

Complex Operations in Weak and Failing States

The Sudan Rebel Perspective

BY WILLIAM RENO

The U.S. Government provides a comprehensive plan for civilian-military efforts in failing states aimed at showing citizens that their own governments can protect them. The object is to weaken any appeal that rebels might develop among these populations. In Sudan, which ranks third in a prominent index of failed states,¹ this effort entails U.S. coordination of humanitarian aid, the provision of basic social services, and help to improve governmental function. This latest effort, part of the implementation of a 2005 peace agreement between a rebel army and Sudan's government, is part of an intensive 20-year official engagement with this country and its conflicts.

Sudan thus serves as a good illustration of complex operations that can inform effort of “synchronization, coordination, and/or integration of military operations with the activities of governmental and non-governmental entities to achieve unity of effort.”² Even though the military component played a minimal role in the Sudan case until recently, this experience with coordinating the other two components of this trinity highlights some important lessons for complex operations in the future.

Too little attention has been paid to how armed groups in targeted countries synchronize the activities of foreign operations to create their own “unity of effort.” This article focuses on how one group, the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA), and its political wing, the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM), have incorporated complex operations of foreigners into their strategies for fighting wars and gaining political power. Even as the SPLA has fought an insurgency campaign against Sudan's government, some rebel groups have significant experience in conducting their own versions of complex operations that involve nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), international agencies, and foreign governments over several decades. From the rebels' perspective, complex operations strengthen capacity to use foreign actors to their own advantage. Foreign-run operations can help rebels to recruit and discipline fighters, suppress factional divisions, and, most critically, convince local people that they, and not the government, protect noncombatants and

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Former SPLA soldiers retrained as police officers participate in graduation ceremony



UN (Tim McKulka)

that the international community accepts the rebels' claims to be "authentic representatives" of the people.

This article first considers the advent of complex operations in southern Sudan from the point of view of the international community, and especially the major U.S. goals there since the late 1980s. This experience has been at the forefront of coordination of U.S. agencies for overseas operations in a conflict zone and has been a significant example of this kind of approach. It was one of the first major efforts of its scale and complexity to provide relief and build local government administrative capacity in a conflict zone, and thus sets a pattern for later complex operations. The article then turns to the SPLA perspective and focuses on how rebels in Sudan interpreted and manipulated the institutional interests of a complex operation. The final section highlights some of the

lessons from this experience and points to some broad considerations for complex operations in other settings.

The View from Outside

The first large-scale experience with complex coordination in Sudan's conflict began with Operation Lifeline Sudan (OLS). The Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA) in the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) worked to coordinate Department of State activities with other government agencies and outsiders in a role similar to that envisioned more recently for the Office of the Coordinator for Reconstruction and Stabilization. OFDA worked with NGOs that had extensive knowledge of wartime conditions in Sudan, under the coordination of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) director James Grant, to launch a coordinated response

to the plight of noncombatants in what by then was a 6-year civil war. This collaboration led to the conference in Khartoum in 1989 that created OLS. This conference brought together USAID offices in Sudan and Kenya, members of Sudan's government, and United Nations (UN) officials to coordinate famine relief. Sudan was also a proving ground for improved UN coordination efforts, which led to the 1991 creation of the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs.³

One of the aims of the 1989 conference was to secure an agreement from Khartoum to provide “corridors of tranquility” through which aid to noncombatants could be delivered. This effort also required an agreement from the SPLA, which by 1989 had captured large areas of southern Sudan from its bases in Ethiopia. NGOs eager for access to rebel-held areas within the framework of the U.S.- and UN-sponsored agreement helped to organize formal talks with Lam Akol, the head of the SPLA's Office of Coordination and External Relations. These NGOs and UN officials provided the buffer that U.S. officials needed to avoid direct working relationships with the SPLA and its relief wing, the Sudan Relief and Rehabilitation Association (SRRA). This arrangement opened the way for other NGOs to work in SPLA-held territory without directly involving U.S. officials—but at the same time serving U.S. goals of addressing famine conditions under the rubric of OLS.

