

A Letter From Sudan

By a White Father

The following article is an account of a two-month visit to the Sudan in July and August, 1999. It is written by a White Father who would like to remain anonymous.

Hajj Yousif lies some 15km from the centre of Khartoum. There the tarmac road ends and tracks, known only to the initiated, lead off to the East through scrub and semi-desert. These were the old camel- and lorry-routes to Kassala, the border with Ethiopia and the Red Sea Coast before the new road, which passes through Wad Medani and Gedaref far to the South, was constructed. Now a busy suburb of Khartoum, Hajj Yousif was once a small village lying out in the desert across the Blue Nile to the East of the old town of Khartoum. Since 1983, the year in which the most recent tragic episode in Sudan's cruel civil war broke out, waves of displaced people from the South of Sudan have arrived to settle on the outskirts of the capital. Their numbers have swelled at times of fierce fighting when towns fell to one or other of the combatant factions or when famine and disease broke out due either to the destruction and upheaval caused by the war or to periods of drought. It is estimated that some 2,000,000 souls are living around the capital, seeking to eke out some kind of existence.

The conditions are appalling. A generation of displaced people have now grown up in these conditions and have known nothing but misery in their brief lives. Among these displaced are to be found Christians of various denominations, Muslims and followers of African traditional religions. The more fortunate find work in Khartoum or join the hundreds who buy and sell in the local souq. From early morning till late at night, conventional

buses, lorries, pick-ups and taxis - many clearly unfit to carry even a driver, not to speak of passengers - crawl bumper to bumper along the narrow, pitted tarmac carrying workers and those seeking work to the 'Three Towns' - old Khartoum across the Blue Nile, Khartoum Bahri to the North and Omdurman on the Western bank of the White Nile. These three towns have as their central point the confluence of the Blue Nile and the White Nile, vast expanses of muddy, fast-flowing water in this season of rains. These two Niles become one and flow on for 1,000km before reaching Lake Nasser and the Aswan Dam on the border with Egypt.

As I write, the rains have begun, particularly heavy this year. The Blue Nile is already within a metre of its banks and cloudy skies, so unusual in Northern Sudan, bring the threat of further heavy rain and subsequent flooding. After a very heavy downpour this week, the scene in Hajj Yousif, away from the single track of tarmac, reminds me of First World War footage of the Somme battlefields with vast areas of mud, trenches dug to channel some of the water away - but where in this so-flat land?! - vehicles stuck and abandoned and everywhere people, their jellabiyyas (long white cotton shirt worn by men) or taubs (brightly coloured wrap-around worn by women) hitched up, struggling to go about their business with some semblance of normality.

It is here in Hajj Yousif, in this sprawling suburb of Khartoum, that the White Fathers, Missionaries of Africa, run a thriving parish of the poor. For some ten years now, the parish has been administered from a private house. There is no church building as such.

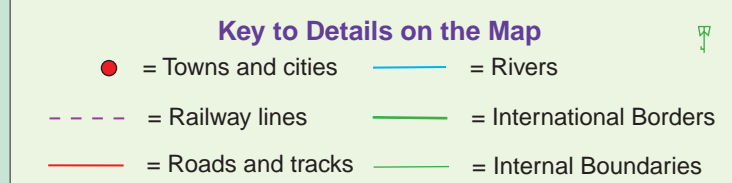
Ten centres, which serve as primary schools during the week and as places for meeting and prayer at the weekends, are situated throughout the parish. The Schools for the Displaced are administered by the Archdiocese of Khartoum. Some 10,000 children receive primary education in the centres of Hajj Yousif alone.

