

Bishop, doctor say Sudan food crisis provoked by aerial bombing

Tom Gallagher | May. 22, 2013

The people of the Nuba Mountains, a disputed region in Sudan that shares a border and ethnic ties with South Sudan, are starving. They have no food and the armed conflict that has prevented them from growing their own is stymieing relief efforts.

A Catholic bishop and Catholic medical missionary visited the United States earlier this year to speak for the Nuba people and seek an international intervention to halt the aerial bombings, to open roads to allow food relief to be brought in, and to require the parties in conflict to sit down and negotiate a lasting peace.

Bishop Macram Max Gassis, who heads the diocese of El Obeid in Sudan and South Sudan, and Tom Catena, a medical doctor and volunteer, presented a briefing in February on the food crisis in the Nuba Mountains at an event co-sponsored by Caritas International and the Catholic Medical Mission Board and held at the Church Center for the United Nations in New York City.

The relative calm that has settled over southern Sudan and South Sudan since the latter became an independent nation in July 2011 has not settled in the Nuba Mountains. Populated by ethnic groups aligned with peoples in South Sudan, the Nuba Mountains are in the southern Sudanese state of Kordofan.

Various nomadic tribes have been in armed conflict in the region since 2009. The government of Sudan entered the conflict in 2011, supporting the groups that were fighting South Sudan rebels. The main government support has been aerial bombing of disputed areas.

The bombing is crude -- explosive devices are thrown out of the back of twin-engine, propeller-driven transport airplanes.

“The Antonov [a Russian-made transport plane] is ... a crude weapon? without guidance systems or even bomb sights, Catena said. “It’s not a precise military weapon. It’s mainly a weapon of terror. ... It could hit a farm, a market area, kill civilians and scare people off so that [they] can’t live their normal lives. It’s a weapon used to disrupt people in their normal way of life.”

Tens of thousands of people have been displaced and many citizens have been maimed or killed. The food crisis is a direct result of the aerial bombing.

The rainy season runs from May through October each year and that is when Nuba people plant their crops so they can harvest when the dry season arrives.

“Due to the campaign of the aerial bombardment by the Khartoum government, and due to the insecurity caused by the local militias who are paid off by the Khartoum government, people were not able to plant during the 2011 rainy season,” Catena said. “They were bombing fields and they [the Nuba] were chased off their farms and up into the hills.”

Gassis describes the terror: "We are experiencing daily bombings in the Nuba Mountains. Moving around, dropping bombs here, dropping bombs there, bombs everywhere. Spreading terror. Spreading death ... maiming women and children."

Catena has witnessed the terror. He is the only medical doctor in an area the size of Austria. He and his team run the 300-bed Mother of Mercy Hospital in the Nuba Mountains. It opened in March 2008.

When fighting began in June 2011, the hospital received heavy casualties. "We saw a lot of military and civilian casualties," Catena said. Many amputations took place due to the bombings.

Gassis and Catena blame Sudan's President Omar al-Bashir for the crisis in the Nuba Mountains.

"Omar al-Bashir said on TV, 'If we don't win the governorship of Kordofan by the ballot box, we will win by the bullet box.' This for me was a declaration of war and that is happening today," Gassis said.

The International Criminal Court in The Hague has indicted al-Bashir for war crimes, crimes against humanity, and genocide. The charges are related to the conflict in Sudan's western Darfur region, where an estimated 300,000 people have died and 2 million have been displaced.

According to Gassis, al-Bashir knows the Nuba Mountain region well. He lived there before the 1989 coup that swept him to power. Al-Bashir "used to play cards with my priests," Gassis said. "So he knows the church."

Sudan and South Sudan signed a series of agreements in September 2012, referred to as the Sept. 27 agreements, to end the conflict and bring relief to the area, but neither Catena nor Gassis have seen much progress.

"I personally have not seen a single grain of sorghum in the Nuba Mountains," Catena said. He hasn't seen any of the promised international monitors either.

"If they came, they would have come to see us in the hospital. We are the only hospital in the mountains. They would have come to see what the situation is here," Catena said. But no one has come.

A recent report from the United Nations confirms much of what Gassis and Catena describe.

A February 2013 Security Council report finds: "Hostilities in South Kordofan and Blue Nile have continued. ... A key issue is what measures the [Security] Council can take to encourage or compel Sudan and South Sudan to implement the 27 September agreements."

The Security Council is split between countries that want an immediate humanitarian intervention and those that believe that Sudan, as a sovereign state, is justified in fighting a rebel group, according to the February report.

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Dialogue a way of life for Gassis

Bishop Macram Max Gassis' El Obeid diocese is almost three times the size of Italy. It straddles both sides of the Sudan-South Sudan border (perhaps the only diocese in the world split between two nations). A bishop since 1988, he serves the diocese from exile, but he is from the region and is a native Arabic speaker.

When people in international organizations, especially if they are Christian, ask Gassis about dialoguing with the different factions, he tells them: "I have many good Muslim friends, but when [some Muslims] arrived with fundamentalist Islam, they don't have any more mental elasticity. [They say,] "Do you think the way I think? No? We are enemies." "

"This is not dialogue," Gassis said. "What we say in Arabic, "We are handing our beards over to them." We become second-class, not equals to discuss. They don't know us and we don't know them. So what kind of dialogue do we speak about?"

Gassis continued, "I want to ask the Christian people who are in the religious field or in the international community and organizations: Do you know Islam? Have you studied Islam? Have you studied the Quran? The history of Islam? " I ask my brother bishops: How many [of you] have opened the Quran?"

He explained how "dialogue" is a daily experience for Nubas.

Nuba is a generic name for many tribes. "Therefore they are people of different tribes [and] of different religions," Gassis explained. "Within the Nuba society you have Catholics, Protestants, some who are Orthodox; there are Muslims and Africans of traditional belief."

"The dialogue I live on a daily basis is to say as bishop I have schools where there are Christians, where there are Muslims, where there are Africans of traditional belief. This is dialogue," he said.

"The hospital is there for Christians, for Muslims and for Africans of traditional belief," he said. "This is dialogue. This dialogue in life. Treating each other as human beings, as brothers and sisters in humanity. We don't distinguish people because of their race or because of their religion."

-- Tom Gallagher

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