A military coup in Khartoum on June 30, 1989, and the uncooperative stance of the new regime complicated relief efforts, but OLS was renewed in March 1990. Later, the regime in Khartoum proved willing to accept the OLS presence in the south as part of its bid for international goodwill after having backed Saddam Hussein in the 1990 Gulf War. The 1992

international intervention in Somalia also may have alerted Khartoum that total refusal to permit the delivery of aid in a humanitarian crisis might bring even more unwelcome intervention. Thus, the OLS arrangement became institutionalized during the course of the 1990s, and assumed even more complex forms up to the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement in 2005.

OLS played a major role in providing direct humanitarian aid to all war-affected parts of southern Sudan, even though Sudan's government made serious efforts to manage the provision of aid for its own benefit. In enabling more NGOs to operate in Sudan, OLS functioned as a sort of indirect provider of public services to noncombatants. It also had a stabilizing effect on southern Sudanese society during the conflict. In the words of an important observer of politics in Sudan, the “real effect [of OLS] was to keep the household labour force intact, reduce the amount of time spent on gathering alternative sources of food, and reinforce networks of kinship exchange and exchange between neighbouring communities.”⁴

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Even though OLS and its partner organizations started out as an ad hoc response to a humanitarian emergency, it evolved into a quasigovernment for rebel-held areas. This was true even though these organizations had to carefully adhere to the Sudan government's insistence that OLS seek permission for each

relief flight. This was a severe restriction, resulting in an estimated OLS delivery rate of between 20 and 30 percent of predicted needs in the south in the early 1990s.⁵ Nonetheless, OLS gave the UN a vehicle to provide a regulatory framework for relief operations. NGOs were then able to participate in operations in rebel-held territories, regardless of whether they addressed all humanitarian aid needs in particular areas or not.

UN and NGO promotion of longer term development in these areas, or what they defined as capacity-building operations, led to more intensive consultations with rebels. These contacts were organized through the

foreign actors found that they could promote an indigenous state-building project and a democratic transition in the midst of a conflict even while relieving a humanitarian crisis

SRRA. After a factional split in 1991, the rival Southern Sudan Independence Movement (SSIM) set up the Relief Association of South Sudan (RASS). UNICEF then seconded and paid consultants to these organizations' Nairobi offices to provide technical advice, and gave grants to SRRA and RASS to pay staff and rent offices. This support amounted to about \$220,000 in direct financial aid in 1996.⁶

OLS officials also encouraged other international organizations and NGOs to develop formal relationships with indigenous southern Sudanese community groups. Their foreign partners could then help these Sudanese groups find and apply for foreign funding and would supervise their activities. In 1993, only two of these "civil society" groups had formal relationships with OLS-affiliated partners; by 1995,

more than 30 of these groups had appeared. These activities required a constant schedule of workshops and seminars as the Sudan-based organizations selected individuals to receive foreign-sponsored training. Nairobi became a base for these meetings, as well as for at least 50 Sudanese-run NGOs by 1997.⁷

This dense interaction between outsiders and the SPLA and SSIM led in 1994 to the establishment of formal OLS ground rules governing the conduct of the rebel organizations in exchange for humanitarian assistance. One document stressed that the "guiding principle of OLS and SRRA is that of humanitarian neutrality—an independent status for humanitarian work beyond political or military considerations."⁸ This cleared the way for other agencies to contribute to this process, for example, with the start of the predecessor to the USAID Sudan Transitional Assistance for Rehabilitation program.

These relationships seemed to put OLS and its partners into a position from which to influence the development of rebel organizations toward a greater interest in governance. These foreign actors found that they could promote an indigenous state-building project and a democratic transition in the midst of a conflict even while relieving a humanitarian crisis. Sudan's crisis in the 1990s therefore mirrored contemporary concerns over supporting improvements in local governance while providing aid to meet basic needs as components of an overall strategy to resolve a conflict.

The SPLA responded positively in 1994 when it announced its adoption of a framework for administration that included clear distinctions between civil and military institutions, a provision for the separation of powers in administration, and recognition of basic human rights.⁹ This announcement occurred

in the context of broader negotiations involving rebels and Sudan's government under the aegis of the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (an African regional association) and the Friends of the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (a group of Western countries including Canada, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, the United Kingdom, and the United States). The resulting Declaration of Principles set up a framework for peace negotiations that by 1996 involved Sudan's president. Now injecting a (faintly) military component, the Western countries would finance security patrols, supply technical equipment, and underwrite a secretariat in Nairobi for peace talks. A new round of negotiations began in 2002 and in 2005 produced the Comprehensive Peace Agreement that is the current framework for the postwar integration of rebel and government forces.

