

Considering these recurring violations, the question must be asked: How long can we accept that Sudan form part of the UN Human Rights Commission?

Editor's note: Just before we went to press, the news agency Zenit filed this report on the case:

A Sudanese Christian woman accused of adultery and sentenced to death by stoning was instead given 75 lashes and then released, human-rights activists told United Press International. The U.S.- and Germany-based activists said the punishment was cruel, but they noted the reduction of her sentence proved that Sudan did heed international pressure.

It was unclear whether 18-year-old Abok Alfa Akok was still pregnant when she was flogged February 18, or had already given birth to the child conceived out of the allegedly adulterous liaison. Albrecht Hofheinz, a scholar of Islamic studies who lives in Berlin, said that according to his sources, Akok had her baby in prison while awaiting the outcome of her appeal. But Eric Reeves, a professor at Smith College in Massachusetts and one of America's foremost experts on Sudanese human-rights abuses, disagreed. "To my knowledge she was still pregnant," he told UPI.

The same court that sentenced Akok to death acquitted the child's father. Akok said he had raped her.

Under Shariah, or Islamic law, women should not be flogged while pregnant or recovering from childbirth. Faith O'Donnell, Sudan specialist of the Washington-based Institute on Religion and Democracy, said that during the flogging a medical specialist is present to make sure that the offender does not die.

A criminal court — not a religious tribunal — in Nyala in Southern Darfur, one of Sudan's predominantly Christian states, sentenced Akok to death on December 8, the Sudanese Victims of Torture Group reported.

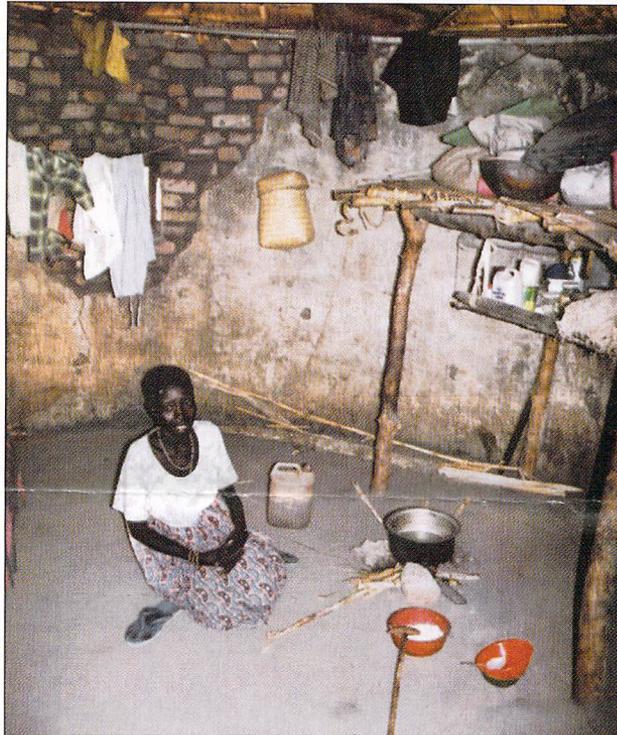
The trial was conducted in Arabic, a language the Dinka tribeswoman did not master. There was no interpreter present.

The case went to an appeals court in Khartoum, which overturned the sentence. It ordered the lower court to give the defendant a "rebuke" sentence, according to the organization. Human-rights groups had appealed to Sudan's President Omar Bashir to intervene on behalf of the young woman. ●

A WITNESS IN THE SUDAN

by Cecilia Bromley-Martin

In every place I visited, piercing rays of sunlight shone into the old brick churches — through the bullet holes in the corrugated iron roofs... Report on a trip to Sudan



Rosa in her village hut in Sudan. Opposite page: top, Rosa "walks" with her daughter Mary behind her; bottom, Agau Adom Mayen, one of the "Lost Boys" of Sudan

As a child, Rosa had polio. Today, a grown woman and mother, she moves by crawling on her hands and knees. The sandy ground of her Sudan village is hot; she wears flip flops on her hands so as not to burn them.

Any distance is a slow and difficult effort, even from her tiny straw hut to her parish church (a two-minute walk for anyone else) but she is there for the 6 a.m. Mass every day.

She had five children, four of whom have died. Her husband abandoned her and she lives with her daughter Mary who is five years old.

"There was no hospital, no medicine, no one to help," she told me. "The hunger also made it worse. They died. My husband left as he felt

my illness was the reason our children died."

When I first met Rosa, she was leading a group of women singing a hymn: "God is good. God is so good to me."

