



## Famine Politics and the Cycle of Relief Failure in Sudan's Civil War: A Case Study of the OLS Relief Operation in the Bahr el-Ghazal Famine, 1998

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### Abstract

This paper attempts to survey the corrigendum present within the underlying OLS relief structure using both specific insights into the mistakes made in the 1998 Bahr el-Ghazal relief operation as well as a broader analysis of the inherent weaknesses within the triangular network of: relief agencies, donor governments, and political influences within the Sudan. The commendable principle of neutrality originally established in the OLS mandate remains virtually inactive as all relief organisations, whose operations revolve around securing funds, work in a clandestine, opaque manner with no accountability to their recipients but only to donor governments that often harbour either apathetic or politicised motivations. Using Bahr el-Ghazal as a case study, it is argued that this condition resulted in an uncooperative, poorly planned relief response. The OLS principle of neutrality is also unprecedented in its sole use of international pressure for negotiating relief access as opposed to utilising military support. This reliance on fickle donor government pressure while purporting an impartial stance has led OLS to become a weak, unreliable actor that cannot base its operations on need but only through political negotiation. Finally, this paper also considers the problems relief operations face due to the nature of the conflict itself as well as the historical role of food aid in the global political economy.

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## Introduction

*Assistance to people stricken by calamities is, under present conditions, poorly organised, and in a great degree, inefficient. The money allocated is badly distributed. Frequently the materials provided for purposes of relief are not adapted to the requirements of the people and the local climatic conditions. In many cases those who come to the assistance of the sufferers lack an expert knowledge of the technique of relief work.*<sup>2</sup>

--Senator Giovanni Ciralo, 1921

Although the exasperated Senator Giovanni Ciralo cites a case of relief operation failure that occurred eighty years ago, the exact same fatal errors remain within the relief agency system. These failures are further accentuated in relief operations within the context of internal conflict as each actor within the war becomes increasingly absorbed into the political situation, reducing further accountable relief deliveries. Operation Lifeline Sudan [OLS] was originally initiated in 1989 as a response to the ignominious NGO neglect to the 1988 famine in Bahr el-Ghazal that killed roughly 250,000 people. The terrible irony is that nine years later, the 1998 Bahr el-Ghazal famine resulted in another 100,000 (estimated) deaths despite the OLS presence. This is not to suggest that the OLS did not assist in reducing the level of casualties, but to callously compare these monstrous famine mortality estimates and generally conclude a mediocre success rate is unacceptable, especially considering these numbers constitute human lives.

In principle, the OLS is an unprecedented initiative as a neutral humanitarian operation that works within an internal war. However, like many good principles, the actual implementation has remained enmeshed with political contradictions and obstacles and until these major discrepancies are addressed by the donor governments and OLS, there appears little chance for an end to devastating famines within Sudan. The majority of reports written on relief operations in Southern Sudan focus on some of these political obstacles, namely the gross manipulations of aid by either warring parties. Undoubtedly, this is a major factor in reducing NGO effectiveness, but ubiquitous emphasis by all relief agencies to blame the GOS and SPLM is in itself a political manoeuvre. Failure cannot exist within relief agencies without losing crucial funding. This results in a clandestine humanitarian operation whose overall

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<sup>2</sup>De Waal, Alex, *Famine Crimes: Politics and the Disaster Relief Industry*, London, 1997, p.68.

effectiveness is perturbed by its own lack of transparency and commitment. The donor/NGO funding system lies at the heart of the OLS ground operation dilemma. Competition for crucial funding from either apathetic or politically motivated donor governments has led the Bahr el-Ghazal relief operation to: high staff turnover rates, a lack of cooperation or planning within a supposedly united operation, and finally, an illogical allocation of relief not based on need or merit.

When reviewing the 1998 Bahr el-Ghazal relief operation one must also consider the famine in its wider politico-economic context. In an effort to appear neutral, these myriads of reports citing cases of GOS/SPLM misappropriations never analyse the nature of the conflict itself. The Sudanese conflict is one of the world's longest on-going civil wars; there is no question that the nature and reasons for the conflict have changed over time. Despite its ideological mask, the NIF is conducting a war of resources and relief aid inevitably becomes intertwined in this debacle whether the OLS will publicly admit to this or not. Previous politically accountable state systems in the Sudan no longer exist and until the OLS acknowledges the political motivations behind all the actors in the war, chances of dynamic changes to the OLS relief operation seem negligible. In this politically vegetative state, the OLS resembles an onion. After first peeling off the political motivations of the larger actors such as the donor governments and big businesses, then peeling off the next political layers of the GOS and SPLM, finally once the smaller skins of the NGOs within OLS are removed, the very centre of the onion, representing the famine victims themselves, reveals nothing. Although this paper is admittedly highly critical of the 1998 OLS Bahr el-Ghazal operation, it does not subsequently suggest and end to relief aid activities altogether. After all, while the OLS relief operation may fall severely short of its originally benign intentions, it did still provide sporadic assistance. In Rumbek county, for instance, the 1998 famine was actually referred to by the Dinka as *cok U.N.* (the U.N. famine), based on the U.N./OLS level of support.