This evolving ad hoc complex operation produced more dividends in terms of the post-conflict construction of southern Sudan. By 2002, the SPLA had sponsored numerous conferences throughout southern Sudan, including meetings that led to commitments to improve the status of women, protect wildlife, and set up programs for the disadvantaged.¹⁰ This socialization of a rebel movement into the acceptance of basic global norms of governance appeared as one of the triumphs of the tedious but careful coordination of international assistance and international political engagement. Moreover, the framework for negotiation and the regulatory framework for the distribution of humanitarian aid contributed to the healing of the factional split within the SPLA. By the time the final peace agreement was signed in 2005, the SPLA and its more democratically inclined SPLM political wing were able to act as an authoritative representative of rebel forces and

enjoy the support of a vigorous civil society in southern Sudan, which was expected to give the peace agreement a solid political base.

The Rebel Perspective

The rebel perspective of these events was quite different. The SPLA began its fight for self-determination with the 1983 collapse of a decade-old peace agreement with the government of Sudan. Like many rebel movements of its time, the SPLA adopted a Marxist-Leninist framework, probably because it found the centralizing tendencies and association with liberation struggles elsewhere in Africa useful for maintaining internal unity and ideological focus. Its leadership also benefited from the patronage of Ethiopia's President Mengistu Haile Mariam, then in the midst of a "socialist revolution" with Soviet help in his own country. Mengistu was willing to provide the SPLA

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with a rear base in Ethiopian territory and used his security services to identify and eliminate rivals to the SPLA's leadership under John Garang. In return, the SPLA harassed Sudan's government, which was supporting Ethiopian separatists at the time. The SPLA even fought inside Ethiopia in support of Mengistu's army as it battled separatist rebels from its northern provinces. By the late 1980s, Ethiopian support was critical to the SPLA ability to control wide swaths of territory inside southern Sudan, and it was from this position of strength that it dealt with the newly formed OLS.

The collapse of Mengistu's government in mid-1991 in the face of advancing rebels (whom Khartoum had supported) came as a great disaster for the SPLA, as it was forced to leave Ethiopian territory. Suddenly denied their secure rear base, SPLA leaders faced splits in their own ranks. The OLS appearance on the scene was fortuitous for the SPLA core leadership. John Garang, the SPLA chairman, made his diplomatic debut in the context of his key role in ensuring SPLA cooperation with OLS. He toured the United States and Europe in mid-1989 as the head of an "authentic representative" of southern Sudan's people, and as one who had to be recognized as a negotiating partner on par with the government of Sudan if humanitarian relief supplies were to reach people in need. A graduate of Iowa State University (with a Ph.D. in agricultural economics) and of the infantry school at Fort Benning, Georgia (as a member of the prewar Sudan military), Garang's new status enabled him to renew contacts and to visit with members of the U.S. Congress and the Brookings Institution.¹¹ Even if the U.S. State Department refused to extend formal recognition to the SPLA, OLS equipped it to conduct its international relations at a new level.

OLS and its partners shifted the balance of resources toward the rebel forces with which they negotiated and that they thought would be the most reliable. The factional split in 1991, for example, raised concern among some foreign officials that the willingness to supply humanitarian relief to groups outside of the main SPLA framework would promote the formation of more factions, which would raise the financial expenses and complicate the political negotiations necessary to maintain relief operations.¹²

