

The Washington Times

WASHINGTON, D.C., MONDAY, MAY 3, 1999 ***

Faith seen as path to peace in troubled Sudan

Nongovernment groups try to end war between Muslims, Christians

By Larry Witham
THE WASHINGTON TIMES

The Muslim-Christian rivalry woven into Sudan's long civil war is an intractable problem that makes geopolitical thinkers throw up their hands.

For Douglas Johnston, a conflict-resolution advocate, religion may be an avenue to end the long-standing conflict when all else has failed.

Muslims and Christian have some common ground no matter how bitterly they differ, said Mr. Johnston, who recently visited Khartoum to meet officials of Sudan's Foreign Ministry.

"One of the touchstones was talking about Jesus," he said of that session. "The foreign minister had formerly been head of the inter-religious council, a group of Christian and Muslim leaders who meet regularly."

In the world of geopolitics, the fact that Jesus said "blessed are the peacemakers," or that Jesus is praised frequently in the Koran, would be considered by many policy-makers and diplomats as a very small building block indeed.

Yet the private initiative by Mr. Johnston illustrates what others consider an increasingly credible approach to global peacemaking. In July, he will step down as executive vice president of the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) to start the new International Center for Religion and Diplomacy.

"He is one of a number of people who have tried [personal diplomacy] on the Sudan," said Chris Mitchell of the Institute for Conflict Analysis and Resolution at George Mason University.

Mr. Mitchell said diplomacy by a nongovernmental organization, or NGO — also called "Track II" diplomacy — can be used in a conflict situation to work with grassroots populations, with political leaders, or through religious groups.

But, he added, it is almost always long-term work.

"People will ask, 'How many conflicts did you solve last week?'" said Mr. Mitchell, a 30-year veteran of such efforts. "It's much slower and more complicated than you might think."

Track II diplomacy

Mr. Johnston said he went to Sudan to explore whether "recent conciliatory gestures" by the government, and the aftermath of the U.S. cruise-missile attack on a pharmaceutical plant, might allow for talks with the Sudanese leaders.

Nobody knows if the Track II approach can work in Sudan. But there is abundant evidence, people in the field said, that this kind of diplomacy has more history than people know about — and that the approach has become even more prominent in the past decade.

"People no longer think of us as simply naive do-gooders," said Mr. Mitchell of the George Mason institute. "They consider that you do have a place in the array of things, even in a vast, horrible situation like Sudan."

Joseph Montville, who heads the Preventive Diplomacy Program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, coined the term "Track II" in a 1980 Foreign Policy article.

He said that such work may be traced to President Eisenhower's use of magazine editor Norman Cousins to begin backstage talks with the Soviets at Dartmouth College in 1959.

Now, he said, the U.S. Foreign Service Institute — a State Department branch that educates its Foreign Service staff, has put into the curriculum study of the role of NGOs in official nation-state diplomacy. "It is a milestone in the change of world view," said Mr. Montville.

Track II diplomacy, he said, "Lays out the intellectual and moral basis for a settlement. But in reality, moral-intellectual settlement is not enough." Those kinds of plans must be passed on to governments or armies, who hopefully will be persuaded to enter negotiations.

Mr. Montville, formerly a career Foreign Service officer, said the product of Track II work also has gained a "growing recognition from the U.S. military." But in his experience, he added, it is easier to persuade a group of elites to consider a settlement than to sell it to the populace of an aggrieved society.

Taking risks

This work, which he calls "healing the wounds of history," is an on-the-ground approach that is similar to what another Washington institution, the Institute for Multi-track Diplomacy, is trying to do.

"We look for risk-takers," said the institute chairman, John W. McDonald, a 40-year veteran of diplomacy and former U.S. ambassador to the United Nations.

Risk-takers are people in a country who are willing to meet and talk with opponents in a conflict, risk the label of traitor or suffer retribution, he said. Yet they are the ones who can start a change, he added.

