

Sudan has also signed on to the Slavery Convention, as amended, the Supplementary Convention on the Abolition of the Slave Trade, and the Convention relating to the Status of Refugees. In addition, it has ratified the ILO conventions concerning Forced Labour.

It is important that Leonardo Franco recognized the difficulty of respecting human rights and humanitarian law in a case of internal armed conflict, but, as importantly, he did not allow this circumstance to decrease in any way the imperative need for such respect. GOS spokesmen and "friends" of the GOS, such as the Sudan Foundation, have stated that the civil war has inevitably had a negative effect on the country's human rights record, presumably to suggest that without war, the GOS would be responsible for far fewer violations. Critics, on the other hand, have said that there have been among the war-strategies of the GOS human rights abuses, such as the arming of Arab militiamen who raid Dinka communities in the South.

Franco expressed the view that "the war and the pernicious strategies employed had also revived and exacerbated the problems of slavery in the Sudan", and was concerned about the plight of internally displaced persons, who he took to constitute evidence that the war was being conducted in disregard of the principles of human rights, and the GOS bore the largest share of responsibility for violations. It is a basic element of the Sudanese reality that when human rights are under discussion, thoughts of the war, and of displacement, can never be far away, but perhaps the most heinous aspect of the absence of human security in Sudan are the allegations of Slavery.

These are powerful, compelling, and difficult to address, partly because of the disruptions caused by a war in which the practice of abducting women and children is too often condoned or facilitated, and partly because the allegations themselves are being used as a "weapon of war". The campaign in the United States to encourage divestment from Talisman Energy Inc., for example, has produced estimates that "more than 200,000 Sudanese Christians have been forced into slavery."

A more rational allegation, and no less forceful an indictment, is to be found in the annals of Anti-Slavery International. Mike Dottridge, Director of Anti-Slavery, the world's oldest international human rights campaign, said in an appeal to Sudanese President Bashir early in 1999 that "the reality is that people being abducted from communities in northern Bahr al-Ghazal by government-backed militias are being exploited as slaves in the households of militiamen and others."

From UNICEF, from the Save the Children Fund, and from the Dinka Committee which has been in the front-line of attack against this abhorrent situation, we learned that as many as 15,000 women and children, mainly from Bahr El Ghazal, and most of them Dinka, have been abducted and remain in captivity.

The Assessment Mission was mandated to collect the facts about this situation and this has been done in the hope that action will follow, action which will lead to the freeing of all those women and children, and their return to their families and familiar places.