



WEB EXCLUSIVE

Sudan: Another Viewpoint

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CBN.com - Douglas Johnston, the head of the International Center for Religion and Diplomacy, has stepped in to do what he can to bring Sudan's bloody war to an end. But he does not approach it from the same angle as many conservative Christians who are furious at the way Islamic fundamentalists have persecuted, killed and enslaved Sudanese Christians.

Late last year Johnston's center organized a gathering in Sudan's capital Khartoum that brought together Muslim, Christian and African traditionalist religious leaders and scholars. He told CBN News what happened there.

Johnston: We invited them to come together and try to address some of the religious issues relating to the war and to social tension more generally. Well, the Christian leaders were there with their heels dragging. After being beat over the head for so many years now, they're very skeptical and dubious about any kinds of interactions with Muslims of this nature. But at the end of the day, they came. Because, as I suggested to them, we as Christians have no other recourse. This is what we're about; we need to seek peace. So they came — very skeptical.

This meeting had the potential to really blow up in our faces. Happily, it did not. It turned out to facilitate a real genuine breakthrough between the two religious communities in the North [of Sudan]. It generated 17 consensus recommendations. We're now implementing three of those, very important recommendations that will point to greater religious freedom and fairer treatment of non-Muslims among other things. And the government sanctioned this.

But the ingredients that helped make this work: One was a prayer team that we brought over from California...halfway around the world. And they prayed on scene for the success of these deliberations. We began each day's sessions with readings from the Bible and the Koran and had some meditation. Every morning before we started, we had a prayer breakfast.

All of these things came together and I think really gave credence to the concept of faith-based diplomacy, which is what we were trying to practice. Bridging the political and the religious, achieving a synergy in coming after some of these problems that accede the grasp of regular diplomacy...like ethnic conflict, like tribal warfare, like religious hostilities. So that's what we're trying to do there, and Muslims are very receptive to this kind of approach.

CBN News: The warring factions in Sudan — is it that some just happen to be Muslim, some Christian, some animist, or is their religion one of the major reasons they fight?

Johnston: It's not really one of the major reasons that they fight at all. In many respects, Sudan is living out the predictable consequences of its colonial legacy. For years, primarily in the last century, the Brits did everything they could to separate the North and the South. For years, they forbade anyone from the North going to the South. Their long-term goal was to split the South off as part of a federated British East Africa. And they also wanted to use it as a bulwark against the advance of Islam. So missionaries were given free rein in the South and the like.

Well, when it came time for Britain to divest her colonies, under Egyptian pressure, because of the control of the headwaters of the Nile, the Brits gave independence to Sudan in toto, with the North and the South. This was a very unfair event in the sense that the North totally dominated all the positions of authority and power, and the South was really underdeveloped. And when the North sought to impose Arabic as the national language and also Islamic law, the South felt it had no recourse but to fight for its rights and to seek autonomy. Out of 44 years of independence, that country has labored under the burden of 34 years of conflict.

CBN News: You don't believe Americans are getting a very balanced picture of what's happening in Sudan, do you?

Johnston: We're only getting one side of the picture. There are atrocities being committed on the other side [the southern side] ...very significant atrocities. There are no innocents to be found. That's not to excuse the North for its bombing of civilian targets. But even the UN has chastised the South for using civilian facilities as a cover for its military operations.

So you see, there are two sides to this and I think that we have to be open-minded. If we're going to love our enemies, as Jesus has enjoined us, we need to try to understand what's driving the problem and somehow bring that sordid conflict to an end. But the conflict has really been about political power and distribution of resources, which the North has totally dominated up to now.