## The Unique Nature of OLS - Positive Aspects and Aspirations

Operation Lifeline Sudan remains an unprecedented initiative as a humanitarian operation that works within an internal war in a sovereign country and officially recognises the principle that all civilians have a right to humanitarian assistance, wherever they are located. This agreement between the UN and GOS has set the stage for what UN officials described as one of history's largest humanitarian interventions in an active civil war as well as establishing a precedent for many humanitarian interventions that followed, for example in Angola, Iraq, Somalia, and

Bosnia.<sup>3</sup> Unlike other integrated interventions, OLS is distinct in its informal security arrangements. OLS does not rely on the military protection of humanitarian aid; rather it depends on the application of international pressure and negotiations between the warring parties.

Initially, claims Francis Deng, a former regional representative in Southern Sudan, the OLS mobilised and deployed between \$2-300m and provided international presence and pressure that eased the level of violence and brought a return to normalcy across large areas of the South.<sup>4</sup> Despite the controversy behind the role of food aid in wartime actually propagating conflict rather than assisting in famine relief, few can argue against the benefits food aid can bring in terms of stabilising market prices. Furthermore, although OLS food and food production inputs remain small, they help to keep household labour forces intact, reduce the amount of time spent on alternative food sources, and, perhaps most importantly, re-enforce networks of kinship and exchange between nearby communities. Food inputs received in Mapel in 1998, for instance, have helped to increase labour available to households for cultivation by reducing the need to go out in search of food through fishing, collecting wild foods, and labour migration. Finally, with its large, magnanimous presence, OLS has managed to improve funding options for NGO's previously working in the area by providing public awareness through its international presence. While few NGOs would argue against these significant achievements, behind closed doors, many concede that actual implementation of OLS has only been marginally successful despite the size and funding for the operation. Per Janvid, the Secretary-General's special coordinator for emergency and relief operations in the Sudan admits that "while one can praise the principles of Operation Lifeline Sudan," he observed, "one cannot ignore the difficulties of putting them into practice."<sup>5</sup> Indeed, another Scandinavian named Svein Tore Rode-Christoffersen of Norwegian Church Aid said it best, "The principle is the best part of Operation Lifeline Sudan."<sup>6</sup> Unfortunately, the principle will remain the best part of OLS until a clearer, transparent relief operation structure is devised to assist in a war-induced famine few relief workers genuinely understand.

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<sup>3</sup>Atual, Karim, *Operation Lifeline Sudan, A Report*, Khartoum-Nairobi, 1996, p.1.

<sup>4</sup>Deng, Francis Mading & Minear, Larry, *The Challenges of Famine Relief: Emergency Operations in the Sudan* Washington D.C., 1992, p. 111.

<sup>5</sup>Deng, Francis Mading & Minear, Larry, *The Challenges of Famine Relief: Emergency Operations in the Sudan* Washington D.C., 1992, p.86.

<sup>6</sup>Minear, Larry, *Humanitarianism Under Siege: A Critical Review of Operation Lifeline Sudan* Trenton, 1991, p. 33.

## Factors That Have Caused Famine in Bahr el-Ghazal, 1998

The 1998 famine in Bahr el-Ghazal cannot be explained holistically by a single cause or framework. Generally speaking, the deaths of over 100,000 people in Bahr el-Ghazal resulted from increased historical vulnerability from the prolonged conflict and political marginalisation, but also primary shocks such as intensification of counterinsurgency warfare, market exchange failures (created partly from army officials and powerful merchants) and a failure in public action to countermand all of this. In short, the Bahr el-Ghazal famine was, as almost all historical famines in Sudan have been, a man-made phenomenon. Of course, in 1997 high torrential rains -- the highest recorded since the sixties, further exacerbated a precarious situation.<sup>7</sup> The El-Nino phenomenon brought some of the worst climate changes to the Greater Horn of Africa resulting in widespread crop failure; but even such severe devastation would not typically induce famine. Only the deadly combination of warfare and natural disasters result in famine as traditional coping mechanisms used by the Dinka (among other tribes) become blocked by the conflict. David Keen argues that these recurrent famines are not isolated events but emerged from a long history of exploitative processes that threatened to destroy the way of life of the Dinka and remove their assets.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, in Southern Sudan the most important attack on production and the key link to epidemic famine is the confiscation and killing of large numbers of livestock, the central feature of the rural economy.

