

# **The Crisis in the Nuba Mountains**

Address to  
**The Working Group  
on Indigenous Populations**

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by  
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Distinguished Guests  
Ladies and Gentlemen

My name is Suleiman Musa Rahhal.

On behalf of the Nuba people of Sudan, I send my greetings and thanks to the Secretary General of the United Nations, H.E. Butros Butros Ghali, the United Nations Under Secretary for Human Rights, Mr Anton Blanca, to all members of the United Nations and to the Anti Slavery Society for declaring 1993 the Year of the Indigenous People, in recognition of their rights as members of the world community.

Ladies and Gentlemen

It is indeed an honour to address the distinguished members of the United Nations and the international community present today on this momentous occasion. This is the first time in our long history of struggle for survival that the voice of the Nuba people is to be heard across the world.

Today, in many member countries of the United Nations, there are some 300 million indigenous people whose basic rights are being systematically denied through the use of violence and suppression, forced assimilation, forced displacement and exploitation.

It is now clear that former colonial policies, which were based on "protection and civilisation", are responsible for much of the misery which besets the indigenous people in the world today. At Sudan's independence in 1956, the Nuba people were given on a plate by the colonial administration to the Sudanese Arabs who, in effect, became their new colonial masters. If it had not been for the colonial policies, therefore, the Nuba people would probably not have found themselves victims of genocide and repression now. It is our hope that the international community and Britain in particular, as the former colonial power, will recognise its moral duty and obligation to set right some of the past injustices and offer practical and moral support to the Nuba and other indigenous peoples of Sudan. But now, while not forgetting the past, let us concentrate on the present.

Today my people, the Nuba, who live in central Sudan - the heart of Sudan - are fighting for ~~our~~<sup>their</sup> collective rights. We are fighting for our basic political rights, our right for cultural autonomy, the right to determine our own identity, the right to right to be what we are, the right to have control over our land, and the right of self-determination. In other words, the right to be Nuba.

I was born a Nuba. I am proud to be a Nuba, as are my children and my people. The deliberate and systematic campaign which the government of Khartoum has embarked upon to eradicate Nuba identity and our cultural heritage must be condemned and immediately stopped.

## The Nuba

There are 597 different ethnic groups who live within the present day borders of the Sudan, Africa's largest country. The Nuba, who live in Kordofan Province of Northern Sudan, are one of the largest groups of non-Arab indigenous people.

The word Nuba (from "Nubia" or "Noubai") was first used by the Greek Eratosthenese in 200 BC to describe people living south of Egypt. It was later used by Arab immigrants to Sudan to describe all negroid peoples. Today the term Nuba describes the non-Arab people who live in the mountains of southern Kordofan and which have come to be known after them, as the Nuba Mountains.

Little is known about the ancient history of the Nuba. Tradition and historical linguistics show that the Nuba are indigenous to Sudan and migrated to the mountains of southern Kordofan at some point in the distant past, in the face of a wave of Arab settlers from the north. Similarities between some Nuba languages and the Nubian language of northern Nile ~~and~~ suggests that Nuba culture may have its roots in the ancient Nilotic Kingdoms of Meroe and Kush.

The Nuba Mountains, which cover an area of some 30,000 square miles (roughly the area of Scotland) have been the homeland of the Nuba people for centuries. Today there are over one million Nuba people living in the mountains. They speak over 50 different dialects, which are categorised into ten language groups. They practice a mixture of Islam, Christian and tribal religious beliefs. They are renowned for their wrestling, their body art and their music.

The Nuba are first and foremost an agricultural people and there is a strong association among the Nuba between the land, agriculture and culture. Our traditional cultural ceremonies follow the agricultural cycle. Our agricultural system make the best use of the delicate environment in which we live, integrating shifting rainfed crop production and livestock husbandry. Our land is ~~not~~ the most fertile, it is our vital resource and is never wasted.

## Nuba - Arab Relations

For centuries the Nuba have shared the region with the nomadic Arab Baggara tribes, who migrate through the area with their cattle twice a year. Although in the past the Nuba have been subject to raiding and slavery, earlier this century we managed to resolve our difficulties and were able to live together side by side in relative peace, mutual trust and understanding. This relationship was maintained by local chiefs who were wise and competent enough to solve any conflicts without resorting to violence. Disputes over land and water were resolved at annual conferences which took place on neutral ground at a place called lake Kaylak.

Through respect for the wisdom of the Arab sheiks, many Nuba accepted Islam in a peaceful, and dignified way. Today at least 40% of Nuba are practising ~~Muslims~~<sup>Islam</sup> and the majority speak Arabic as the lingua franca of Sudan. Sadly, as a result of the policies of the Sudanese government, relations between the Nuba and their Arab neighbours in the past two decades has deteriorated.

#### Militias - How the Sudanese Government Encourages Conflict

Under the laws first laid down by the colonial administration, Arab nomads were not allowed to enter the agricultural lands of the Nuba, before the harvest was collected. Nowadays, these laws are no longer implemented and the nomads are allowed to move freely into these areas before crops are harvested, thus resulting in conflicts between the Nuba farmers and the Arab herdsmen. This is one example of how a relationship of co-operation, which worked for generations, has been destroyed as a result of the policies of the governments of Khartoum.

Following the outbreak of war in 1983 between the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) and the Sudanese government, the national governments in Khartoum began to arm the Arab tribes who move through the Nuba Mountains. Their militias, the so-called "Murhaleen" and "Mujihadeen", have been provided with sophisticated weapons and training under the pretext of fighting insurgents from the SPLA. It has become clear now, however, that the policy of the present government is to drive the Nuba people from their ancestral lands and to give those lands to loyal Arab tribes, or convert them to mechanised farms.