Although Sudan's government could manipulate relief deliveries for its own

advantage, the politically favored mainstream SPLA also was able to divert relief supplies for military purposes and to devise ways to tax relief aid that arrived via OLS. In the words of a member of the SPLA Executive Council, "Since humanitarian assistance is only provided for the needy civil population, the task of distribution of this assistance fell on specially selected SPLA officers and men who saw to it that the bulk of the supplies went to the army. Even in cases where the expatriate relief monitors were strict and only distributed relief supplies to the civilians by day, the SPLA would retrieve that food by night."¹³ This collaboration between rebels and relief agencies, regardless of the intentions of specific actors, was a significant shift from past practice among relief agencies to refrain from engaging with nonsovereign authorities that were fighting recognized governments.¹⁴ It also enabled the SPLA to adapt to the new situation its existing system of political commissars that it had developed under the tutelage of the regime in Ethiopia. Moreover, some SPLA cadres had received technical and political education in Cuba up to about 1990, and they could also be used to ensure that foreign-provided aid was employed in ways that benefited the rebel group.¹⁵ As an SPLA commander noted, commissars typically accompanied battlefield commanders in the 1980s to enforce political discipline and manage rebel contacts with local authorities, and this system of "political education" was easy to adapt to the challenges of managing relationships with new actors in the 1990s while the SPLA continued to fight its enemies.¹⁶

Even if Sudan's government asserted its sovereignty to interfere with and veto OLS relief flights, longer term aspects of the OLS engagement with the SPLA conveyed additional advantages to rebels. The external

support for the development of “civil society” groups gave the SPLA and its SRRA the capacity to screen participants in workshops and seminars and to influence which local NGOs would get contracts to implement foreign-supported development projects. Many of these Sudanese NGOs were headed by former SPLA members and other associates of the rebel group, including those that sprang up in Nairobi around the opportunities that the organizational base of the coordinated relief operation provided.¹⁷ What appeared to the international community to be part of the normalization in support of a peace process was to rebels the opportunity to assert political control over wider swaths of southern Sudanese society and dominate the distribution of resources from foreign sources while they continued to fight.

This boost in the political position of the SPLA appeared in its decision in 2000 to impose its own memoranda of understanding on NGOs in territory that the SPLA controlled. These included provisions that NGOs had to abide by SPLA and SRRA regulations and seek their permission before interacting with local communities. The foreign guests also had to pay various fees and taxes to the SPLA, including for permission to enter, work, and live in this territory, much as a sovereign government would demand.¹⁸ These regulations also allowed the rebels to control people in its territory and assert its political dominance as a gatekeeper to external resources. Traveling to rebel-held parts of Sudan at that time was like traveling to a new country, with SPLA travel permits, registries, and other administrative paraphernalia typical of a sovereign state. A senior SPLA commander who had served with the rebel group since 1983 described the NGO presence as supporting the SPLA’s objective of convincing local people in areas under their control that the SPLA was

better able than the government to protect and support them.¹⁹ In short, the Leninist organization that the SPLA developed in the 1980s under Ethiopian tutelage was well suited to manage the agendas of a new set of foreigners in ways that contributed to core goals of the rebels.

A few NGOs operating under the OLS rubric actively collaborated with the rebels. An investigation of Norwegian People’s Aid (NPA, known colloquially among some NGO workers as “Norwegian People’s Army”) “had for several years organised an air-bridge for the supply of weapons to battle zones within Sudan under the supervision of its Nairobi office. One of the NPA pilots involved in the gun running . . . stated that his plane had landed at SPLA bases with some 2.5 tonnes of weapons.”²⁰ A senior SPLA member who was responsible for managing its foreign affairs in the late 1980s and into the 1990s described the NPA as “outstanding” for the SPLA, and noted that “Norway has always been there.” He also noted

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that the SPLA’s relations with other NGOs were “strategic” as they assisted the rebel group in significant ways that enabled the rebels to concentrate more on fighting.²¹ NGOs that did not wish to provide direct military assistance had a hard time avoiding contributions to the military effort in some other form. Relief flights into SPLA-held territory, for example, routinely carried SPLA members.²²

The additional effect of this complex operation was to release the SPLA from the need to actually administer local communities while



Man displaced by attacks on his tribe waits to receive food ration

still being able to claim that they were protecting and providing for people by virtue of their gatekeeper status vis-à-vis foreigners. An early critic of OLS noted the weakness of administrative institutions in rebel-held areas in which aid was focused.²³ This is not to say that the SPLA did not provide local people with some level of order and security from attack, if not much in the way of social services.²⁴ This postwar complex operations arrangement continues to maintain this division of labor between the international community and rebel administration in the provision of services to people under its control. As of 2009, for example, the UN and other organizations provide “more than 80 percent of Southern Sudan’s safety net including primary health care and clean water.”²⁵