Finely calculated inter-tribal trading systems and breeding procedures for livestock have, in the past, ensured the Southern Sudanese considerable protection from ecological crises. But by 1870 raided cattle had become the universal and indispensable medium of exchange for militias and subsequent merchant traders. After the 1986 elections, the Umma Party derived much of its support from the Baggara and much of its finance from wealthy western merchants. Some of these *jellaba* were involved in the livestock trade fuelled by raiding Dinka lands and were keen to support the Baggara tribes who make up the infamous murahaleen militia. The astronomical numbers of forced cattle transfers to Northern Sudan become apparent by looking at the government's livestock statistics, from 1958 to 1982 alone, Northern provinces such as Darfur increased their number of cattle by almost 3 million, while the population itself increased marginally.

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<sup>7</sup>Northern Bahr el Ghazal Emergency Sitrep #6, *UNICEF/OLS*, 24 February, 1998, p2.

<sup>8</sup>Keen, David, *The Benefits of Famine*, Princeton, 1994.

Regionalism and the use of militias as an inexpensive means of counterinsurgency warfare has been the central military tactic for both warring parties as the Sudan remains a de-institutionalised, weak state. In the case of the NIF, the use of the murahaleen militias enabled them to simultaneously appease a politically influential community who have faced economic marginalisation and redirect this potential aggression towards Dinka communities to clear the rebel's civilian base of support. Whether warranted or not, the SPLA had been describing its relationship with the people using Mao Tse Tung's famous description of the guerrilla as a fish swimming in the water of the people, while the GOS use the counterinsurgency strategies that would drain away water to enable it to catch the fish with ease.<sup>9</sup> Such tactics were used in northern Bahr-el Ghazal in late 1997-1998 by the militia forces of the Murahaleen, Nuer, and Kerubino Bol receiving full military and logistical support from GOS military garrisons in Abyei and Gogrial towns. By the end of 1997, almost the entire population of Abyei, Twic and Gogrial counties, with an estimated 600,000 persons, were displaced more than three times yearly while all houses, livestock, and crops were destroyed. The Murahaleen and Kerubino forces, among others, developed a lucrative culture of looting and raiding in the area, the SRRA estimates almost 60 per cent of the livestock population in Northern Bahr-el Ghazal was lost during the 1990s as a result of counterinsurgency activities and more than 40 per cent of families lost all their livestock.<sup>10</sup> It is important to stress that these raids are not coordinated solely by the GOS, the SPLA has consolidated its presence in areas previously not under its influence through tactical alliances. The SPLA's arming of the Nyangatom, for example, allowed it to mount a devastating attack upon the Mursi, killing almost 10-20 percent of the entire population.<sup>11</sup> Similar to the case of the Baggara and Dinka (who used to share grazing lands, watering holes, etc.) such 'divide and conquer' military tactics have destroyed the vital traditional systems of checks and balances between groups, Northern and Southern alike. In Yirol county the 1998 famine was associated with the collapse in social relationships and was named *cok dak ruai* (breaking of relationships), a clear example that famine is more than simply a decline in food availability but also a collapse in social support. Interestingly, in Twic county people gave the name *cok machok guar* (famine with bell in foot) to indicate that people had

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<sup>9</sup> Deng, Biiong Luka, *Famine in the Sudan: Causes, Preparedness and Responses: A Political, Social and Economic Analysis of the 1998 Bahr el-Ghazal Famine*, Sussex, 1999, p.30.

<sup>10</sup>'Southern Sudan Annual Needs Assessment', *Sudan Relief and Rehabilitation Association*, Nairobi, 1998.

