

Pope draws attention to non-Muslims' plight

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and amongst whom the Christian church is as well-established as Islam," reported Amnesty International last week.

"It appears ... that the authorities are implementing a program of military action directed at the mountain communities of the Nuba, which amounts to 'ethnic cleansing.' The aim appears to be to destroy the SPLA in the area by driving out the Nuba themselves," the report continued.

In September, 1992, the Sudan Council of Catholic Bishops and bishops from East Africa asked the Department of Social Development and World Peace of the United States Catholic Conference to publicize the ongoing persecution of non-Muslims in Sudan.

"Every single action of a non-Muslim is liable to be punished by secret security officers who are everywhere," the African bishops wrote, detailing several of the following instances of repressions of non-Muslims:

- The expulsion of foreign Christian missionaries and the persecution of public preachers; attempted confiscation of church land; arbitrary arrest and detention of priests and catechists in certain regions; and the harassment of religious and lay Catholics.

- The closure and destruction of churches, along with government refusal to issue building permits for new ones.

- Accusations in the government-controlled press that the church is anti-Islamic.

- Pressure applied to imprisoned non-Muslims to convert to Islam with the reward of being set free and given money; the requirement that government job applicants be Muslims; and the use of food aid in famine-stricken areas to promote Islam.

Despite attempts by the *Catholic Courier* to obtain a response from the

SUDAN:

A COUNTRY IN CRISIS

Sudanese embassy in Washington, D.C., no one was available to answer the church leaders' charges.

A U.S. congressman who recently returned from his third visit to southern Sudan said conditions are worsening and recommended four specific steps of action.

Rep. Frank Wolf, R-Va., also said that everywhere he went, "the issue of religious persecution came up."

"Conditions are worse today than they were before," Wolf told the *Arlington Catholic Herald*, newspaper of the Arlington diocese. "The situation must not be permitted to last. It need not last. There is much that can be done."

Wolf recommended:

- The Clinton administration pressure the Sudanese government to stop the bombing and killing.

- The Sudanese government stop persecuting Christians and violating human rights.

- Buffer zones be established in southern Sudan to protect refugees from government soldiers and allow relief agencies the freedom to administer food, medical supplies and humanitarian aid.

- Relief organizations be encouraged to return to the region.

Wolf's visit to southern Sudan coincided with the pope's Feb. 10 visit to the Sudanese capital, Khartoum.

Wolf pointed out that although Somalia has gotten most of the media attention in the last two years, more people have died in southern Sudan than in Somalia.

He also said that Catholic Relief Services, the U.S. bishops' overseas relief and development agency, is playing a "vital role" in distributing food supplies to three refugee camps in the

southern region.

Wolf, who visited Sudan in 1988 and 1989, described the southern region as a "no-man's land" of barren desert, bush and jungle. The displaced Sudanese are faced with a steady onslaught of disease, sickness, famine and war.

"Failure to act soon will surely result in still more tragic loss of life and possibly the loss of an entire culture," he said.

EDITORS' NOTE: This article contains reporting by staff writer Rob Cullinan.

The U.S. Catholic Conference has asked that letters of concern about the fate of Christians and non-Muslims in Sudan be sent to Ambassador Abdalla Ahmed Abdalla, Embassy of the Sudan, 2210 Massachusetts Ave. N.W., Washington, D.C. 20008.

The USCC also asks Catholics to write their congressional representatives and the U.S. Department of State, urging that the United States press the United Nations to condemn the Sudanese government's human rights violations.

Ethnic, religious tension rooted in Sudan's history

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south," noted the 1992 book *Sudan: a country study*, published by the Federal Research Division of the Library of Congress.

In particular, the book noted that Islam promoted the idea of a society whose individuals and state were unified under God's will. Indeed, to this day, this idea holds sway in many predominantly Muslim nations where a number of citizens believe in a total adherence to Islamic law in all temporal matters.

However, other Muslims prefer the rule of a secular, non-sectarian state, and such contrasting beliefs have often

clashed in such predominantly Muslim nations as Iran, and are currently contributing to increasing tensions between secularists and fundamentalist Muslims in Egypt.

Such contrasting beliefs have contributed to the strife bleeding Sudan, where fundamentalist Muslims have long struggled with their more liberal brethren over the direction the nation should take. Meanwhile, Sudanese Christians and other non-Muslims have consistently resisted being incorporated into any kind of a fundamentalist Islamic state.

Christianity re-emerged in Sudan in

the late 19th and early 20th centuries, when European and U.S. Protestant and Catholic missionaries came in to the country. By the 1930s, nearly 40,000 Sudanese had converted to Catholicism, particularly in southern regions where traditional non-Muslim religions had held sway.

British rule in the 20th century helped to lay ground for the current conflict between Muslims and non-Muslims in Sudan after the British treated southern Sudan completely separately from the North.

"The colonial administration also discouraged the spread of Islam (in the south), the practice of Arab customs, and the wearing of Arab dress," noted the authors of *Sudan: a country study*. "Finally, a 1930 directive stated that blacks in the southern provinces were to be considered a people distinct from Northern Muslims and that the region should be prepared for eventual integration with the British East African colonies."

Southern military units in Sudan mutinied in 1955, killing northerners in the area, and strife has marked the relations between the North and South since independence in 1956, according to *Sudan 1898-1989: The Unstable State*, by Peter Woodward. Much of the strife can be attributed to southern resentment of northern economic and political dominance of the nation, and to resistance of attempts to impose Islam on non-Muslims.

A guerrilla war took place between southern rebels and the government from 1962-72. The peace agreement signed at that time stipulated that Sudan's southern region had limited autonomy, and was heartily supported by Christian leaders who often served as mediators during the negotiations.

Unfortunately, civil war broke out again in 1983 over many of the same issues that have plagued Sudan's alternating civilian and military governments since its independence.

The central government, wary of the South's growing political power, attempted to divide the South into three regions. Further enraged by the imposition of *sharia*, or Islamic law, which created resentment among non-Muslims and secularized Muslims, southern Sudanese governmental opponents took to arms in civil war by year's end. That war still rages today.

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