The institute's work, under way since 1992, has taken it to Cyprus, Israel, Bosnia and four African nations to apply a "nine-track" approach to peacemaking. The tracks range from a stable government and a free market to citizen exchanges, training in conflict resolution — and ample funding for such work.

Mr. McDonald said the role of religion in ethnic strife often is "overstated." Yet if there is one quickest way to defuse an internal national conflict, he said, it is to end laws that deny minorities their religious or ethnic identity.

"That can be done by the stroke of a pen," he said.

Mr. Johnston, founder of the new religion and diplomacy center, is trying to apply some of these principles in Sudan. But his first step has also taken him into a heated Washington debate on what works best in resolving conflicts.

Since 1980, the debate has been in terms of Track I and Track II kinds of diplomacy. Track I is the classic use of government negotiation, taking sides, deployment of military force or use of economic sanctions.

The second track tries to bring a similar result by personal, quiet and neutral "engagement" with a regime or with both sides in a conflict.

For the "first undertaking" of his new center, Mr. Johnston said he wanted to work in a place where the magnitude of suffering could no longer be ignored. To some in Washington, talking with Sudan's leaders is both useless and naive.

Campaign against Sudan

"You can't negotiate with someone who is an architect of genocide," Nina Shea of Freedom House said of the military-backed government in Khartoum, which is led by Lt. Gen. Omar Bashir since 1989.

She said the ideological leader of Sudan, Hassan al-Turabi — speaker of the National Assembly and head of the push to enforce Islamic law — also is "very sophisticated" in using religious language to win sympathy in the West.

"In a place like Ireland, conflict resolution can work," but not in Sudan, Ms. Shea said.

Freedom House, in support of a Campaign of Conscience, has urged that the United States declare that "genocide" has taken place in Sudan.

The campaign also calls for international economic sanctions. It has begun a campus campaign, hoping to galvanize a popular student protest against Sudan's regime like the groundswell that developed during the Vietnam War or in the decade before South Africa dismantled apartheid.

At the U.S. Institute of Peace, African activities director David Smock said any number of U.S. approaches can have their proper role in Africa.

But for Sudan, he puts the most hope in official peace talks supervised by the Kenya-led Intergovernmental Authority for Development (IGAD).

"It's moving into a critical stage right now," he said, adding that the talks are gaining "higher levels" of support from the U.S. and European governments.

On Friday, the United States announced that the economic sanctions it has imposed on Sudan for hosting terrorism will be relaxed so that food and medical supplies may be sold, but only for cash. Mr. Johnston called it "a step in the right direction."

The country has been ruled by Gen. Bashir since he took power in a 1989 coup. This followed a civil war that broke out in 1983, ending a period of relative peace. That had been brokered by the World Council of Churches and African church groups, in an agreement that had given the south autonomy from the north.

Northern Sudan, which is dominated by an Arab and Islamic culture, has attempted since the end

of colonial rule to unify the country, which includes an African culture of Christians and animists that dominates the south.

While the recent State Department report on human rights does not use the term "genocide" to speak of the increased rate of casualties since the mid-1990s, it acknowledges that the civil war has religious and ethnic roots.

"Fears of Arabization and Islamization and the imposition of [Islamic law] fueled support for the civil war throughout the country," said the report, issued in January.

It also reported that "all sides involved in the fighting were responsible for abuses in violation of humanitarian norms."

With a population of 27.5 million, Sudan now has 4 million displaced persons — making it the country with the largest number of internal refugees.

No government solution

Freedom House, which is more critical of Sudan than the State Department, has decried the slave trade and said Sudan's control of food relief efforts amounts to a "calculated starvation" in rebel-controlled areas.

Roger Winter, director of the U.S. Committee for Refugees, said Sudan has suffered 2 million "war-related" deaths. But he said the overall conflict cannot be called genocide — except in a few pockets where food had been cut off to an isolated population, such as the Nuba Mountains.