<sup>11</sup>Duffield, Mark, *War and Famine in Africa*, Oxford, 1991, p.19.

anticipated the imminent 1998 famine, again, another indicator that western perspectives concerning the nature and solutions to famine may be incorrect: famine is not a *sudden collapse* as defined by Sen, but a gradual process.<sup>12</sup>

Here, then, may lie the heart of the problem with the OLS structure and outlook -- using imported western assumptions about famine and the nature of internal warfare, the OLS has not only remained ineffective, but also detrimental in creating an environment viable for a peaceful solution. In the Sudan, groups and movements require more than just conscripts to fight; they need porters to carry weapons, supplies and booty, sappers to clear mines, informants to disclose enemy positions, and crucially, a ready access to food and sustenance.<sup>13</sup> How such goods and services are secured by a relatively poorly financed army from either warring party is the central dynamic of internal warfare. Such analysis then begs the question, can famine be prevented through food deliveries when accumulating food (including requisitioning food) is a common military tactic? Estimates of the amount of food diverted by the SPLA in Bahr-el Ghazal in 1998, for instance, started at 10 percent and ranged up to a high of 65 percent made by Bishop (now Archbishop) Cesar Massolari of the Diocese of Rumbek.<sup>14</sup> Western media and NGOs must sway from easily defined explanations for the conflict, it is no longer between North and South, Muslim and non-Muslim. Nor is it just about inequalities in regional development, the real issue is about the ownership of the Sudan's resources. The NIF did not just seize political power in 1989, they have been systematically transferring the nation's assets to their supporters and allies (both domestic and foreign) ever since.<sup>15</sup> Neither side of the conflict is inherently "evil" and actually directs their agendas to create famine conditions. Famine is an unfortunate by-product of a war driven on acquiring resources; whether it is clearing land for oil development, acquiring cattle and grazing land, or, perhaps most important, attaining cheap wage labour. The Dinka are a very proud culture that effectively avoided entering the capitalist economy after independence having developed their own highly complex but effective self-sustainable survival strategy. Thus, there has been little impetus or incentive for the Dinka way of life to change until the war recommenced, causing massive displacement. Wealthy merchants and farmers from the North and South have benefited from the war by accruing cheap wage labour from the displaced

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<sup>12</sup>Deng, Luka Biong, *Famine in the Sudan*, 1999, p.9.

<sup>13</sup>Duffield, Mark, *War and Famine in Africa*, 1991, p.18.

<sup>14</sup>Rone, Jemera, *Famine in the Sudan, 1998: The Human Rights Causes*, New York, 1999, p.119.

<sup>15</sup>Johnson, Douglas H., 'Dear Minister, what you need to remember about the Sudan', *Parliamentary Brief*, March, 1999.

Southern populations. And as long as the war benefits a certain small but influential percentage of the Sudanese population, there are very little opportunities for lasting peace and a consequent end to famines. This is the central crux to Sudan's political economy; as long as the NIF regime can rely on support from a small but wealthy percentage of the Sudanese community, they can remain oblivious to domestic political accountability.

The combination of a self-destructive national economy with a political vacuum present in Southern Sudan has made famine prevention at the national and local government level virtually non-existent. The introduction of an 'Islamicized' political economy has had profound consequences for the Sudan and, although the correlation is rarely made, explains the government's financial inability or lack of incentive to contend with impending famines. Dr Hassan al Turabi demanded that Islamic banks (which charge no interest and instead enter into a partnership with their clients) be allowed to operate, with significant tax privileges. And despite the fact that the country was virtually bankrupt, expatriates from the Arab states brought an inflow of cash, providing a false sense of economic stability in the relatively prosperous urban centres. In fact, the inflow of remittances from expatriates has been known to be roughly ten times greater than the next highest source of foreign exchange, cotton exports.<sup>16</sup> Inevitably, secular capitalists divested as the Islamic banks and Islamic merchants invested, enjoying their tax privileges and political connections, while endemic corruption followed quickly behind. As the Sudan was effectively 'bought and sold', inflation occurred affecting civil society and local government budgets as well as weakening the civil services designed to provide rural protection from famine.

This predicament contrasts sharply with the almost exemplary famine policies taken in the mid-1970s that managed to weather the 'Sahelian' drought and respond to a large influx of Ethiopian and Eritrean refugees.<sup>17</sup> The difference in response to famine results from contrasts in political accountability, at the time Numeiri had to collaborate with a fairly influential local parliamentary body while the NIF need only (although, this is in itself a costly operation) to appease their wealthy, urban Islamic constituents. This lack of political accountability has enabled Omar al-Beshir to show a callous disregard of Southern Sudanese citizens; in May 1998 he announced a donation of 5,000 MT of sorghum to Niger to help them get over a difficult season while the famine

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<sup>16</sup>De Waal, Alex, *Famine Crimes: Politics and the Disaster Relief Industry*, 1997, p.88.

