

## LETTER FROM SUDAN BY MICHAEL McIVOR



**The temperature hovers around fifty degrees celsius and a *hubhub*, the local name for dust storm, is blowing. We are travelling through northern Kurdufan region from El Obeid to Sodiri on what aid workers here sardonically call "Highway 1."**

In some places it is vague track. More often, there is nothing but drifting sand or rough shale. A companion pulls out his canteen and takes another swig of hot water. Some spills as we lurch and jolt along. "Driving in Sudan," he mutters, "is like riding in a clothes drier with dust blowing in."

By air, it is less than 200 kilometres between El Obeid and Sodiri. By "Highway 1" it is eight back-bruising hours in a four-wheel drive van, not including the time wasted fixing two flat tires, digging out after twice becoming stuck in the sand, and getting seriously lost. In other words, it was a normal trip with an experienced driver. This is the same route emergency food aid must travel to reach the hungry in North Kurdufan.

And it gets worse going west to Darfur region. The paved road built with international aid ends at El Obeid, the capital of Kurdufan. El Fasher, the capital of Darfur is two days further on by rough track. Most people prefer to fly taking the risk that Air Sudan, not so affectionately dubbed, "Air Sometimes," will actually show up as scheduled. It usually doesn't. Sometimes it is days late on domestic routes.

Arriving in El Fasher is to step back in time. There actually is one paved road. But mostly it is dirt street. A few four-wheel drive vehicles are out and about. Almost all of them belong to international aid agencies, the government, army or security police. For the rest, with the disconcerting exception of three or four American cars with '50s fins and chrome, it is donkey power. And the donkeys are slowly dying because of the drought. There are power lines which is a nice Potemkin village touch be-

cause unless one is on the "A" line which runs to the government buildings there is no electricity at all. Just as there are no phones.

El Fasher is the pinnacle of twentieth century technology in Darfur. Outside the capital, it gets primitive, which is why it is a truly awesome task trying to get emergency food aid and seeds to rural areas. Even communication is impossible. The shortwave radios used by foreign construction teams and aid agencies were seized by the security police some months ago. They were convinced the radios were being used for spying. Just what there would be to spy on in rural Darfur defies the imagination.

But the two-year old Islamic fundamentalist military does not like foreigners, especially Westerners. Until late this spring, many aid agencies suffered various types

of harassment. Some, like *Médecins Sans Frontières* in Darfur, gave up and left. In Khartoum, our hotel rooms were searched. Telexes are read by the security police. Many telephones are bugged. Not that it matters; they usually do not work. Sudan is a country that has turned xenophobic at a time when it most desperately needs foreign development assistance.

Sudan inherited an underdeveloped but functioning infrastructure when it gained independence from the British in 1956. The trains from Khartoum to Port Sudan, the

country's access to the ocean, used to run twice a day. Now there are fewer than two a week. During the sixteen years of Gaafar Mohammed Numeiri's rampantly corrupt dictatorship, not only was there little effort to expand basic services, what existed was not maintained. "I am afraid the infrastructure of the country has deteriorated very severely over the last seven or eight years," says Abhav Deshoande, the World Bank's representative in Khartoum. "This applies to roads, railways, power, factories, irrigation systems, everything." Deshoande says a World Bank survey found 112 of the 115 bridges on the Port Sudan-Khartoum highway to be unsafe; ninety percent of the emergency food aid moves down that road.

Sudan's Finance Minister, Abdul Rahim Hamdi acknowledges that what he calls "the very pervasive deterioration" continues, and admits, "we need massive economic investment to basically rehabilitate all the infrastructure in the country." To try to attract it, Hamdi has introduced some measures to promote the development of a market economy and to appease the International Monetary

gered coalition members including rich, formerly generous, Arab neighbours. Western nations are upset the government will not compromise to end the brutal, debilitating civil war with largely Christian and animist tribes in the South. Of particular concern is its refusal to replace Sharia or Islamic law with a secular code. And the dictatorship's human rights record is worrying. The US Ambassador to Sudan, James Cheek, says the result is "most of the development assistance that used to flow to Sudan has stopped because donors feel that given the policies and attitude of the government, assistance cannot really accomplish much."

Emergency food aid will continue. But without development assistance for roads, irrigation projects, new wells and reforestation, the tragic cycle of drought and famine will continue. Sudan, potentially the breadbasket of East Africa, cannot even cope with its disintegrating infrastructure much less finance anything new.

Such global problems do not feature in Mahava village in northern Kurdufan even though the people here have to live with the consequences. It is a six-hour walk to the nearest water since their well went dry. There is water deeper down but no money to drill for it. And the desert is seeping into the village. "Thirty years ago there were lots of trees," says a farmer pointing to the barren landscape. "I remember seeing deer when I was a boy. Now, if there is a stick on the ground, after a while there will be a small sand dune." There are no funds to plant new trees as a buffer against the desert.

"What will happen to you?" I ask. "I expect one day the sand will drive us from our land." Being landless in Sudan's agrarian, peasant society is tantamount to a death sentence. At the moment there seems no hope of a reprieve. □

*Michael McIvor is senior European correspondent for CBC national radio news.*

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