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Soldiers of Christ

The war in Sudan becomes a crusade. Here's why, as seen from the ground

By Tom Masland

NEWSWEEK INTERNATIONAL

April 9 issue — For the first time in seven months, a plane with supplies from the outside world stood on the guerrilla leader's dirt airstrip. The Americans had brought corn, soap, medicine and boxes of Bibles printed in the local language, Nuer.

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Leaders of the Sudan lobby, including several powerful senators, say an Islamic fundamentalist dictatorship in Khartoum enslaves and persecutes black Christians in the south—a charge Khartoum denies.

BUT WHAT MADE rebel commander Peter Gatdet happiest was the 440 pounds of salt. In the territory where the Sudanese People's Liberation Army operates—the swampy headwaters of the Nile, one of the world's most remote and primitive places—salt is a better currency than money.

AUDIO Newsweek On Air: Sudan's Suffering

The supply mission was like a covert operation. Over the next three days low-flying charter aircraft ferried in more than 20 tons of goods from the Kenyan border town of Lokichokio, 500 miles away. The pilots rushed for fear of Sudanese government bombers or helicopter gunships. But the Americans who carried off the op weren't U.S. spooks. They were in southern Sudan on behalf of a fundamentalist church from Orange County, California, called Calvary Chapel. The goal: to help people in Sudan's oilfields, driven from their villages by government forces to make way for foreign oil firms—a sinister new dynamic in the 18-year-old civil war. "We'll probably take some hits from people who'll say we're reckless or stirring up trouble," says senior pastor Gary Kusunoki, the soft-spoken leader of Safe Harbor International Relief, the church's missionary arm. But the ex-cop cites the Book of Timothy: "You therefore must endure hardship as a good soldier of Jesus Christ."

During a week in the hottest Sudanese war zone, I watched crusaders intent on thrusting Africa's biggest country onto America's map. The new Bush administration is under fierce assault from one of its most important constituencies, the Christian right. Leaders of the Sudan lobby, including several powerful senators, say an Islamic fundamentalist dictatorship in Khartoum enslaves and persecutes black Christians in the south—a charge Khartoum denies. They demand measures even tougher than Bill Clinton's to punish and isolate Khartoum for allegedly promoting terrorism and abusing its citizens. It's telling that one such group, Samaritan's Purse, is run by Franklin Graham, son of the Reverend Billy. It operates a hospital in guerrilla territory near the southern capital of Juba. Graham delivered the prayer at Bush's inauguration—and promptly afterward lobbied the new president for a tougher Sudan policy.



Human-rights and African-American groups are also pushing. They want to make Sudan the sort of cause that South Africa was in the 1980s, urging sanctions and disinvestment tactics that target Canadian, Chinese and Swedish companies working to develop Sudan's oil industry. Some threaten civil disobedience. Bush has ordered a thorough policy review. He may well announce a major peacemaking initiative before the month is out. Whatever he decides, Sudan is likely to become one of his more improbable foreign-policy priorities.

The new Sudan lobby isn't waiting for Washington, however. A growing "redemption" movement attacks slavery by buying back captives taken by Arab militias in the war zone, for cash. And Christian missionaries range far into the hinterlands, traveling without Sudanese visas in defiance of Khartoum, under the protection of the rebels. Khartoum denounces some of them as spies and gunrunners. Better-known relief groups such as Medecins sans Frontieres, also operate unilaterally in the south, without the government's permission and outside the umbrella of the decade-old United Nations relief effort, Operation Lifeline Sudan. The U.N. program can deploy resources only with Khartoum's approval—and Khartoum manipulates the rules, sometimes blocking humanitarian relief as a weapon of war.



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The United States takes no official position on freelancing Americans. But it can hardly complain. Washington has been increasing support for relief operations beyond the purview of Operation Lifeline Sudan. Last year the United States Agency for International Development provided \$17 million to groups that work in Sudan without Khartoum's

permission, about half the amount agencies under the U.N. program received from Washington. The main recipient is Norwegian People's Aid, an advocacy group described in a report commissioned by the Norwegian government as going "beyond the boundaries of what is generally considered humani-tarian practice."