There are only a few permanent structures. Most centres consist simply of a number of rākūbas, shelters constructed of wooden poles and bamboo which provide shade, enclosed by a barbed-wire fence. In those centres where ownership of the plot has been secured, more permanent structures - a youth building, a women's meeting room, a teachers' staff room, etc. have been built. Trained catechists, lay leaders and volunteers help the three priests, a local permanent deacon and a community of Good Shepherd Sisters with the pastoral activities of the parish. Work for development and relief, supported and funded by many benefactors from abroad - both organizations and individuals - goes hand in hand with Christian instruction, training sessions and workshops on various

aspects of Christian life. A community of Carmelite Sisters from India runs a dispensary in the parish. Masses and the Sacraments are celebrated on Sunday in all the centres when sufficient priests are available. Some 300 catechumens follow a programme of instruction for baptism each year. The celebration

of Easter, with the Baptism of so many young and not-so-young people at the Easter Vigil, is the highlight of the Church's year and is the cause of a great and deep joy among the faithful.

This, then, is the setting for the small, very active community of White Fathers in Hajj



Yousif. Perhaps through relating one or two everyday occurrences here or incidents which have occurred during my stay in the parish over the past two months, the reader might gain an insight into some of the joys and the sorrows lived by these residents of the parish.

Fifty metres from the Fathers' house, in an area being developed for housing, a Dinka family squats, like many hundreds of displaced families in and around **Khartoum**, in a house under construction. Agot Deng, only thirty years old, clearly has TB. He lies emaciated on a rope bed, dressed in a soiled **jellâbiyya**. It takes him and his wife, Abuc, some minutes to get him to sit on the edge of the bed and welcome **abûnâ** (Father). A number of children gather round, amazed at the visit of the **khawaja** (European). A young widow and her two children - and there are so many young widows like her in the Sudan at war - share with Agot and his family the one room of the house which has a roof and the shelter made of dirty sacking set up in the yard. A chair is found for **abûnâ** and we are given water to drink. The family receive food aid from the church, but Agot needs to return to the doctor for further treatment. We pray together and a small sum is given for doctor's fees. The family are grateful for the visit.

The permanent deacon lives about 5km. away on the edge of town, near the parish centre named **Dâr al-Salâm**, 'the House of Peace'. Situated near open fields with irrigation ditches and plenty of grass in this wet season, the family compound is plagued with mosquitoes and never a week goes by without one of the family being sick with malaria. Deacon Anthony arrived today to ask for help to pay for medicines for his two sons, one suffering from dysentery and the other from typhoid. The water delivered by donkey-cart in this season of rains is often brown and muddy. All are at risk of intestinal disease.

Most of the parents and older people I meet in the centres after Mass on Sunday are deeply concerned about the threat - ever present but more menacing this year - that the government will close down and bulldoze the schools of the parish. Extremely poorly equipped and with few resources, these church-run schools have produced some excellent results over the years and have set a high standard of achievement. Ominously, two huge, brand-new schools, built with the best of materials, have sprung up in the parish within the past few months. Constructed by **al-da'wa al-islâmiyya**, the Islamic Mission, and sponsored by funds from Malaysia, these new schools are being proposed as replacements for the Schools of the Displaced.

A new national primary education syllabus has recently been published and will be implemented in all schools this year. A preliminary glance at the content of the syllabus shows that a very clear and deliberate islamization of all areas of the school curriculum is under way. Whether the Schools for the Displaced remain independent or not, the introduction of this new national programme means that all children attending school will have to learn and be examined on the content of this one programme. There will be no entry to secondary or to higher education for those who have not followed and assimilated this programme. Parents, teachers and church leaders across the spectrum are rightly concerned that their religious freedom - indeed the very faith of their children - is yet again under attack from fundamentalist Islamic influences within the government.

At the petrol station near the Fathers' house, I pull in and ask for five gallons of diesel, for some time now readily available. I am overcharged and, when challenged, the attendant, very friendly and with a smile, says that the supplement is for **jihâd**, the government's war effort. Yet again, I argue that I am here as a

worker for peace and I refuse to pay the supplement.