#### The Effects of Mechanised Farming

In the mid-seventies, Sudan was being hailed as the bread-basket of the Arab world. Making use of freely available petro-dollar loans, plans were laid down to expand mechanised agriculture from the irrigated lands along the Nile westwards into the fertile rainfed plains of Southern Kordofan. This idea was encouraged with international donor support, such as the World Bank, who supported the creation of the government Mechanised Farming Corporation.

The expansion of mechanised farming schemes has been rapid. The licensed area for mechanised schemes alone grew from less than half a million hectares in 1968, to some 5 million hectares in 1986; an equal number of hectares are farmed illegally.

The rapid expansion of mechanised farming in the Nuba Mountains has had an adverse effect on the livelihood of the Nuba, as well as on the land itself. Nuba have lost access to traditional farming lands, water points, grazing lands and herding routes. Many Nuba have become landless as a result. In most cases the lands have been confiscated from the Nuba without compensation. In February 1993, the government announced a programme of land sales in South Kordofan. Areas around Khor Shalongo, near Lagowa were sold off. There are no Nuba names on the list of new owners. The new owners are Arabs, mainly rich merchants, absentee landlords in Khartoum, who support the National Islamic Front dominated government.

The clearing of forests, deep ploughing of the land, the lack of long term investment and over use of the land for short term profit, means that we are now faced with an environmental and ecological disaster.

#### Al-Jihad in the Nuba Mountains

When the present government of Lt. General Omar Al Bashir seized power four years ago, the Nuba people at first were optimistic. Messages of support were sent to the President and to the National Security Advisor, Ibrahim Nyail Idam, himself of Nuba descent. The Nuba called on the government to provide protection from the Arab militias. However, the government never came to their aid. Instead it has continued with the same policy as the previous civilian government. Indeed the militia have been given even more freedom and weaponry to drive the Nuba out from their land.

For the past three years the Nuba Mountains have been virtually cut off from the rest of the world as government armed forces have besieged the mountains. At the same time military intelligence has detained masses of educated Nuba on the suspicion of being SPLA sympathisers and for the fear that they might act as leaders of their communities. Over a hundred have been arrested in Kadugli, Dilling, Lagowa and other towns in the Nuba Mountains. The detainees have been subjected to torture and killed without trial.

In January 1992, the National Islamic Front dominated regime intensified its campaign against the Nuba, when the Governor of Kordofan Province declared a holy war or "jihad" against the Nuba people. A large number of government armed forces and Arab militia were sent to the mountains. Backed up by indiscriminate aerial bombing and shelling, the government army has carried out a brutal campaign involving the destruction of villages, looting properties, the abduction children and women, the killing of thousands and the forced dispersal of tens of thousands of Nuba from their homelands and into camps on the outskirts of the towns of Kadugli, Dilling, Lagowa and El Obied or dumped in camps in northern Sudan. Many of those relocated have died of hunger, exposure and disease. Some have been taken to work on agricultural farms of the wealthy Arab merchants without pay.

The deliberate and forced relocation of the Nuba amounts to what Africa Watch and Amnesty International have described as "ethnic cleansing". We believe it is a deliberate policy of this government to eradicate the identity and culture of the Nuba people. As a result, our people are now refugees in their own country.

To implement this policy, the government in Khartoum is using food as a weapon. It is preventing food aid and aid workers from entering the Nuba mountains, the intention being to starve people to death. This has caused considerable sufferings to tens of thousands of starvation of our people.

Added to this, the determination by the National Islamic Front government to implement sharia Islamic law has brought a lot of misery to the non-Muslim Nuba. Churches and worship shelters have been burned in many Nuba villages. Priests and Christian lay workers have been harassed and forced to flee their parishes. But this is not a religious war. The government does not discriminate between Muslim and Christian Nuba. I myself am a Muslim.

This brutal campaign by the government now threatens the very survival and existence of the Nuba people in the Sudan. The latest report by the Amnesty International tells of a terrible massacre committed against the Nuba in Jebel Heiban between December and early January of this year. Hundreds, maybe thousands of men and women and children were killed and dumped in mass graves. Is this the beginning of the end of the last of the Nuba in Sudan?

### The International Response

I can hardly believe what I hear and read about events in the Nuba Mountains. I cannot believe that such terrible things could happen in our modern times. What shocks me even more is the silence in the international community. While atrocities continue to happen on an unprecedented scale and the government continues to refuse to allow UN food aid to reach the Nuba Mountains, the United Nations and the international community sit quietly and pay no attention. Why do they watch so silently the disappearance of my people and their culture?

We hope that in this year of the World's Indigenous Peoples the international community, and in particular the United Nations, will take more positive steps and serious practical measures to alleviate the sufferings of the Indigenous People around the world. We ask them to provide immediate protection and support to those people whose very survival, like my own people, the Nuba of Sudan, is much threatened and facing virtual disappearance.

### Appeal

Specifically, we appeal to the international community:

1. To condemn the Sudan Government for the arbitrary arrests, the extra-judicial killings and the campaign of ethnic cleansing it is pursuing in the Nuba Mountains.
2. To put pressure on the Sudan Government to allow humanitarian aid and international non-governmental organisations to go to the Nuba Mountains.
3. To put pressure on the Sudanese government to withdraw all military forces from the Nuba Mountains.
4. To put pressure on the Sudan government to allow international human rights observers, independent press and journalists into go the Nuba Mountains.
5. To ensure that the Sudan government stops the forced relocation of the Nuba people of Sudan.

6. Put pressure on the Sudan Government to end the civil war which is threatening the lives of millions of people<sup>and</sup> to find the lasting peace in the Sudan.

7. To exert its influence on all military, political and religious factions in Sudan to reach a political settlement to the present war, and to ensure that any resolution to the conflict contains measures recognising the rights of the Nuba and all other indigenous peoples of Sudan.