

WORLD & NATION

Sudanese bishop pleads for awareness of conflict

By John Burge
Catholic News
Service

NEW YORK — Bishop Paride Taban of Torit, Sudan, feels as though the world has forgotten his country.

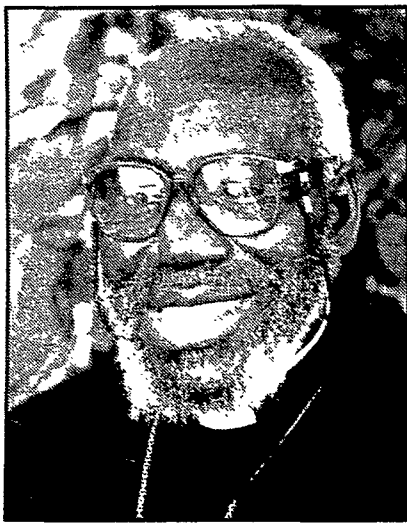
He has seen the United States, NATO and the United Nations respond to conflicts in Kuwait, Kosovo and East Timor but not to his northeast African nation that is suffering from a drawn-out civil war.

Civilian populations are bombed, Christians are enslaved and forced to convert to Islam, and the church is persecuted, he said, but hardly anyone pays attention.

"Without the efforts of the international community, South Africa would still be suffering," he told Catholic New York, newspaper of the Archdiocese of New York, and communism would still dominate the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. But there are few such efforts in regard to Sudan, he said.

"The worst thing is the bombing of poor, innocent civilians for many years, and nobody is taking action against it," he said.

Bishop Taban was in New York for most of January. He met Jan. 20 with the U.S. bishops' International Policy Committee in Washington, asking for a dele-



Nancy Wiechec/CNS

Bishop Paride Taban of Sudan

gation to visit Sudan.

"We want them to make regular visits so they know the plight of the people," he explained. "When they see their faces, they'll know what we're talking about, not just get secondhand messages." He also wants the bishops to talk to the U.S. government about the situation.

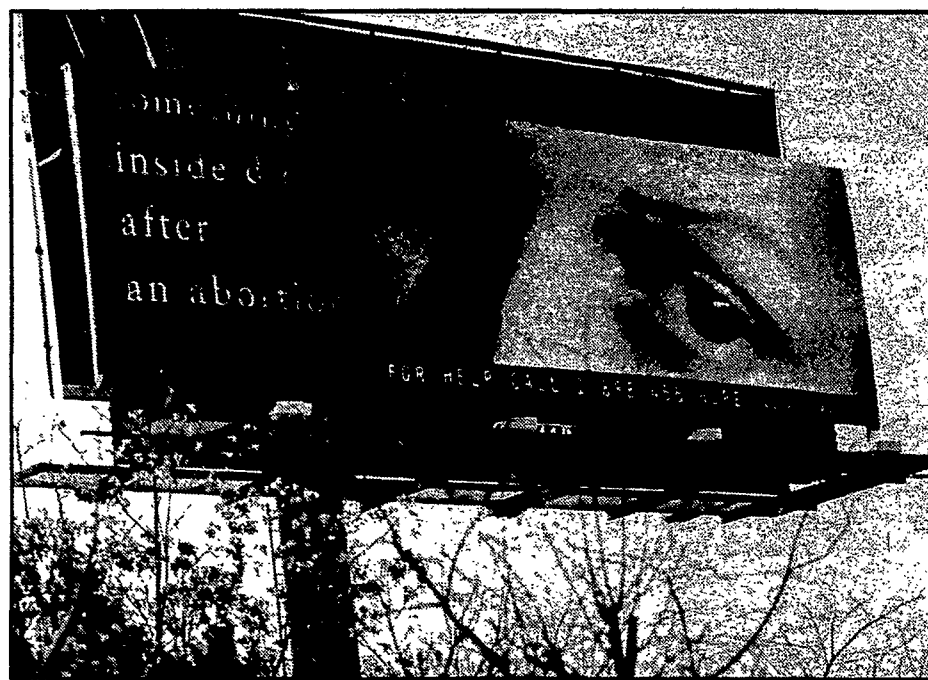
"The bishops are looking for ways to be in solidarity with the bishops in Sudan in support of respect for human rights and a just peace," Gerry

Powers, director of the bishops' International Office of Justice and Peace, told Catholic New York.

"We'll try to find new ways to raise awareness among Catholics in the U.S. ... about one of the worst conflicts in the world and some of the most egregious human rights violations and do what we can to encourage a constructive U.S. policy toward Sudan," he added.

The conflict between the Islamic fundamentalist government in Khartoum and rebel groups seeking more autonomy for the largely Christian and animist population in southern Sudan began in 1983, the year Islamic law was first imposed. Catholics make up about 8 percent of Sudan's 28 million population. Arab Muslims live in the North.

Famine and the war have claimed



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some 2 million lives. Bishop Taban said that only two American bishops have visited the country during the war: the late New York Auxiliary Bishop Emerson J. Moore, when he was an official with Catholic Relief Services, the overseas relief and development agency of the U.S. bishops; and Bishop John H. Ricard of Pensacola-Tallahassee, Fla., president and chairman of CRS, in 1998.

CRS has run programs in Sudan for many years.

Bishop Taban said that the government militia takes people, including many children, to concentration camps where they are indoctrinated into Islam.

"They can be sold anywhere," he said.

The bishop agrees with human rights groups in the United States who are pressuring city and state governments to divest themselves of shares in Talisman Energy, a Canadian company that pays the Sudanese government royalties to mine oil there.

"Pressure should be put on companies," he said, because the oil money is funding the war. Similar actions were successful in fighting apartheid in South Africa.

But Bishop Taban keeps the faith. "I survive because I see that my people are able to smile in their poverty," he said.



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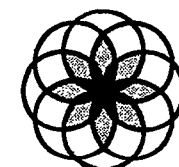
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