Mr. Winter, who heads an NGO, said so many private efforts have reached into Sudan because there is no U.S. government solution for the tragedy. Still, he added, private diplomats often are "not professionals, who take the situation down a blind alley" — a point critics of Track II work often make.

Still, Mr. Johnston of the religion

and diplomacy center, through friendships in Christian and Muslim circles, found his way to Khartoum to meet on March 18 with Sudan's minister of external affairs, Mustapha Osman.

Mr. Johnston said he was surprised at the state of Islam in Sudan. "What I found when I got there is a more progressive form of Islam than I had expected," he said.

For example, he said, several women have seats in the parliament and others have ministerial posts. "There are more women than men in the universities, and no woman that I saw was wearing a veil."

Mr. Johnston also spoke for two hours with Mr. Turabi, whom he described as the chief architect of the modern Islamic resurgence in Africa. "I came away with the impression that he is trying to construct a form of Islam that will appeal to people," he said.

Yet he did not downplay the widely confirmed reports of human rights abuses and the coercive use of Islam in the country. He said that a key solution will be how to exempt non-Muslims in Sudan from the enforcement of Islamist law, or Sharia.

A 'bold stroke'

Following his meeting with Mr. Osman, the Sudanese foreign minister, Mr. Johnston sent him a letter that recommended:

- A visit to Sudan by Robert Seiple, U.S. ambassador for international religious freedom and reconciliation.

- A three-day conference of religious leaders in Khartoum to discuss religious freedom, including recommendations to the government on how it might end the "second-class status" of non-Muslims under Sharia.

- A "bold stroke" by the government announcing an "international

ally supervised" referendum on self-determination by the south in 2001 — on the condition that the rebel group, the Sudan People's Liberation Movement, agrees to a cease-fire.

In Mr. Osman's letter of response, provided by Mr. Johnston, the Sudanese foreign minister welcomed the suggestions and urged that the United States "partake in a course of dialogue rather than confrontation."

One Sudanese exile, Imam Mohammed Magid of the All Dulles Area Muslim Society in Herndon, said that such inter-religious efforts could produce a change in Sudan.

"Authentic Muslims and authentic Christians are still talking with each other in the north and the south, at the local level," said Mr. Magid, who came here with his father, Haggajid Musa, in 1986.

His father had been minister of inter-religious affairs in Sudan under an elected regime, he said.

He said the grass-roots people should "pressure" the current Muslim leadership to live up to its earlier promises of a modern Islam that allows for religious pluralism. "Christians should be exempted from Islamic law, regarding criminal law," Mr. Magid said.

Highly skilled cadre

Western Christians in diplomacy have not ruled out Track II approaches in Sudan, either.

Tonight, the Episcopal Diocese of Washington's Peace Commission will host a talk by an experienced diplomat and a charity worker on how "outsiders" can empower Sudanese to resolve their crisis.

Books on private diplomacy have often set the agenda. Mr. McDonald of the Institute for Multi-track Diplomacy edited an early symposium book on the subject, "Conflict Resolution: Track II Diplomacy," in 1985.

A book by Mr. Johnston also opened the way for his work. Published in 1994, "Religion: The Missing Dimension of Statecraft," assesses seven situations in which Track II diplomacy by religious groups or mediators has resolved major conflicts since World War II.

Drawing on these and other lessons, the new center will work with a small, highly-skilled cadre that can act quickly in "a preventative mode" but also in conflict situations.

The center has a \$7 million funding goal for the first three years of projects. "The priority," Mr. Johnston said, "will be to facilitate joint efforts between politics and religion in support of peacemaking."

In Sudan, he believes official diplomacy has stalemated and doubts any country will intervene by military force. "Nor do I see a strategy of punitive sanction achieve the goals," he said.

"How best to resolve the impasse and stop the bloodshed?" he said. His answer is "engagement," even by private diplomacy.

Can it work in Sudan? "There have been stunning successes," Mr. Mitchell of the George Mason institute said of Track II diplomacy. "There have also been horrible blunders."