



MISREPORTING SUDAN:

LINDA SLOBODAIN,
WAR CRIMINALS
AND
ISLAMOPHOBES

THE EUROPEAN-SUDANESE
PUBLIC AFFAIRS
COUNCIL

17 Bedford Square,
London WC1B 3JA ENGLAND

Telephone: 020 7872 5434

Telefax: 020 77 53 2824

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WORKING FOR PEACE IN SUDAN

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In March 2000 the Sun Media group of Canadian newspapers published several articles by Linda Slobodian, with titles such as 'Slaughter of the Innocents'.¹ Ms Slobodian has written on Sudanese affairs for several years for the **Calgary Sun**. Her track record with regard to objectivity and her judgement with regard to Sudan, however, are questionable. Reporting on Sudan, as with any war and particularly civil war, needs objective, professional journalism. Ms Slobodian's reporting simply does not come up to scratch. Her willing association with the southern rebel movement, the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA), an organisation responsible for horrendous human rights abuse, and with others who have an unambiguously Islamophobic agenda, further undermines the credibility of her reporting from Sudan. She has shown a remarkable selectivity in picking and choosing the human rights she is concerned about.

Ms Slobodian's track record on Sudan is a poor one. In 1997, the **Calgary Sun** published her eight-part special report entitled 'The Slave Trail'.² These articles claimed that the Sudanese government were complicit in "slave raiding" in Sudan. The articles also claimed to document a large-scale "redemption" of southern Sudanese "slaves". Ms Slobodian spoke of purchasing these "slaves" from "Arab slave traders".³ As Ms Slobodian freely admits, her trip was arranged by Christian Solidarity International (CSI).

Ms Slobodian handed US\$ 2000 over to the SPLA, claiming that the money helped to "redeem 20 slaves".⁴ The claims Ms Slobodian made in this eight-part series, of slavery and of large scale "slave redemption", can now be clearly assessed against an objective source, the report by John Harker into human rights abuses in Sudan, a report commissioned by the Canadian government. Significantly, Ms Slobodian appears to accept the veracity of the Harker Report, citing it as a source in one of her articles.⁵

The Harker report, **Human Security in Sudan: The Report of a Canadian Assessment Mission**, was published in February 2000. One of the two missions with which John Harker was specifically tasked was to "independently investigate... allegations of slavery and slavery-like practices in Sudan."⁶ While Harker was critical of many human rights abuses in Sudan, he clearly questioned the credibility of large-scale "slave redemptions" as arranged by groups such as CSI:

[R]eports, especially from CSI, about very large numbers were questioned, and frankly not accepted. Mention was also made to us of evidence that the SPLA were involved in "recycling" abductees... Serious anti-abduction activists... cannot relate the claimed redemptions to what they know of the reality.

The Harker Report also detailed how fraudulent "slave redemptions" were being used to raise money for the SPLA, money which he also stated is used to purchase arms and ammunition.

Several informants reported various scenarios involving staged redemptions. In some cases, SPLM officials are allegedly involved in arranging these exchanges, dressing up as Arab slave traders, with profits being used to support the SPLM/A, buy weapons and ammunition...

The Harker Report documented the deliberately fraudulent nature of many "slave redemptions".

Sometimes a "redeeming group" may be innocently misled, but other groups may be actively committed to fundraising for the SPLM/A & deliberately use "slave redemption" as a successful tactic for attracting Western donors.

We did speak with an eyewitness who can confirm observing a staged redemption and this testimony conformed with other reports we had from a variety of credible sources. The "redeeming

¹ See, for example, 'The Forgotten Ones', **Calgary Sun**, 2 March, 2000; 'Truth Seen in the Eyes of Survivors', **Calgary Sun**, 5 March, 2000; 'Slaughter of the Innocents', **London Free Press**, 5 March, 2000; 'Fight for Survival', **Calgary Sun**, 6 March, 2000; 'Defying Odds', **Calgary Sun**, 7 March, 2000; 'No Excuses for Bombing', **Calgary Sun**, 7 March, 2000.

² See 'The Slave Trail: An Eight-Part Special Report: Humanity For Sale', **Calgary Sun**, <http://www.canoe.ca/SlaveTrail/home.html>

³ 'The Slave Trail: An Eight-Part Special Report: Mission Possible', **Calgary Sun**, <http://www.canoe.ca/SlaveTrail/part2.html>

⁴ 'The Slave Trail: An Eight-Part Special Report: Freedom', **Calgary Sun**, <http://www.canoe.ca/SlaveTrail/part3.html>

⁵ 'Fight for Survival', **Calgary Sun**, 6 March, 2000.