The development of complex and coordinated operations in southern Sudan since the signing of the 2005 peace agreement (and its provision for a referendum on secession scheduled for 2011) continues to serve SPLA political interests. Approximately 40 percent of the southern administration’s budget receipts, supported through an agreement with the government in Khartoum to share oil revenues, go to military spending.²⁶

Overall, the SPLA has ably manipulated the interests and agendas of outsiders, despite its position as a nonsovereign authority. It has been efficient at extracting resources and pursuing its political goals, even when these have been at odds with those of its foreign interlocutors. This disjuncture in perspectives is pervasive in discussions with members of the international community in southern Sudan and with SPLA members after the signing of the 2005 peace treaty. Many SPLA members assert that their willingness to fight is in the service of the independence of a sovereign state

in southern Sudan. They say that Khartoum would never consent to their secession even though a referendum on the issue is scheduled for 2011. They are convinced another war is likely. Meanwhile, many NGO workers and other foreigners condemn such talk as harmful to the peace agreement and remain focused on its implementation.²⁷ In sum, the SPLA has managed to use the intensive engagement in two decades of complex operations to leverage the power of much better endowed and capable actors to fight its enemies, discipline its own ranks, politically dominate local communities, and create a broader context in which its core goals are more likely to be achieved, regardless of whether its patrons want this outcome or not.

Sudan's Lessons for Complex Operations

The obvious difference between international engagement in Sudan and contemporary complex operations planning is the near absence of military engagement on the part of the intervening force in the former case. Even so, OLS and other actors have had military significance. The OLS apparatus allowed U.S. agencies and others to provide aid to rebels through intermediaries such as the SRRA that they could claim did not represent recognition or direct provisioning of rebels. The actual situation was that “SRRA officials were all named from among the soldiers anyway and retained their military rank. . . . If aid did materialize, the first human needs to be served would naturally tend to be those close to the [SPLA] army.”²⁸

This brand of complex operation did have an effect on the organization of the rebel group and its interests in providing governance to communities under its control. Rather than socializing the SPLA in the direction of a liberal political organization intent on implementing

the 2005 peace agreement, it has helped it to develop its institutions of control and to assert its political domination as the “authentic representative” of southern Sudanese society. Outside aid helped the struggling rebel group to further develop a separate administrative framework alongside the expanding range of contacts with foreigners and Sudanese society. This engagement has made it much more likely that the SPLA will eventually lead southern Sudan to independence with broad popular support.

This disjuncture between outsiders’ aims and local recipients’ interests appears in more recent U.S. military training efforts. One trainer was confident that SPLA fighters would accept American training in ways that would help to reshape the SPLA into a force more like the American military. Cultural differences could be overcome through personal contact, and this would lead tactically proficient SPLA fighters to use American expertise to develop into a disciplined military able to take its proper place within the framework of the 2005 peace agreement. While this is not an unreasonable proposition, at least some SPLA commanders saw the situation quite differently. They pointed out that the visibility of one trainer—a white contractor who drove a black Hummer in Juba traffic—emphasized

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American power but also the equally jarring mismatch of foreign advice and the local situation. As an SPLA commander with 25 years of guerrilla warfare experience remarked, “Why aren’t they asking us for advice in Iraq and

Afghanistan?” The United States, he stated, usually has a very good military strategy and a poor political strategy.²⁹ This condition, which is enhanced with the participation of large numbers of actors with diverse interests, offers valuable opportunities for manipulation and exploitation to groups such as the SPLA.

The SPLA story highlights the more general point that complex operations, with or without military components, have tended to favor the weaker, nonsovereign military force because humanitarian emergencies often take place in conditions where central state authority has grown weak or has broken down altogether. In these situations, such as in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Sierra Leone, or Liberia, humanitarian aid agencies and UN or regional peacekeepers need to negotiate with whatever armed force controls a particular area as a precondition for gaining access to people in need.

