



2nd GENEVA SUMMIT FOR HUMAN RIGHTS, TOLERANCE AND DEMOCRACY

March 8-9, 2010

Session: Genocide and the Humanitarian Challenge

Speech of Simon Deng, Sudanese rights activist, former slave

First, allow me to thank you for the invitation to address the Geneva Summit for Human Rights, Tolerance, and Democracy. These are issues of great importance to me. Now more than perhaps ever before, the time is ripe to end discrimination and persecution, and promote understanding and democracy throughout the world, especially in troubled countries like my native Sudan. In my country today, innocent people still suffer from half a century of genocide, slavery, and forced Islamization and Arabization. And though we are supposedly “at peace,” this legacy of evil still lives on. For far too many, and far too often, “peace” remains only a dream.

My name is Simon Aban Deng. I am from Southern Sudan. I am a Shilluk by tribe. I am a Christian by religion. For decades, the people of Southern Sudan have been persecuted by various radical, jihadist regimes in Khartoum. Twice we have been the victims of prolonged genocidal campaigns by these Islamist regimes, seeking to destroy our people and our cultures through murder, rape, enslavement, and forced conversion to the Islamic faith and Arabic culture. First from 1955 to 1973, then again from 1983 until 2005, what are often referred to as “civil wars” brought death and destruction to my people. Yet these wars were far from civil: they fit into a well-defined pattern of Arab imperialism, which seeks to destroy the indigenous African peoples of Sudan in whatever ways possible. During these years, over three million Southerners were killed. Millions more became refugees. The same pattern is seen still in Darfur, but also in other less-frequently-discussed parts of Sudan, including the Nuba Mountains, Beja in the east, Nubia in the north, and still throughout the South as well. Indeed, the majority of the population of Sudan consists of marginalized peoples. They are all ruled by a small, powerful minority in Khartoum.

I am living proof of the many crimes and de-humanizations that occur in Sudan. When I was child, my village was raided by Arab troops contracted to kill and destroy by the Khartoum regime. As we ran into the bush to escape, I watched as my best friends were shot dead and the old and weak who were unable to run were burned alive in their huts. The survivors rebuilt our village and buried our dead, only to have the whole process repeated, over and over again. The same calculated atrocity happened across Southern Sudan, and for many many years.



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When living in my village became impossible, my parents moved us to the capital of the Upper Nile region of Southern Sudan, the city of Malakal. There, at the age of nine, a neighbor asked if I would help him with his luggage. He told me to carry his bags onto a steam-ship on the Nile, and to wait there until he returned. I waited, but he did not return, and soon the ship left the dock, and I, terrified, began screaming and crying. The neighbor then appeared out of nowhere, and calmed me down by saying that since we had left the station already, we would have to wait until the end of the journey when he would put me back on a ship to head back home. He promised it would be ok. Of course this was a lie.

When we arrived at our destination, in the northern city of Kosti, it turned out that the neighbor had brought three other children with him on the same ship, and we were all unloaded with him. The other children soon disappeared, probably handed off to someone else. I don't know. I was brought to the man's village in a suburb of Kosti. There I was given to a family, his relatives, without any knowledge of the arrangement between them, and immediately put to work. After three miserable days, I asked them where my neighbor had gone, for he had promised he would return me to my loved ones back home. It was then I was told that I would not be going home, because according to them I was given to them as a gift. A "gift", ladies and gentlemen. When you look at me, do you see a gift? Do I look like an object or a commodity? I am a human being, a person created in the image of God. This simple truth is denied by the jihadists and slave-traders who continue to kidnap and enslave children in Sudan to this day.

I don't like talking about my experience as a slave, but I do it because it is important for the world to know that such slavery does exist even today. I am grateful the opportunity to be a voice for those who have no voice. Untold millions have suffered as I have suffered, and it is for them that I speak to you today.

