

## **An Interview with John Garlang, Commander of the Sudanese People's Liberation Army**

By Ed Badolato, Executive Director of the IACSP

**Introduction.** During his recent visit to Washington, I had the opportunity to interview John Garlang, the political and military leader of the Sudanese Peoples Liberation Army (SPLA). Based on our operational experience in Africa, and after reading the interview, I think our readers will agree that Garlang is definitely someone they should keep an eye on, as well as someone that they should learn more about.

John Garlang received both his undergraduate degree and his Ph.D. in the US. Prior to 1983, he was a career officer in the Sudanese army, and attended military courses in the US. He is a member of the Christian Dinka tribe of Southern Sudan. In 1983 as a LtCol in the Sudanese Army, he led the revolt against the Khartoum regime, and has been fighting against the Islamic fundamentalists for over 16 years.

**Background on Sudan and the current situation.** Sudan is an interesting country, but not very well known in the US. It gained its independence from the UK in 1956, and the current regime, led by General Omar Hassan Ahmed Bashir, came to power in 1989 after a coup overthrew a traditional coalition government. General Bashir immediately formed a Revolutionary Command Council to govern the country, and in a typical autocratic manner suspended the constitution, dissolved the National Assembly, and banned all political parties and trade unions. Subsequent puppet organizations have been set up to operate the government.

The main political arm of the Sudanese government is the National Islamic Front (NIF), a fundamentalist Islamic organization which is pushing for the establishment of a totalitarian regime with Islamic law (Shari'a) throughout Sudan, even though the majority of Sudan's population is non-Muslim. Sudan's minority Arab Muslims control commerce, politics and the national security apparatus. The ideological "guru" of Sudan's Islamic extremist movement is Dr. Hassan al Turabi, the Speaker of the Sudanese Parliament, who is also considered to be the *de facto* leader of Sudan and a radical Arab extremist.

Sudan has been constantly in a state of civil war since 1983, and the primary opposition to the government's 118,000-man army is the SPLA led by John Garang. SPLA forces, along with six other exiled northern opposition groups make up the National Democratic Alliance (NDA), which is composed of the Umma Party, the Democratic Unionist Party, the Beja Congress, the New Sudan Brigade, the Sudan Federal Party, and the Legitimate Command. SPLA military operations have evolved from early reliance on hit and run tactics--ambushes of military convoys, assaults on police stations, and attacks on small army posts. They now conduct successful full-scale military operations, capturing key towns and provincial capitals. Presently the SPLA controls almost half of Sudan.

The US State Department includes Sudan on its list of seven countries that sponsor terrorism. Both Egypt and Ethiopia have accused Sudan of harboring the terrorists who attempted the 1995 assassination of President Mubarak in Ethiopia in. The UN Security Council has officially accused Sudan of supporting terrorism in its UN Resolution 1044, and in 1996 the UN imposed diplomatic sanctions. Also in 1996, the US withdrew all diplomatic personnel from Sudan because of concerns for their safety. On August 20, 1998, two weeks after the bombings of the US embassies in Nairobi, Kenya, and Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, US air forces attacked a suspected chemical weapons

facility near Khartoum. The suspected perpetrator of the embassy bombings, Osama bin Laden, had resided in Sudan for several years and was suspected of terrorist links to the Sudanese government.

Sudan has a weak and debt-ridden economy, but recent oil production looks as if it will provide a major source of cash to the government. The emerging oil production is causing international investors to beat a path to Sudan's door. Major discoveries from the Heglig and Unity fields alone are estimated at 660 million to 1.2 billion barrels of recoverable oil--worth about 40 billion dollars. The oil fields generally lie in southern Sudan but are controlled by the central government in the north. The Sudanese regime's refusal to give the south a say in the development of the fields was one of the original causes of Sudan's 16-year civil war.

The oil is being produced by a consortium called the Greater Nile Petroleum Operating Company, composed of the Sudanese national oil company, a Canadian firm, a Malaysian firm, and the largest player--the Chinese National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC). In August 1999, the oil began flowing to an export terminal at Port Sudan on the Red Sea by a 1500-km pipeline, the longest in Africa.

There are reports that the Sudanese regime has forcibly and violently removed populations from the oil producing regions to make the oil fields more secure for foreign companies. On September 19, 1999 the pipeline was bombed at Atabara in Northeast Sudan, causing a two day disruption of shipments. Responsibility for the attack was taken by the NDA, specifically the military wing of the Umma Party. Needless to say, the pipeline and Sudan's new wealth will be very vulnerable to pipeline sabotage.

Of longer term interest to the US is the attempt by Beijing to forge a strategic alliance with Sudan built around the purchase of oil. CNPC is reported to have invested over \$2 billion in the Sudan oil project as a hedge against China's severe future oil shortfall which is projected to take place over the next decade. The CNPC effort in Sudan is to be financed by a multi-billion dollar initial public offering on the New York Stock Exchange. Rep. Frank Wolf, R-VA, has strongly fought the underwriting of a rogue state's economy by US investors, saying that he was opposed to "propping up a regime engaged in slavery, genocide, and terrorism".

