

The perennial conflict between Arabs and Africans in the largest state of the Black Continent

Sudan, the swamp of the world

A forgotten war, which lasted, in practice, half a century. The Islamic regime in Khartoum dreams of ethnic cleansing of southern black "slaves" to have land and oil. The fight for the freedom of Sudanese rebels became a war of commission paid by the United States. And everyone speculates about people's hunger.

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The bags full of corn branded "WFP" (World Food Program) fill most of the belly of the plane. Humanitarian mission. The distracted breast of the international community bows to feed its most abandoned children, who wait for hours under the sun the help from on high. Behind the dust raised by the propellers, hundreds of stares evaluate their new meeting with Providence. They are young soldiers in slippers, wiry women, big hands, big feet, curious and scared children. This place is called Akot, an airstrip and a few huts in the great emptiness of southern Sudan. Some white comes, some white go. Everyone goes across Lokichokio, Kenya, the last modern outpost before entering "inside" (as aid workers, volunteers and missionaries are accustomed to say).

No more showers, no more sinks, no electricity, no cold beer or American cigarettes. End of Western normality, perhaps in an African version, but with banks, cars, offices, police. There is nothing "Inside", and often there seems to be none. Only miles and miles of bush crossed by something like roads that become mud for eight months a year.

Even the war, the only sure thing in southern Sudan, is only a hint. You see it in the few devastated homes in Rumbek, in its open-air church destroyed by Arab troops of Khartoum.

The government was here until July 1997 and is (encircled) in Wau and Juba, synonymous with battered cities, endless sieges. Rumbek, the strategic center of nothing, is a handful of huts and a few damaged building occupied by people of Sudan People Liberation Army, the SPLA of John Garang, who has fought this war of the poor against Muslim oppressor since 1983.

"Ours is not a religious war - clarifies Paul Mayom, 45, SPLA leader - it is simply a struggle for self-determination of an always discriminated people, an African people who do not want to become either Arabic or Muslim".

Sudan is the latest modern monster created by colonialism, two completely different nations that began to belong to one state with the independence by the British and Egyptians (1956).

Northern Arabs, more developed, commanding, Southern blacks (actually, a Babel of ethnic groups, 652 different languages, an authentic anthropological mine interspersed on a vast territory) serving. The first coup general Ibrahim Abou, has tried to use Islam as a unifying national element since 1958: south public holiday becomes Friday instead of Sunday, Christian missionaries begin to be sent away (until the total expulsion in 1964), Koranic schools are built everywhere, the roads are improved (even by rail: there was a train that drove from Khartoum to Wau in five days; the line still exists, even if it is almost always interrupted). But southern people are regarded as laborers or servants, "infidels" to be converted, in many cases, blacks (especially Dinka ethnic group) are actually enslaved.

Since independence, guerrilla groups (called Anyanya) have fought against the dominance of northern Sudanese. In 1972, under the dictatorship of General Nimeri an agreement is signed in Addis Ababa: South Sudan gets a large autonomy, Juba becomes the center of a regional parliament. Nimeri is one of the best allies of President Sadat of Egypt, his policy is definitely pro-American, but the agreements of Addis Ababa will never be really enforced, and meanwhile Islamic fundamentalism grows in the country, led by the charismatic leader Hassan al Turabi. Nimeri believes he can ride the fundamentalist tiger, and digs his own grave.

1983 is the turning point year: in May, the new generation of guerrillas in the south (called "Anyanya 2") is organized in a real army, the SPLA. They are mostly students, teachers, frustrated

young people, former officials with ideas close to Marxism-Leninism. Their struggle is above all the struggle of the outcasts, second-class citizens. An officer leads them, John Garang, who was trained in U.S. military schools. Their sponsor is Mengistu, the ruthless communist dictator of Ethiopia, the man who had transformed the medieval empire of Haile Selassie in a sad African imitation of the Soviet Union. The bases of the SPLA are in Ethiopia, the leaders are sent to Cuba for training and even in China.

Then Nimeri comes to radicalize the conflict, deciding the enforcement of Islamic law, *sharia* (September 1983). The war takes the fundamental form that does not change anymore: on the one hand there is an Islamic regime (even more rigid after the coup by Omar al-Bashir in 1989) that uses the religion as an instrument of power, on the other an army that refuses to subject to a political, cultural and religious dictatorship.

Since 1983, Sudan tragedy has assumed biblical proportions. Every kind of scourge falls on the civilian population: the war and the endemic poverty are added to the floods, droughts, famines, epidemics and even a plague of locusts.

The population is exhausted, the war drags without winners or losers, just allies change: Islamic regime in Khartoum has the solidarity of Iran, and (in part) of Libya, becoming a "sanctuary" of international terrorism;

the SPLA becomes the tool of the United States to fight Sudan, fully entered into the "black list" of Washington enemy countries.

"Since I has arrived in Sudan in 1981, I have seen things go from bad to worse - says Msgr. Cesare Mazzolari, bishop of Rumbek, resident in Nairobi - the dialogue with Islamists in Khartoum is impossible. John Garang became an absolute dictator, there is no ideal tension, soldiers get rich with humanitarian aid, while the international community (France more than any other country) cares especially about the oil of Bentiu".

The bishop of Rumbek and his missionaries (almost all Comboni) feel encircled: on one hand the Islamic fanaticism that threatens the Christian minority in the north and oppresses the south; on the other, the increasingly corrupt and arrogant soldiers of the SPLA and the other rebel factions. If they speak, they risk deportation or jail. If they are silent, they risk being complicit in a perverse system. Because hunger in Sudan has become an instrument of struggle and blackmail, the tragedy of a people has turned into business.