When I was a slave, I was unable to say the word "no." All I could say was "yes," "yes," "yes." I was the first one to wake up in the morning – to fetch the first load of the day's water from the river, and the last to go to sleep at night. I had no bed, like a normal human being, I was forced to sleep on the ground, among the animals. I was beaten time and time again, usually for no reason at all - even by the children of the family, younger than myself. I could not go to sleep until every last bit of heavy work had been performed. When you read, usually in history books or even the Bible, about the brutality of slavery: for me, as child, it was reality. For me the pain and suffering was real.



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Miraculously for me, my enslavement ended after only a few years. Most are not so lucky.

After a time, the family that enslaved me had moved from the suburbs into the city of Kosti, where the miracle of my freedom occurred. I was twelve and a half years old when I was sent to the store to pick something up for the family. By sheer coincidence I ran into three Shilluk gentlemen bearing the same tribal markings on their foreheads which I bear now, but which at that time I did not yet have. I ran to them and told them who I was and the situation I was in. They told me that they knew someone from my village after I mentioned where I was from, and that this man happened to be in Kosti. They said they would bring him to the same spot the next day to confirm that I was who I said I was.

The next day we met and instantly the man from my village recognized me, and tears began to flow from his eyes. He cried because everyone had lost hope that I would ever return. When I disappeared, my father put up ten cows as a reward. This was a very high price. They assumed, since no one had come forward to claim them, that I must be gone for good. Within a couple of weeks I was free at last, and reunited with my loving family.

When we talk about human rights abuses in Sudan, to me it doesn't even go far enough. We should be talking about the complete lack of human rights, and indeed the destruction of human life and the attempted annihilation of human culture. Truly the situation in most of Southern Sudan, and for most all of the marginalized peoples of Sudan is beyond comprehension. And to make matters worse, to this day no one has been held accountable.

When the Comprehensive Peace Agreement was signed in 2005, like most people I was optimistic – despite my deep lack of trust towards Khartoum - and still I remain optimistic... but nevertheless I am nervous. I am troubled by the lack of full implementation, and by the roadblocks and delays consistently put forward by the Khartoum regime. Why has no country or international body shown the guts to stop them from continually breaking the agreement? In the five years since the CPA was signed, the situation in Southern Sudan has improved, but it still needs much more improvement. The extent to which there is any peace in Southern Sudan, is due to the promise of the CPA, that the South will soon have the chance to vote on self-determination, in the referendum scheduled for next year. Without this commitment, the South would still be as hopeless as ever. Therefore without the full implementation of the CPA, all will be lost



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in no time. And the international community must continue to play a vital role in ensuring that the CPA remains in force.

For the first time, the international community has much to be proud of in Sudan, but there is still so much more work to be done. Truly, without international pressure, the CPA would never have come into existence in the first place. International peacekeepers put their lives on the line in Sudan every day. And aid groups help many people in desperate need, but still far too many are beyond their reach. Violence and instability continue in every corner of Sudan. Sudan still has more internally displaced people than any other country in the world. And though this fact surprises most people, there are roughly the same number of internally displaced people in Southern Sudan as there are in Darfur, even after five years of so-called "peace." We need so much more engagement between the world and Sudan, and we need to constantly keep pressure on Khartoum to live up to their commitments and protect vulnerable communities. We live in a global community now, but only through peace and security can Sudan become a part of it.

There are some voices now in the world – including even the Secretary General of the United Nations – who have stated that the South's impending vote for independence will be a dangerous thing for Sudan and for the region. Truly, that is a backward view. Since when is democracy and self-determination a bad thing? It may threaten the status quo, but the status quo is unacceptable. Such voices may believe that Southern secession is dangerous - because they say it sets a bad example - but I believe the opposite is true. If the people of the South are somehow denied their promised right of self-determination, such rage would erupt that a return to war would be inevitable. The results would be catastrophic for Sudan and the region, and especially for the civilians there, who like myself, have already gone through so much.

Sudan stands at a crossroads. In one direction lies a tragic past of genocide, slavery, and injustice, while in the other lies a hopeful future of reconciliation, forgiveness, and democracy. I hope that with the help of the international community, human rights organizations, and people of good will, Sudan and possibly an independent Southern Sudan, will be able to walk into the future together in peace.

Thank you.