It is probable that Sudan will use the oil profits obtained from its Chinese and Canadian oil partners to purchase arms and prolong the war. Hassan al Turabi was quoted as saying that oil revenues would be used to finance new factories to produce tanks and missiles. There are also some reports that China is actually paying Sudan for its oil purchases with weapons. It appears to be a bad situation, including Sudan's terrorist activities, underwritten by US investors.

*The following are the comments of John Garland obtained during his Washington interview:*

**Question: What is the strategic importance of Sudan to the US?**

John Garland: Sudan is unique in that it is the largest country in Africa with two and a half million square kilometers of territory and a population of 35 million people. It has a heterogeneous multi-racial, multi-cultural, multi-religious population that the current Islamic fundamentalist government has been attempting to forcefully turn into a totally Muslim state. We have fought two wars to resist this Islamic domination. The majority of Sudan's population (60%) is African, and 30% is Muslim.

Sudan is important to regional stability because of its strategic location--it borders on nine African countries: Egypt, Libya, Chad, the Central African Republic, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Uganda, Kenya, Eritrea, and Ethiopia. It also straddles the waters of the upper Nile, and has a critical position on the Red Sea. It is truly placed in the "heart of Africa."

The Khartoum government is attempting to use its strategic position to recruit, train and export radical Islamic fundamentalism to its neighboring states, in particular Eritrea, Ethiopia, Somalia, Kenya, Uganda, Congo, and Chad.

Also, significant oil deposits have recently been developed in Sudan that adds to its strategic significance and permits the Khartoum government to use the oil profits to exploit its Islamic fundamentalist agenda. Hassan al Turabi has said many times that they depend on oil and Allah to help them defeat us.

**Question: Compare your operations with those of the Khartoum government.**

John Garland: When the Islamic fundamentalist government initially took over power, they established a policy of using Sudan as a base from which they could expand their power and operations in Africa. Their methods of accomplishing this are very sophisticated and very brutal. The Khartoum regime is at war with its own people. More Sudanese people have been killed by the NIF government than in the Bosnian, Rwandan, and Somalian wars combined. We have had over had over two million Sudanese killed, 90 percent of them innocent civilians, four million displaced people, thousands of enslaved women and children, and two million currently needing food aid.

The Khartoum government is attempting to eliminate the Christians, as well as other African religions, and even the moderate Muslims through two methods: physical elimination and assimilation. The physical elimination, similar to the ethnic cleansing used in other countries, is a particular problem in the oil producing areas of Sudan where entire village populations are bombed and destroyed. In 1992, the Sudan government (NIF) declared "Jihad" against the people of Southern Sudan and Nuba Mountains. Khartoum's assimilation policy for the African majority is designed to eventually transform the Arab minority into a majority status. Some methods include the forced abduction and indoctrination of African children and their conversion to Islam. The Islamic fundamentalist government has a vision of establishing Islam throughout Africa. However, this policy has little popular support among most of the Sudanese people.

Right now the SPLA has 70,000 men under arms with combat operations on six fronts--three in the South and three in the North. We are currently able to hold our own, and the central government forces are unable to defeat us. For example, last year there were some significant military operations where after three months of fighting, we captured 41 officers, including their Commanding General, killed 2,000 troops and wounded 3,000. We also captured 38 pieces of 120mm artillery, 92 122mm mortars, and 108 machineguns. Because of successful operations like this, we now control 40% of Sudan's territory.

However, with their increasing oil income, Khartoum can afford to sit out the situation, build up their military, and wait for better opportunities to carry out their plans.

**Question: What are your current needs in Sudan?**

John Garland: In my view, the best way to combat Islamic fundamentalism is through economic development. This will erode the appeal of Islamic fundamentalism in the North as well as South Sudan. I would like to see a mini-Marshall Plan of economic assistance. Modest assistance could result in a complete change in the Sudan. Militarily we have enough weapons, but we need support items, such as vehicles, communications, foodstuffs, and uniforms. The vehicles would provide us the mobility to move military forces around the large distances in our country. The communications would provide us with the command and control of our wide spread forces.

**Question: What was your perspective on the US bombing of the Sudanese chemical plant?**

John Garland: The bombing did not help the SPLA cause. It gave the Khartoum regime a real propaganda advantage because the population was not only angry with the US, but they also blamed the SPLA for being allied with the US. It was a public relations fiasco. It was not clear if the plant was being used for chemical weapons, but we believe that the Khartoum government has been using chemical weapons against us in the South. Our military positions and villages have experienced serious circumstantial evidence of the use of chemical weapons--people in bombed areas have developed severe skin rashes, vomiting, increased miscarriages among the women, seen the extensive death of local dogs and cats, etc. The evidence of chemical weapons is strong but the Khartoum government has not cooperated with any UN investigations of their possible use.

*Ed Badolato is experienced in all aspects of counterterrorism operations--from leading small unit operations, to heading up the DOE's nuclear counterterrorism efforts, to serving on the White House Interagency Group on Terrorism, to writing numerous books and articles on the subject. He has headed a number of national level committees on counterterrorism and is a retired US Marine Corps Colonel. He can be reached at (202) 463-8811; e-mail: bado@erols.com.*