

Where does the rebel SPLM-North get its weapons?

Monday 24 September 2012

By Eric Reeves

September 23, 2012-

We have heard for many months now accusations from the Obama administration, the UN, the African Union, and other international actors that there is somehow an equivalent responsibility on the part of Juba and Khartoum for the arming of military "proxies": Khartoum arming, supplying, and providing sanctuary to brutal renegade militia forces in the South; Juba supplying (so it is claimed) substantial aid to the Sudan People's Liberation Army-North, particularly to the forces of Abdel Aziz al-Hilu in the Nuba Mountains. What has long been striking about this version of "moral equivalence" is the dramatic disparity in the evidence available. Notably Khartoum, which is most insistent in claiming that Juba is assisting the SPLA-North, has provided no evidence of any kind.

The Small Arms Survey has provided many highly detailed, authoritative analyses of weapons captured from Khartoum-backed militia groups in the South, and these make indisputably clear the regime's very substantial support for men like David Yau Yau, Johnson Olonyi, Gabriel Tanginya ("Tang"), and formerly George Athor (now dead) and Peter Gadet (who has yet again switched sides). By contrast, there is almost no evidence—from the Small Arms Survey or anyone else—of Juba's assistance to the SPLA-North.

No doubt some food and fuel has made its way into the Nuba from the South, and perhaps small amounts of military equipment, although there is no physical evidence of weapons transfers. And there can be no doubt about the South's deep sense of common cause with the people of South Kordofan and Blue Nile. Indeed, the SPLA-North is made up primarily of men who fought in the civil war alongside the South, although Khartoum's campaign of extermination has had the effect of bringing under arms many men whose families have been killed, their lands rendered useless by aerial bombardment, and who endure the punishing effects of impending famine.

But there is simply no comparing Khartoum's support for military proxies in South Sudan with what Juba has provided to the Nuba, especially since the SPLA-N retained a great deal of the weaponry from the time during which it was part of a united SPLA (they formally split a year ago). Khartoum's support for military proxies in the South extends well back into the early 1990s, and continued in especially destructive fashion during the "oil war" (roughly 1998-2002). This regime policy extended to giving support to Joseph Kony's maniacal and unspeakably barbarous Lord's Resistance Army. As the International Crisis Group reported in 2006:

"Khartoum now admits that the LRA was given sanctuary and logistical support as part of a destabilization strategy and scorched earth campaign against Sudanese civilians." ("A Strategy for Ending Northern Uganda's Crisis," ICG, January 11, 2006, page 4, <http://www.crisisgroup.org/home/index.cfm?id=3864&l=1>)

Those who have attempted to establish an equality between the support offered to "proxies" by Juba and by Khartoum conveniently elide any reference to this finding of ICG.

The most recent report from the Small Arms Survey thus provides especially timely research, not only into what sustains the increasing—and increasingly invisible—violence in Darfur, but how weapons are reaching various rebel groups in (northern) Sudan. Of particular note are the conclusions about the weaponry of the SPLA-North of Abdel Aziz al-Hilu:

"The evidence outlined in this Issue Brief indicates that Sudan's major international arms suppliers, including the Russian Federation, Belarus, and China, have continued to supply SAF [Sudan Armed Forces] with weapons despite sustained evidence that SAF is continually and unlawfully moving these weapons into Darfur. Since early 2011, many of the same types of ammunition and munitions identified in the hands of all sides in Darfur have also appeared among forces fighting in South Kordofan, Blue Nile, and South Sudan. The apparent common source, as in Darfur, is SAF stocks, used by SAF and its proxies, and captured from them by SPLM-N and JEM fighters. The commonalities between the arms and ammunition used in Darfur, South Kordofan, Blue Nile, and South Sudan show history repeating itself: the same international arms flows into Sudan that have consistently supplied the Darfur conflict over the past seven years...."

("Business as Usual: Arms flows to Darfur 2009-12," September 2012,

<http://smallarmssurveysudan.org/pdfs/HSBA-SIB-20-Arms-flows-to-Darfur-2009-12.pdf>)

It is time for the international community to end its expedient and disingenuous comparisons of the scale of support provided by Juba and Khartoum to respective military "proxies." Indeed, it is time cease referring to the SPLA-North as a "proxy" of South Sudan—time to cease pretending that there is no difference between what motivates the renegade militias operating ruthlessly in the South and what drives the SPLA/M-North, which represents the deeply felt grievances and marginalization experienced by the people of South Kordofan and Blue Nile. Men like David Yau Yau are simply instruments of civilian

destruction and chaos; they have and serve no meaningful political agenda. The SPLA/M-North is fighting for survival and for justice, an end to discrimination, and an end to persecution on the basis of ethnicity and religion.

They are not the same, they are not "morally equivalent"; to pretend for reasons of diplomatic expediency that they are—in order to project a contrived "even-handedness"—is perverse and a betrayal of the people of greater Sudan. For so long as Khartoum believes that it pays no price for its support of these brutally destructive militia groups in the South, so long as such support is considered by the Obama administration, the UN, and the African Union simply a "wash"—the negotiating equivalent of Southern "support" for the Nuba—diplomacy to end the vast humanitarian crises in South Kordofan and Blue Nile will continue.

In turn this will create larger and larger refugee populations in South Sudan—already in the range of 200,000 (excluding the refugees in Ethiopia and the Dinka Ngok who fled to the South following Khartoum's military seizure of Abyei in May 2011). These populations in Upper Nile and Unity states are already overwhelming humanitarian capacity, and as the region begins to dry out after the long rainy season, we may be sure that violence and desperate hunger will drive many more tens of thousands of human beings to the South.

Of course acknowledging the gross misrepresentation embodied in such "equivalence" would make it more difficult for the Obama administration to sustain its current policy centerpiece, as articulated by Obama administration special envoy for Sudan Princeton Lyman: "Frankly, we do not want to see the ouster of the [Sudanese] regime nor regime change." As its justifying corollary, Lyman asserts that the Khartoum regime is capable of "carrying out reform via constitutional democratic measures." And here we come to the real heart of darkness in President Obama's Sudan policy. Cleaving to such a preposterous claim puts the U.S. on the wrong side of history, and represents apparent ignorance of the intensifying dissatisfaction that is everywhere in Sudan; it also promises to have immensely destructive consequences in the short term, indeed until regime change does indeed come.

Thus the question that remains most exigent: what elements within the Obama administration resist such readily apparent truths?

Eric Reeves is author of a forthcoming eBook, [Compromising with Evil: An archival history of greater Sudan, 2007 - 2012](http://www.CompromisingwithEvil.org) (September/early October 2012); available at no cost at: www.CompromisingwithEvil.org