The 12-man mission from Safe Harbor was intent on

getting aid to the hardest-hit areas. The California group has led about 50 missions into Sudan in the past four years, and it operates a clinic in northern Uganda near the Sudanese border. It has come a long way in a short time. The group's organizer-in-chief, Reverend Kusunoki, got into relief work when, shortly after retiring from the San Clemente Police Department as a lieutenant, he set up a system to deliver drinking water to victims of the Los Angeles earthquake. A mission to postgenocide Rwanda followed, and Sudan was the natural sequel. The group has spent about \$4 million on Sudan relief, with some of it contributed by an organization called the Sowing Circle Foundation. Kusunoki has adopted two orphaned girls in the upcountry town of Marial Bai, an area often victimized by Arab raiders, where the group supports local churches. He and others in the group also repeatedly have visited the rebel-held Nuba Mountains in northern Sudan, chartering in from Lokichokio.

This time the main mission was to document forced displacement of villagers from the oilfields. A damning report by the British charity Christian Aid last month had told of a scorched-earth policy in the region as the government extended oil exploration along a new road south of Bentiu, southern terminus of a 1,000km pipeline that began moving oil last year. But the study relied mainly on secondhand sources. The Safe Harbor team, traveling in small planes chartered from an American based in Lokichokio, quickly began gathering atrocity stories. NEWSWEEK went along.

In Alek, a provincial town retaken from the government by the rebels last summer, elders told of mass abductions by mercenary Arab militias that range south along a railway. "They take the cattle, they take the children and they kill the others," said Chief Edward Nyang, 62. He added: "Now oil has become a weapon used against us." Kusunoki told the group, "I have a message for you from God, and it is that you have not been forgotten." Hungry people were arriving daily in the rebel stronghold from villages to the east, near the oil road, after trekking overland for as much as 10 days. "On Feb. 6 they came to our village and started shooting," said Zakaria Jiech, 24, who had led a group of 14 teenagers to the makeshift refugee camp. "The population was around 3,000—now it's a no man's land."

To know more, the Safe Harbor missionaries had to get closer. A top rebel intelligence official set up a meeting with a key commander in the swampy territory that stretches southwest of the government's oil complex at Bentiu. With the official aboard, the team nervously put down in a riverside village called Bouth. It was there that Commander Gatdet received his gift of salt, and boasted of his victories against government

troops. His men had shot down three helicopter gunships using RPG rockets and had driven off a Canadian prospecting team, killing two members, he said. Gatdet then boarded the plane for a brief tour of the front.

Nothing was left of the town of Nialdiu, just a three-hour walk from positions within mortar range of the oil center. It was burned out in fighting on March 5, witnesses said. Dozens of other villages visible from the air also lay in ashes, deserted. Some 20,000 refugees were living under rebel protection. Kusunoki ordered another, bigger plane to be brought up the next day. The team set up tents a few hundred yards beyond the airstrip. Not far away lay the skeletal remains of a man in the burned-out shell of a reed hut. That night the rebels killed a goat in honor of their visitors and served it with fried chunks of a big Nile perch naked boys had caught in the river. The team spent a restless night in the sweltering heat. After midnight heavy machine guns opened up to the west, where the rebels were besieging the government garrison.

Staying in the base was risky, bordering on reckless. A government bomber could have arrived at any time, and the group had no protection. But Kusunoki wanted to conduct a food distribution and preach to the refugees. In the end, hardly anyone showed up, and he had to leave the supplies with the rebels. Commander Gatdet agreed to keep 25 percent of the food and distribute the rest to the needy. Kusunoki settled for addressing a small group of people, obviously malnourished, who had been drawn in from the bush by the promise of food. "We know the SPLA is working hard to protect you," he said. "When we come to bring food, our food goes to everybody, because everybody needs to eat. Please tell all your people that this was a gift from Jesus Christ."

Is this the way to relieve Sudan's suffering? In Nairobi, a senior official of UNICEF, one of the main U.N. relief agencies in Sudan, suggested that such freelancers simply become the willing tools of the SPLA.

And he blames the rebel group for the theft of food that could have saved tens of thousands of lives during a wholesale famine two years ago. But such criticism may never reach Washington. Last week, days after returning from Sudan, Kusunoki told a U.S. congressional committee that Washington should declare a no-fly zone for Sudanese-government aircraft in southern Sudan. Groups like his should get U.S. funds, he told the committee: "I cannot sit silently, because I have seen firsthand the horrors done by this country that sanctions slavery and genocide." Clearly, a new administration is likely to listen carefully.