He is one in a crowd of 17,000 people, most of them displaced by recent attacks on their villages, making a massive, anxious circle around a C-130 Hercules cargo plane filled with food.

They wait for rations to be distributed.

Deng's mother, Nbuol Ageny, says she walked four days with her son to get here. Once they arrived, he took a turn for the worse.

Neither of them has eaten a full meal in 11 days, and she says Deng, his eyelids droopy, "isn't even eating the tree leaves now."
A Christian, Nbuol Ageny says the only thing she can do now is to stroke her son's hair and softly recite the Lord's Prayer, especially the part that says, "Give us this day our daily bread."

Soldiers destroy village's church, but congregation keeps worshipping Horse-riding bands of militias pour down from the north to attack not only the villages but also their churches.

It happened in Maper Giir, a sprawling village in the midst of some of the country's most fertile land. The village is just east of a railway that connects Khartoum, in the north, with the south's largest city, Wau.

The attack occurred April 4. More than 20,000 people were displaced in the raid, and 436 women and children were captured by northern troops and presumably taken into slavery, says the village's chief, John Aher Arol Aher.

But what struck Peter Mayen Akot, 22, and Samuel Akot Agok, 25, was what the troops did to the village's Catholic church, a thatched hut that was the area's spiritual center.

Akot and Agok are the church's catechists, teaching Bible lessons and directing a church choir in the absence of a priest. When they heard gunfire, they say they ran and hid in the bush, about 200 yards from the church.

From there, the catechists say they watched two soldiers scale the thatched roof, tear off the church's large cross and toss it to the ground. Another soldier then threw the cross into the sanctuary before lighting the entire structure on fire, they say.

Christian Solidarity International has documented similar treatment of Christian churches in other villages. Bishop Gassis has seen it, too.

"It is evident what's happening," Gassis says. "It's part of the persecution of Christians. They want to wipe out even any sign of Christianity from the land. The sign of Christianity is a building with a cross, known as a church. The destruction of the church is a statement that Christianity doesn't exist. It happens constantly."

Though charred pews are all that is left of their building, the children congregate there as Akot leads them, hands raised, in singing a hymn professing, "God gives us blessings." A boy keeps everyone in rhythm by banging a stick against the metal frame of a burned-out drum.
According to Akot, church attendance has increased since the attack, especially among the young people, even though services have to be held under trees. Akot says he is preparing scores of people to be baptized when a priest makes his annual visit to the area. He says some people will walk for two days or longer to receive Holy Communion.

"This has made people even more determined to be Christians," Akot says. "The church is even fuller now because of this persecution."

In southern Sudan, more people are becoming Christians, Akot and other church leaders say, even though the price of belief can be steep.

"Everyone knows that whenever they (northern soldiers) attack a village, the first people they go after are the church people, especially those who wear a cross," he says.

A wooden cross, with small nails where Christ's hands were pierced, dangle from Akot's neck. Why does he wear such a symbol if it puts him at greater risk? He laughs. The question is absurd.

"This," he says, "is a sign of my faith. This is what makes me different."