Responses to humanitarian emergencies have had explicit military components for some time. UN Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali’s *Agenda for Peace*, for example, set out a plan for preventative diplomacy, peacemaking, and peacekeeping that described well the ideals of the international intervention in Somalia in 1992.³⁰ But like more purely civilian complex operations, military engagement usually ends up with foreign actors seeking out collaborations with local armed groups on an informal basis, if not officially. Even places without a central government, such as Somalia, prove too difficult to pacify and administer without significant cooperation with groups who already have guns.

Counterinsurgency operations in some states can create humanitarian emergencies that bring combined civil-military responses that can be deemed complex operations, as in

Kurdistan-Iraq in 1991, Bosnia in 1992–1995, and Kosovo-Serbia in 1999. These interventions also tend to favor rebels, especially when rebels are keen to collaborate with the enemies of *their* enemies. The outcome of intervention in many of these conflicts has been the consolidation of the authority of secessionist rebels as they use their control of humanitarian aid to convince local people that they are the real government authority in that area. Moreover, these rebels are all the more convincing to non-combatants when they receive obvious support from important foreign partners.

Complex operations in the service of existing states are a relatively new development. The Sudan story shows, however, that getting local politics right is often even more complex than the challenges of administrative coordination. Actors that appear weak or disadvantaged often turn out to be those that are most motivated and most adept at manipulating outsiders and in playing their interests off one another. They suspect that outsiders are motivated by career goals that define success fairly narrowly, and that they will soon depart for the next disaster zone. Administrative coordination is an important component of a strategy to address these unintended outcomes. Even so, the local actors know they probably will spend the rest of their lives in that place, so they place a much greater urgency on achieving their goals than the foreign visitors, who believe they are training these local actors in their own image.

This is not an argument against the concept of complex operations. Instead, it is simply a warning to take the capabilities and interests of local actors seriously and to recognize how the interests and resources of foreigners can provide opportunities to local actors and can produce unintended consequences. **PRISM**

Notes

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¹³ Peter Adwok Nyaba, *The Politics of Liberation in South Sudan: An Insider’s View* (Kampala, Uganda: Fountain Publishers, 1997), 53.

¹⁴ Mark Duffield, “NGO Relief in War Zones: Towards an Analysis of the New Aid Paradigm,” *Third World Quarterly* 18, no. 3 (1997), 534–535.

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¹⁶ Discussion with SPLA major general, Juba, Sudan, August 22, 2009.

¹⁷ Riehl, 14.

¹⁸ “Sudan: Focus on NGO Pullout from SPLM,” UN Integrated Regional Information Network, Nairobi, Kenya, February 29, 2000.

¹⁹ Interview with SPLA lieutenant general, Juba, Sudan, August 25, 2009.

²⁰ European-Sudanese Public Affairs Council, “Perpetuating Conflict and Sustaining Repression: Norwegian People’s Aid and the Militarisation of Aid in Sudan,” London, December 1999, 2. See also Royal Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Evaluation of Norwegian Humanitarian Assistance to the Sudan* (Oslo: Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation, 1997).

²¹ Interview with senior SPLA member, Juba, Sudan, August 24, 2009.

²² Author’s observations in 2003 while traveling to SPLA-held areas. Nairobi-based Sudanese NGOs helped to arrange this travel and secure SPLA travel documents.

²³ David Keen, *Refugees: Rationing the Right to Life, the Crisis of Emergency Relief* (London: Zed Books, 1992).

²⁴ Øystein Rolandsen, *Guerrilla Government: Political Changes in the Southern Sudan During the 1990s* (Uppsala, Sweden: Nordiska Africainstitutet, 2005), 68–70.

²⁵ United Nations Security Council, *Report of the Secretary General on Sudan* (New York: United Nations, January 30, 2009), 10.

²⁶ “Sudan-United States: No Longer at Ease,” *Africa Confidential* 50, no. 2 (January 23, 2009), 7.

²⁷ Observations from the author’s August 2009 and earlier visits to southern Sudan.

²⁸ *African Rights, Food and Power* (London: African Rights, 1997), 88–89.

²⁹ From discussions in Juba, Sudan, with SPLA commanders and an American military trainer and meetings with SPLA commanders in SPLA Headquarters, Juba, where American military trainers were observed.

³⁰ Boutros Boutros-Ghali, *An Agenda for Peace* (New York: United Nations, 1995), 39–72.