The courtyard at the Fathers' house is rarely empty. Parish workers, catechists and the poor arrive from early morning till late in the evening. Much time and energy is spent simply listening to the sad stories of these people whose poverty extends beyond material considerations. Uprooted from their traditional lands in the South and deprived of their homes, their cattle or their farms, these displaced and disoriented people now see their tribal customs, which gave structure, form and strength to their societies, under threat. The poor come seeking mainly food or medical aid, school fees for their children or plastic sheets as shelter from the rains, when their mud-brick homes crumble and collapse.

Late one evening, Flora, aged 14 years, and her brother, Frazier, aged ten, come to seek help for school fees. The regular fund for school fees which helps some one hundred and twenty children in the parish is exhausted for this

academic year. I explain this carefully to the children before me. Flora is upset, frustrated and angry that **abûnâ** does not want her to study. It is now dark and frequent flashes of lightning announce the approach of another good down-pour. The electricity is cut off and I am unable to read the letter someone has written on the children's behalf, listing to their needs: school fees, uniform, shoes, exercise books and the all-important satchel to carry the books to and from school - the total cost of these items runs to some US\$20. I ask Flora and her brother to come back the next morning. They will receive help towards the costs.

News reaches us concerning the two diocesan priests, Frs. Hilary Boma and Lino Sebit, who were arrested along with twenty others, and were accused of conspiring to cause explosions in **Khartoum** last year. They have spent the last twelve months in various types of prisons and been forced to appear before various types of courts. Abused and mistreated, most of the group have undergone some form of

torture and three of their number have 'disappeared'. The news we receive, however, is better. On Sunday, August 15th., the feast of the Assumption of Our Lady, the two priests are allowed to celebrate the Eucharist - for the first time since being confined - with a small group of confreres from the diocese. They are now in Kobar Prison and can receive visitors. They even have access to mail and a small portable radio. We rejoice and thank God that their situation has eased somewhat and pray for their speedy release.

The expulsion of Fr. Gilles Poirier, a Canadian PME Father (Prêtres des Missions Etrangères), on August 7th., 1999, is a vivid reminder to us of just how precarious the situation of the Church is in present-day Sudan. Security agents, present everywhere, shadow and track all church personnel. They are especially present at the centres during celebrations and meetings. The economic situation is such that informers can be recruited from within the Christian community and Christians have been known to enroll for training with the Security Services. No official reason was given for Fr. Gilles' expulsion. He had worked assiduously for many years as parish priest of Hilla Mayo, a poor suburb some 10km south of **Khartoum**. When Canadian government officials asked the Sudanese authorities the reason for his expulsion, Foreign Ministry officials denied any knowledge of the matter.

The on-going difficulties experienced by Christians in the nearby parish of **Khartoum Bahri** to pray together on Sundays in the centre at Dour as-Sha'b intensified recently when a group known as the **Ansar al-Sunna**, a radical fundamentalist group, made an unprovoked attack on the priest and the faithful during Mass on Sunday, August 8th, 1999. During the ensuing disturbance, a number of people were injured and the police made several arrests on both sides. The centre has been closed and

prayers forbidden for the time being. His Grace Archbishop Gabriel Zubeir Wako is at present out of the country attending meetings in Nairobi. The pastoral responsibility he shoulders in leading and guiding the faithful of this huge archdiocese of **Khartoum** is at times an onerous burden. We pray that the Spirit of Peace will strengthen him and enlighten him in this task.

My first appointment as a missionary priest was to the other White Father parish in the Sudan, the parish of New Halfa in the district of **Kassala**, some 400km from **Hajj Yousif** across the desert as the crow flies, but 630km away by the tarmac road via **Wad Medani** and **Gedaref**. The opportunity arises for me to visit **Halfa** and I wait one week for my travel permit to be granted ... then stamped by Security ... then signed ...

On a Friday morning I leave with the driver, Francis. We follow the Blue Nile to **Wad Medani** along a road long-overdue for repair. We drive slowly so as to avoid the worst of the holes.

