

Sudan

ISSUE

In 1996, the Government of Sudan acknowledged the need for improvement in its human rights performance by agreeing to a consensus resolution at the Commission on Human Rights critical of its record, and took a number of means to promote human rights. In rebel-controlled areas, groups opposing the Government focussed on education programmes to promote greater respect of human rights. Despite such actions, the human rights situation remained profoundly unsatisfactory, much of this due to the civil war, factional fighting among rebel groups, and lawlessness in Southern Sudan.

BACKGROUND

Grievances by Southern Sudanese, who are culturally, linguistically and religiously distinct from the north with its Muslim and Arab identity, have been at the root of a civil war that has continued intermittently since independence in 1956; it has been a sustained conflict since 1983. The religious radicalism and related lack of concern for human rights by the current National Islamic Front (NIF) Government, which took power in a military coup in 1989, have resulted in ever increasing international isolation, a deteriorating economy, and an almost total freeze on development assistance to Sudan. The Government's relations with neighbouring Eritrea, Ethiopia and Uganda remain strained. As well, the United Nations' Security Council imposed sanctions on Sudan in 1996 because of its support of international terrorism, in particular the attempt on the life of Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak at the June 1995 Organization of African Unity Summit in Addis Ababa.

In March 1996, the Government sought to enhance its legitimacy by staging legislative and presidential non-party elections which were not democratic, free, nor fair. President al-Bashir and the NIF swept the polls and the government was virtually unchanged as a result.

The civil war has destroyed virtually all aspects of civil society, infrastructure and traditional economic and trading systems in the South. There are estimates that, since 1983, one out of every four people in Southern Sudan are estimated to have died as a result of the civil war. The Government and rebel factions have been guilty of obstructing international humanitarian assistance and of continuing abuses against non-combatant populations. There are continued reports of indiscriminate bombing of civilian populations by government forces. As well, both the government and the southern factions have been cited for torture and summary executions, and have received criticism for their use of landmines.

The Sudanese Government has taken initial steps to acknowledge the human rights shortcomings in the country. It has created the advisory Consultative Council for Human Rights, the Special Investigation Committee on Allegations of Enforced or Voluntary Disappearances and Reported Cases of Slavery, the Sudanese Jurists Union and established Human Rights Education Committees throughout Sudan. As these are new government bodies, only experience will prove whether they are intended only as window