For despite her terrible handicap, Rosa has been teaching the Catholic faith to local women for 25 years.

"I decided to serve God with the life He has given me — sitting," she explained. "The women want to learn, but our program is often held up by sickness and hunger as they often have to go and find food for their children."

Rosa feels strongly about the importance of her role, saying "the catechists are the future and hope for the Church in Sudan." Her thoughts were echoed wherever I went.

"They are recognized as the spiritual leaders of their communities," Bishop Mazzolari of Rumbek observed. "Many are as good as well-trained priests."

Southern Sudan boasts an enviable and well-organized network of many hundreds of catechists, brave and selfless laypeople who, despite an Islamic government which has been known to flog and even crucify them, are dedicated to bringing the Word of God to Catholics who may not see a priest more than once or twice a year, if that.

In one area of the Nuba mountains, there was no priest from 1983 until 1997. When priests were finally able to visit the people, they found that three-quarters of them were already Christian, all because of one courageous catechist.

"When people are at war, the first thing they need is the Word of God," one explained to me. "They need Jesus, so we have to offer ourselves so they know the peace of Christ from us."

It was the 1983 introduction of *Sharia*, or Islamic law, which triggered rebellion in the animist and Christian South and led to the appalling fighting which has already cost more than two million lives.

Today, however, there are three other reasons the war still endures.

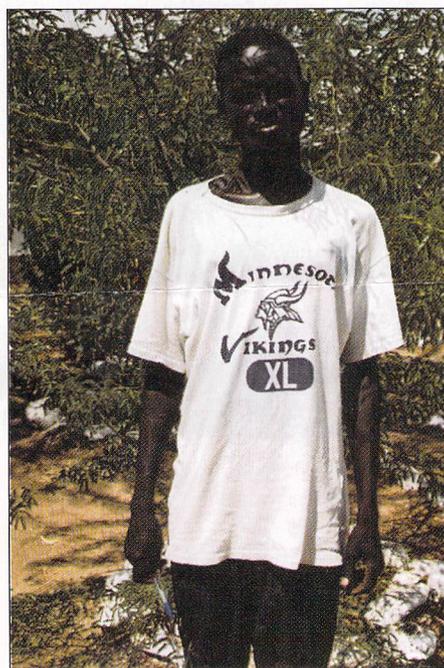
One is ethnic and cultural: the Arabs against the blacks. One is economic: the wealthy but arid North desire the oil and water of the more fertile and oil-rich South. And one is religious: the Muslims against the Christians.

After nearly 20 years of intermittent bombing, ground fighting and massacres, I found the devastation of the South dreadful to witness.

In the town of Rumbek, children with hunger-swollen stomachs wandered around in rags or naked.

Bomb-damaged and looted buildings punctuated each side of the dusty, pot-holed roads, while the overwhelming unemployment was evident in the numbers of people simply sitting under the trees, taking refuge from the fierce African sun.

In every place I visited, piercing rays of sunlight shone into the old brick churches... through the bullet holes in the corrugated iron roofs. Though snakes and scorpions are a



very real natural danger, the people have no medicines to deal with these or other injuries and diseases. Life expectancy is about 50, and an estimated two in five children die before they reach the age of five.

Another tragic by-product of this war are the countless Sudanese forced to abandon their homes, land and livestock. A million people have been displaced and tens of thousands are refugees in neighboring countries.

When I met Agau Adom Mayen, he was 18. As a child, he had fled his home in southern Sudan, walking for many months with thousands of other boys. Only half of them survived the

trek; today, in their Kenyan refugee camp, they are known as the "Lost Boys of Sudan."

"Many of my friends died from thirst, hunger, bombs," he told me. "We would take the leaves off the trees to eat, and if there was no water some even drank their own urine. When people died, we just left them lying on the ground. Our priest died and we just left him by the roadside. My parents were alive when I left, and four other brothers; I don't know if I could find them again if I ever went back, but God gave me life and if He gave them life too I hope we will meet again in the future. I pray for that."

Like Agau, many of the southern Sudanese have a faith which has remained steadfast throughout the pain and suffering of their hard lives: there is a remarkable trust in God which no amount of war will destroy.

When I commented on this undiminished faith, Bishop Lodu of the Yei diocese explained, "The strength of faith is because they are being vigorously and strongly attacked. People are obliged to defend themselves as they don't want to be islamized. Sacramental life is on the increase, as is reading the Bible, and participation in liturgical activities is very high, especially among the youth. For the next 25 years, the Church is going to be very strong in Sudan because the youth now is so fervent."

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