At Medani, after two checkpoint controls at which the Security ask about the **khawaja** and check his permit, we leave the district of the **Jezîra**, the 'island', the rich, fertile fork of land between the Blue and the White Nile, and we head towards the East across huge, flat expanses where vultures and marabou storks circle and glide on the thermals. Sorghum millet, here called **dûra**, the staple diet of most Sudanese, has been sown in July and already fresh, green shoots spread a vivid, green carpet over the land under a huge sky. We breakfast at Hamid's roadside restaurant at Fao, the half-way point on our journey and at **Gedaref** we fill up with diesel. By early afternoon, we reach **Khashm el-Girba** and there we leave the tarmac road to travel the last 65km along the rough **radmiyya**, the coarse stone and pebble

foundation set down to receive its surface of tarmac for the new road which will link the sugar factory at Halfa with the main road. This rough foundation has waited three years to be completed, but in a country at war with itself funds are channelled elsewhere - to feed and equip and arm the military.

It has rained and as we enter Halfa at 4.00pm the land all around us is under a foot of water. The parish priest has dispatched boys to guide us to the church through the water. I am greeted by sixty children celebrating the end of a 'camp' during which they prepare for the great Jubilee of the year 2000. A tree has blown down in the morning's rainstorm and the church compound is full of water. Nothing dampens the children's enthusiasm, however, as they sing and mime and perform, barefooted, in a gala concert to round off their 'camp'. As evening falls, the 'zinging hum' of mosquitoes increases under the trees and on our verandah. We unload the boxes of medicine and the fifty plastic sheets we have brought from **Khartoum**

and the parish priest sets off into the night to drive the children home.

The Fathers' work in Halfa is similar to that of the Fathers in **Hajj Yousif**. Here, however, the numbers of Christians are fewer and the prayer centres are scattered over an area 120km by 30km. We are a rural community, with many of the people occupied in work in the fields or in the sugar factory. The Christians, most of them displaced persons as in **Khartoum**, live in typical African huts outside the town of Halfa and the many villages of the scheme. These new settlements were built in the late 1960s to receive thousands of evacuees from the district of Wadi Halfa far to the North on the border with Egypt whose lands gradually disappeared under the rising waters of Lake Nasser behind the Aswan Dam. Irrigated by water from the River Atbara, dammed at **Khashm el-Girba**, the New Halfa Scheme produces sugar, cotton and wheat as well as many kinds of vegetables and fruit. **Halfaoui** families own land and grow a variety of



crops including lentils, beans and tomatoes. A few Christian Arab families arrived with the Muslim **Halfaoui** evacuees and the government of the time granted land to the Catholic and to the Coptic Orthodox Churches. Two brick and concrete churches have stood in New Halfa since 1970.

The contrast with life in **Hajj Yousif** could not be greater. The pace of life is slower here and people have time to talk. The Fathers visit families, the prison and the hospital, struggling to provide some sort of service and care for all the people, despite the desperate economic situation. Over the years, the Fathers have built up contacts and relations with a number of Muslim families, too, and these we visit. I call to greet the local administrator, the **muhâfiz**, and the leader of the local Council. I visit the sugar factory to celebrate Mass in the purpose-built church. During the rains, harvesting the cane is impossible and the factory closes for maintenance and cleaning. Many of the younger men leave to find work elsewhere, so the congregation at Mass is modest. To the south in Girba, the rains have left the area around the church a sea of mud and we struggle to reach the centre for Mass on Sunday. Back in Halfa, the evening school which welcomes some 150 young adults for primary education on five evenings per week is also closed for two months during the rainy season. An old parishioner originally from Wau, John Basha, is engaged to paint the school - walls and blackboards. I supervise the work and am helped by the street-boys, Kur, Jafar, Taha and Dioup, to arrange the furniture and sweep. The place is transformed, neat and clean and ready for the resumption of lessons in mid-September. The old watchman, Halakah, an Eritrean refugee crippled by polio as a child, dreams of getting a ticket to Jerusalem and asks if I can speak to the parish priest - again - about the matter. We try to convince him that a trip to his own country, only 130km away,

might prove more feasible. I lead a day of recollection for a number of married couples in the parish. They all come to Confession and Holy Communion and seem regenerated by the experience.