⁶ John Harker, **Human Security in Sudan: The Report of a Canadian Assessment Mission**, Prepared for the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Ottawa, January 2000, available at <http://www.dfait-maeci.gc-foreignp-3110186-e.pdf>, p. 1.

group knew they were buying back children who had not been abducted or enslaved. The exchange was conducted in the presence of armed SPLA guards. The “Arab” middle man/trader delivering the children for “redemption” was recognized as a member of the local community even though he was dressed up in traditional Arab costume for the event.⁷

It is a matter of record that the “slave redemption” exercise that Linda Slobodian and the **Calgary Sun** were party to saw US\$ 20,750 handed over to SPLA officials.⁸ The bulk of this payment came from the Canadian Crossroads Christian organisation. It is now evident that it is very possible that the US\$ 2000 provided by the **Calgary Sun** for “redeeming slaves” went towards buying arms and ammunition for the Sudan People’s Liberation Army. The SPLA is headed by John Garang, a man the **New York Times** stated is one of Sudan’s “pre-eminent war criminals”.⁹ The money handed over by Ms Slobodian and the **Calgary Sun** may have thus helped sustain one of Africa’s bloodiest conflicts.

Furthermore, Ms Slobodian’s claims of “Arab slave traders” and that “slavery” was a government policy have disturbing implications. Anti-Slavery International, the world’s oldest human rights organisation, in a submission to the United Nations Commission on Human Rights in Geneva, stated that:

There is a danger that wrangling over slavery can distract us from abuses which are actually part of government policy - which we do not believe slavery to be. Unless accurately reported, the issue can become a tool for indiscriminate and wholly undeserved prejudice against Arabs and Muslims. *[We] are worried that some media reports of “slave markets”, stocked by Arab slave traders - which [we] consider distort reality - fuel such prejudice.*¹⁰ (emphasis added)

Anti-Slavery International has also stated that: “the charge that government troops engage in raids for the purpose of seizing slaves is not backed by the evidence”.¹¹ Additionally, the respected human rights expert, and Sudan specialist, Alex de Waal, while co-director of the human rights group African Rights, cited CSI in warning about “overeager or misinformed human rights advocates in Europe and the US [who play] upon lazy assumptions to raise public outrage”. He has also stated that “there is no evidence for centrally-organized, government-directed slave raiding or slave trade.”¹²

Given these comments by reputable human rights activists, Ms Slobodian’s reporting therefore may be said to distort reality and fuel prejudice against Arabs and Muslims. It is for the reader to decide whether she has also been “overeager and misinformed”. On the issue of Islamophobia, Ms Slobodian also chooses her Sudan companions and sources of information unwisely. As she admits in a recent article, she travelled into the Nuba mountains with Derek Hammond of the South African-based Faith-in-Action organisation.¹³ That Hammond is an Islamophobe is clear: his website overtly champions the “Christian” fight against “the evil of Islam”. He also refers to the “anti-Christian religion of Islam”.¹⁴

For someone who wears her heart on her sleeve with regard to human rights abuses in Sudan as passionately as Ms Slobodian, she seems to be remarkably selective about those abuses that are of interest to her. Human Rights Watch, no friend of Khartoum, has stated with regard to her SPLA friends that “The SPLA has a history of gross abuses of human rights and has not made any effort to establish accountability. Its abuses today remain serious.”¹⁵

The **Economist** also summed up the general image of the SPLA when it stated that:

[The SPLA] has... been little more than an armed gang of Dinkas... killing, looting and raping. Its indifference, almost animosity, towards the people it was supposed to be “liberating” was all too clear.¹⁶

The **New York Times**, another vigorous critic of the Sudanese government, states that the SPLA “have behaved like an occupying army, killing, raping and pillaging.”¹⁷ Ms Slobodian prefers to refer to SPLA “liberated areas”.¹⁸

⁷ Ibid, pp.39-40.

⁸ The ‘Slave Trail: An Eight-Part Special Report: Sellers of Souls’, **Calgary Sun**, <http://www.canoe.ca/SlaveTrail/part5.html>

⁹ ‘Misguided Relief to Sudan’, Editorial, **New York Times**, 6 December, 1999.

¹⁰ The reference number of this submission to the United Nations Commission on Human Rights is TS/S/4/97, and is available to view on the Anti-Slavery International web-site at <http://www.charitynet.org/asi/submit5.htm>

¹¹ **Slavery in Sudan**, Anti-Slavery International and Sudan Update, London, May 1997, p.20.

¹² Alex de Waal, ‘Sudan: Social Engineering, Slavery and War’, in **Covert Action Quarterly**, Spring 1997.

¹³ ‘Slaughter of the Innocents’, The **London Free Press**, 5 March, 2000.

¹⁴ ‘African Christian Faith in Action’, http://www.liaafrica.org/sudan_articles/persecuted_church_of_sudan.htm

¹⁵ ‘Rights Group Warns US Against Feeding Sudan Rebels’, News Article by Reuters on 14 December, 1999 at 11:34:40.

¹⁶ **The Economist**, March 1998.