It is not the first time this happens, and many people argue that there are no alternatives: the Operation Lifeline Sudan (OLS), the biggest humanitarian mission on the continent, has undoubtedly saved hundreds of thousands of people and continues to do it. But no one can deny that the "international solidarity" is used to indefinitely prolong Sudan agony. It is a sad pattern well established in Africa: a shameful political and economic situation creates the conditions for war, the war falls especially on the civilian population, forced to flee, unable to cultivate, abandoned to hunger and disease.

The media only intervene at this stage in crisis, providing Western citizens images that speak of a tragic fatality, almost a natural disaster.

Immediately international solidarity arrives, but makes who do it rich (just think of the gains of the private airlines that operate the endless airlift for Sudan) and fattening the "warlords" (which, not surprisingly, tend to multiply, losing view of any strategy other than self-interest). And while dozens of UN agencies, NGOs, various associations work overlapping each other, scattering in hundreds of sporadic micro-projects and sometimes even becoming competitive, governments and entrepreneurs of these "donor" countries try to grab the best deals even at the cost to come to terms with the devil himself (and diplomats call this bleak politics "protection of national interests"). So, while Italy takes the diplomatic initiative for peace in Sudan, Dalmine company tries to sell turbines to Khartoum government; while Canada applies itself in generous humanitarian aid, a Canadian company, Talisman, searches oil with which Islamic government continues to fund the war. But these stories are never read in any news of the world.

If it is all right, you discuss about hungry as usual (only in the presence of tens of thousands dead people over, otherwise there is "no news"), with the same images of the same withered mothers, of

the same skeletal children.

"It is amazing how different are timings of the international community - says Giovanni Tonucci, papal nuncio in Nairobi - Take the case of Zaire (Congo RDC): the first trade missions, which were then diplomatic missions, started when Kabila occupied the first cities. He was not even halfway through his conquest and European mining companies have already bought the shares of gold mines".

The slow pace of diplomacy, however, is maddening.

The position of the SPLA has been blocked for more than ten years on a single demand: the suspension of Islamic law and the creation of a secular state, an united but free tolerant and democratic Sudan. You remind a slogan of the Seventies: "Be realistic, ask for the impossible". It is clear that on this ground there can be no agreement, because Islamic regime of Omar al-Bashir and Hassan Turabi has not a great propensity to political suicide.

While he could accept, albeit trying to keep the oil regions, a secession of the south. "In peace talks last year, Khartoum government mentioned the possibility of a referendum on the unity of Sudan for the first time", said Italian ambassador in Nairobi, Alberto Balboni. But the last round of talks in Rome ended with yet another stalemate. The only positive result is the extension of the cease-fire "to ensure humanitarian actions".

The well-known efforts of the international community: UN delegates the matter to IGAD, a group of African states in the area, which in turn delegates the issue to four countries (Kenya, Ethiopia, Eritrea and Uganda), two of which are in opened conflict between them (Ethiopia and Eritrea) and three (Ethiopia, Eritrea and Uganda) have relationships bordering on conflict with Sudan.

Virtually everyone against everyone, while the rebel South is disintegrating into many factions, each with its little despot. Richer warlords, such as John Garang or Kerubino Bol, try to eliminate each other in Nairobi, where they live in their houses away from the miseries of southern Sudan. "Inside", in the territory, their more or less faithful, more or less honest henchmen run virtually undisturbed to manage aid.

The silences and hypocrisies about Sudan reach the point that there are American organizations, such as "Love in Action", which, on internet, describes war as a crusade against the new "evil empire" (Islam): "... The Christian flag is seen everywhere, and many divisions of the SPLA march under that sign, even in the attacks! Many soldiers carry the Bible with them, build churches at front, and spend much time praying". Of all the nonsense, this is the most shameful: religion has nothing to do with this.

In Sudanese swamps, where there is nothing that can vaguely look like a state, it is simply enforced the law of the jungle. "Christian" soldiers relieve their frustrations on the people, who are not part of families or clans of the officials (but perhaps it would be more honest to call them "boss"), risk not to have aid or must be satisfied with crumbs. So there is virtually no control, except for some stoic missionary who occasionally tries to be the voice of the weakest.

"Sometimes I get the impression that we priests are losing the sense of our presence. We have a thousand tasks, from catechesis to schools, and now humanitarian aid: a risk of living more and more obtuse everyday. What do we tell to our students, if they ask about their future? That there is no alternative to this crap?" Father Michele Stragapede is a young priest "loaned" to the mission of Agangrial. He comes from the difficult realities of southern Italian and clearly suffers from the absence of opportunities. "Any activity that has even vaguely political implications, is nipped in the bud. Okay, we are close to people who suffer, but I am not convinced that this is the best way. Perhaps it would better be chased, rather than witnessing dumb and helpless to this tragedy ... " Tremendous alternative, dramatic choice between bad options, however. This is the overwhelming feeling of southern Sudan: the loss of History, of Time: today is the same as yesterday, tomorrow will be the same as today. The rationality for those trying to understand, to do something, lets slowly enveloped by a tragic and resigned view of Africa. It 's all so extreme, so absurd, so radically different from our world, that it is hard not to lose completely, because the mind is overwhelmed by the gut.

People who should be desperate, come into the church singing and dancing. Soldiers in flip-flops

with grotesque caps and tragicomic uniforms are photographed on board a Russian tank captured from the enemy, one of them gives his machine gun at a Tanzanian priest smiling for photo. In Mapourdit, among skeletal women, lepers who greet with their stumps, old blind led around by kids with a cane, it happens to see a film by Truffaut ("The four hundred blows") under a sky that seems painted by Magritte. Surreal, absolutely surreal. "Inside", the words are not enough. Ideas, concepts, decisions slowly sinking into the void. From Southern Sudan, from the slime of the world, stands a silent, huge prayer.

Cesare Sangalli