I visit the hospital with the parish priest to anoint Kwol, a 28 year-old policeman, who, in little over a year, has been reduced to skin and bone by tuberculosis. He is extremely weak, but responds to the prayers and his eyes never leave the priest. Two other patients in the ward, both Muslim, look on and await their turn to be visited. Kwol died early next morning and was buried without delay.

On my last day in Halfa, I go to visit Sidonia, whose marriage with Dominic I blessed some years ago. She, too, is a shadow of her former self. Now expecting her second child, she sits on the edge of the bed, scarcely able to speak. We leave her money for food - meat or chicken or eggs - to supplement the poor diet. She takes drugs for T.B. which might affect the life of her baby. Her sister and the neighbours will help her. I have to leave.

My time in the Sudan is fast running out and I must return to **Khartoum**. The great plains are green - so green - and the prospect of a good harvest seems likely. In **Khartoum**, as in Halfa, there is much talk of peace - some form of peace for the year 2000. Great hopes and much talk, but the reality reveals continuing misery for many, many families in the Sudan - both Muslims and Christians. The problems continue and the misery grows daily more dire. Many of the young and the educated among the Southerners living in the North of the Sudan are leaving for Egypt. Visas for Egypt are being granted freely and without difficulty. The South is being systematically emptied by policies promoting war, famine and oppression. If peace should come, who will be here or there - to benefit?

Who cares? WHO CARES?

A Postscript:-

Since this article was written there have been several developments in the Sudanese situation. One of them concerns the two diocesan priests, Frs. Hilary Boma and Lino Sebit, who were imprisoned. President Omar al-Bashir pardoned them and the eighteen other prisoners at the beginning of December, 1999. The President ordered their release after the two priests are reported to have asked for forgiveness.

The pardon follows on from an agreement which was signed in Djibouti between the Government and Sadiq al-Mahdi, a former Prime Minister and exiled opposition leader, last November. The agreement gives a program to bring peace to the Sudan, but it has been rejected by many of the other exiled dissidents. Government officials have met with exiled dissidents in an attempt to encourage them to return and opposition parties legalized in preparation for parliamentary elections.

In another action the President declared a country-wide state of emergency on 13th. December, 1999, which is to last for three months. Amongst the reasons given for this declaration was the preservation of the unity, security and stability of the country due to foreign threats. Parliament was also dissolved and parts of the constitution suspended.

At a press conference Omar al-Bashir also said that the Speaker of Parliament, Hassan el-Turabi, had attempted to undermine him which gave him no option but to declare the state of emergency. Hassan el-Turabi in turn condemned the move as a coup d'état just two days before a parliamentary vote was due to take place to enable the President to be removed with a two-thirds majority vote and to create a new post of Prime Minister. The two leaders have been political rivals for some time and this appears to be a continuation of the feud especially with the Speaker declaring a *jihad* against the President.

Kordofan State which is mainly under Government control. 60% of the people in these 'villages' are thought to be Nubians. Food production, health services, water and sanitation are inadequate in the villages and 41 of them, with a population of 105,000, are considered 'vulnerable' by the UN.

Since 1992 the Government have been clearing the population of the Nuba Mountains. This has been done by blockading the mountains, which stops the Nuba people getting out and relief agencies getting in. Government forces then capture the people and forces them to live in the 'Peace Villages'. These are often situated close to Government garrisons and intensive agricultural schemes - the people are controlled by the former and used as cheap labour in the latter to produce export crops. The people who remain end up leading a nomadic life in danger of starvation.