The SPLA's involvement in war crimes is all too evident. United Nations Special Rapporteur on human rights in Sudan, for example, documented an incident in which John Garang's SPLA forces attacked two villages in Ganyiel region in southern Sudan. SPLA personnel killed 210 villagers, of whom 30 were men, 53 were women and 127 were children. The Special Rapporteur stated that:

Eyewitnesses reported that some of the victims, mostly women, children and the elderly, were caught while trying to escape and killed with spears and pangas. M.N., a member of the World Food Programme relief committee at Panyajor, lost four of her five children (aged 8-15 years). The youngest child was thrown into the fire after being shot. D.K. witnessed three women with their babies being caught. Two of the women were shot and one was killed with a panga. Their babies were all killed with pangas. A total of 1, 987 households were reported destroyed and looted and 3, 500 cattle were taken.¹⁹

In her article 'Slaughter of the Innocents', Ms Slobodian refers to the tragic death of fourteen children in a bombing incident in the Nuba mountains. The Sudanese government have stated that the bombing was a regrettable mistake.²⁰ What cannot be described as anything other than deliberate is the SPLA's premeditated burning, spearing, shooting and chopping to death of 127 southern Sudanese children. Ms Slobodian does not appear to be concerned about these children. If, as she claims, the deaths of 14 children in a bombing raid constitutes "nothing less than a war crime against children", how much more so does the deliberate butchering of 127 children? Yet on these and other murders of children, Ms Slobodian is silent.

The above incident was also not an isolated incident. It is but one of many similar instances of gross human rights abuses involving civilians and children. Amnesty International, for example, recorded an incident in which SPLA forces lined up 32 women from the village of Pagau, 12 kilometres from Ayod in southern Sudan, and then shot each once in the head. Eighteen children were reported to have been locked in a hut which was then set on fire. Three children who attempted to escape were then shot. The rest burnt to death. In Paiyoi, an area north-east of Ayod, Amnesty International reported that 36 women were burnt to death in a cattle byre. Nine others were clubbed to death by the SPLA.²¹ Amnesty reported that in April 1993, SPLA forces "massacred about 200 Nuer villagers, many of them children, in villages around the town of Ayod. Some of the victims were shut in huts and burnt to death. Others were shot."²² SPLA ethnic cleansing continues to this day. Throughout 1999, for example, the BBC and other reliable sources, reported on SPLA violence towards non-Dinka ethnic groups, groups which "accused the SPLA of becoming an army of occupation".²³ These examples are but a tiny fraction of the many war crimes against civilians carried out by the SPLA. In **Civilian Devastation: Abuses by all Parties in the War in Southern Sudan**, a 279-page study, for example, Human Rights Watch devoted 169 pages to SPLA human rights abuses (government violations were dealt with over 52 pages).

These then are the people providing Ms Slobodian with her "information" on Sudan. These are Ms Slobodian's "liberators". Ms Slobodian's over-identification with the SPLA is clear. She even went so far as to liken one SPLA gunmen to a saint: he was "St Paul to me".²⁴

The evidence is sadly all too clear. Ms Slobodian has, at best, been "misled" by those with whom she visits Sudan. It is obvious that she continues to be misled. She, in turn, misleads her readers. While this may make for good propaganda, it does not make for good journalism. She has surrounded herself with gunmen who by her own definition qualify as war criminals; with people such as Baroness Cox who have been described by respected human rights activists as "overeager and misinformed"; and with Islamophobes such as Derek Hammond. She has shown an all-too-transparent hypocrisy and double standard with regard to her professed concern about human rights.

Canadians deserve better reporting on Sudan than the selectively passionate, misinformed and overeager articles written by Ms Slobodian. The Sudanese conflict has already been dogged by far too much partisan propaganda. While such journalism may mislead Canadian readers, it is overshadowed by attempts by the international community and the Sudanese people to achieve a lasting resolution to their conflict.

¹⁷ 'Misguided Relief to Sudan', Editorial, **New York Times**, 6 December, 1999.

¹⁸ See, for example, her article 'Defying Odds', **Calgary Sun**, 7 March, 2000.

¹⁹ **Situation of Human Rights in the Sudan**, UN Special Rapporteur Gaspar Biro, E/CN.4/1996/62, 20 February 1996.

²⁰ 'Sudan Says it May Have Hit Civilians Inadvertently', News Article by Agence France Presse on 14 February, 2000 at 14:25:49.

²¹ **Sudan: The Ravages of War: Political Killings and Humanitarian Disaster**, Amnesty International, London, AI Index: AFR 54/29/93, 29 September 1993, p.25.

²² **Amnesty International Report 1994**, Amnesty International, London, 1994, p.275.

²³ See, for example, 'Growing Friction in Rebel-Held Southern Sudan', News Article by BBC Online on 9 June, 1999 at 16:36 GMT.

²⁴ The 'Slave Trail: An Eight-Part Special Report: Mission Possible', **Calgary Sun**, <http://www.canoe.ca/SlaveTrail/part2.html>