OPERATION LIFELINE SUDAN

Many of the internally displaced people are helped by Operation Lifeline Sudan (OLS). OLS is an organisation made up of the UN (4) and various international NGOs. It is the main means by which humanitarian aid reaches people in the Sudan. The OLS is officially one unit, managed by the UN from Khartoum, but in practice it is divided into two sectors the Northern (Government controlled area, UN managed from Khartoum) and Southern (area controlled by opposition forces, managed from Nairobi). It negotiates with the various sides to allow the humanitarian agencies to distribute aid in the war zones.

The OLS began in March, 1989, after a UN-sponsored conference on relief operations held in Khartoum. It was formed in response to the need to assist the IDPs and after the 1987-88 famine which claimed the lives of about 0.75m people. It grew out of basic work which was done by the Government and especially

the UN after the latter arrived in September, 1988. Gradually OLS has built up a framework for its activities and both the Government and the SPLA have agreed to establish 'corridors of tranquillity' for safe passage of OLS relief. In its second phase the OLS expanded more into the South at the end of 1992.

PEACE MOVES

The South Sudan Independence Movement and several smaller factions from the south concluded 'the Khartoum Agreement' with the Government in April, 1997. 1999 saw more peace initiatives. There was a new round of the Inter-Governmental Authority on Development (IGAD) (5) talks in Nairobi, 19-24 July, 1999, but they ended without any breakthrough. It was then announced, on the 5th. August, that they would observe a seventy-day cease fire. The Government and SPLA then extended this by declaring a cease fire of three months on 15th. October 1999. This was generally respected in Bahr al-Ghazal and Lakes, but there were reports of violations in other parts of the country.

There have also been other peace initiative on Sudan such as a joint Egypt-Libya attempt and talks involving South Africa's President Thabo Mbeki. In early December, 1999, Sudan and Uganda agreed not to support rebel groups which have bases each other's countries, and to respect their territorial integrity. The two Presidents, Omar Al-Bashir (Sudan) and Yoweri Museveni (Uganda) signed an agreement to this effect during talks in Nairobi, Kenya, which were mediated by Jimmy Carter, the former American President.

Parts of the accord include returning prisoners of war, the locating and repatriation of refugees and people who have been abducted, an amnesty for combatants who renounce the use of force, the disbanding and disarming of the rebel groups, and opening of diplomatic missions in each capital.

Southern Sudan - Northern Uganda



Uganda broke off diplomatic relations with Sudan in 1994. The situation between the two countries was caused when Uganda accused Sudan of aiding the 'Lord's Resistance Army' and the 'Allied Democratic Forces' who are

trying to overthrow the Government of President Museveni. In turn Sudan accuses Uganda of supporting the 'Sudan People's Liberation Army' (SPLA) which is fighting for the autonomy of the southern part of the country.

FOOT NOTES: (1) The figures in plain text are from USCR, those in italics from UNHCR, and those within brackets are the people helped by UNHCR. At the end of 1998 the estimated number of Sudanese refugees, a total of 350,000, in neighbouring countries was as follows: 34-35,000 [34,000] in Central African Republic, 8,700-10,000 [8,600] in Chad, 30-31,200 [22,000] in D. R. Congo, 1,900-2,000 [1,900] in Egypt, 48,200-60,000 in Ethiopia, 45-48,200 [48,000] in Kenya, and 170-189,800 [169,800] in Uganda. Many more Sudanese exiles live in the various countries but do not have official refugee status. In its turn the Sudan is host to about 360,000 refugees from surrounding countries, the estimates are as follows: 4,400-5,000 from Chad, 330-3,000 [330] from D. R. Congo, 320-342,300 [147,300] from Eritrea, 30-35,600 [11,900] from Ethiopia, and 2,000 from Uganda. (2) The Sudanese Army (Popular Defence Force [PDF]), the SPLM/A, SPLA (SPLA, SPLA United, SSIA). (3) Concern was expressed by many when the US government passed a law to supply separate aid to the Rebels in Southern Sudan. (4) OLS coordinates work between various UN agencies such as WFP, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). (5) IGAD includes Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia, Sudan and Uganda.