<sup>17</sup>De Waal, Alex, *Famine Crimes: Politics and the Disaster Relief Industry*, 1997, p.86.



in Bahr-el Ghazal continued unaided. Even though it is easy to criticise the government for this blatant indifference towards its citizens, it is difficult to claim that the donor community genuinely harbours a more moral, de-politicised agenda. During Bahr-el Ghazal's famine in 1988, for instance, the donor community essentially ignored the famine but provided diplomatic support to a government that was viewed as friendly and pro-western. In broad terms, GOS and the donor community response to famine will never improve unless it is conducted in a transparent, de-politicised environment. Before discussing the problems with OLS from a wider context, however, it is important to examine specific problems with the 1998 Bahr-el Ghazal famine relief operation.

### Problems and Weaknesses with the OLS Relief Operations in Bahr-el Ghazal, 1998

Considering that OLS had been working almost continually in Southern Sudan for almost nine years and at one period in 1998 received nearly \$1m a day in funds for its operations, the deaths of over 100,000 people in Bahr-el Ghazal in 1998 suggest significant deficiencies with the OLS system. The ubiquitous explanations for this failure in all UN and NGO reports are the flight ban posed by the GOS from January to mid March and the warring parties' attacks and lootings of relief sites. To be fair, these are certainly viable claims. But problems within the OLS structure itself, however, are never mentioned since NGOs cannot report their own faults without losing crucial donor funding. One of the greatest restraints OLS faces (as do all relief operations) is a reliable source of continual funding. In April 1998, only 22% of the projected monthly requirements for WFP were met.<sup>18</sup> When assessing large relief operations, it is only fair to take into account relativity -- no one contests that OLS is big, but the Sudan itself is much bigger. Taking a rough calculation of the number of operations acting within Bahr el-Ghazal during 1998 in comparison to the overall size of the province, it is possible to conclude that OLS could only cover 18-23% of the province at one given period in time. Even if OLS managed to acquire unlimited funding, logistical problems in the largest country in Africa are bound to occur.

Providing relief in a war zone is also undoubtedly dangerous, the OLS security chief reported that from January to mid-April, 1998, fourteen relief locations were bombed.<sup>19</sup> (Please see Map 2, Appendix B) According to the Christian Science Monitor,

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<sup>18</sup>WFP Emergency Report, No. 17 - Africa, *United Nations, World Food Programme*, 28 April, 1998.

<sup>19</sup>Rone, Jemera, *Famine in Sudan, 1998: The Human Rights Causes*, 1999, p.92

from January-June 1998 all bombs dropped were on non-military targets -- feeding centres, hospitals, clusters of displaced people, etc.<sup>20</sup> Eric Reeves explains this further, "it must again be stressed that "air strikes" by GOS consist of massive shrapnel-loaded barrel bombs being rolled out the back cargo doors of retro-fitted Antonov cargo planes, flying at high altitudes. They are without anything approaching the precision that would be needed to strike directly at opposition military assets." Furthermore, relief aid was constantly requisitioned illegally by both warring parties. Kerubino used to keep three transistor radios at hand in order to time raids with the arrival of OLS relief deliveries.

These abject abuses done to OLS can be explained further by exploring the historical context in which the OLS was originally allowed to initiate its programme. When OLS initially started, the GOS and SPLA each agreed to participate only when their respective interests seemed to be clearly served by doing so. In early 1989, the military situation was such that each side needed a reprieve -- the government to recover from losses and the SPLA to consolidate gains. Politically, too, the time was propitious. The government of Sadiq al-Mahdi was weak and under pressure to end the war; the SPLA could use time to establish their authority in areas newly under their control and both sides wanted to reinstate themselves in the good graces of the international community.<sup>21</sup> Late in 1989, however, when the political-military situation changed, cooperation with OLS no longer suited the immediate interests of either side. The effectiveness of relief efforts diminished as each warring party reclaimed its sovereignty and influence over the OLS. When assessing the OLS, it is also important to note the environment in which the UN had agreed to initiate Lifeline. By early 1989, the war appeared to be over as a defeated military council put pressure on Sadiq-el Mahdi to make reconciliation with the rebels. Believing a long awaited peace would occur, the OLS was originally an interim idea of post-war reconstruction, and consequently ill-prepared to contend with 12 more years of warfare. Having only started in April, 1989, "we were very much designing this afternoon's step this morning," recalls a UN official, "lifeline was instant design, all ad-hocracy."<sup>22</sup> Within such a context a certain level of inefficiency can be expected, but does this warrant the same mistakes being made almost nine years later?

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<sup>20</sup>Mackenzie, Hilary, 'Only Lasting Relief for Sudan is Peace', *Christian Science Monitor*, 29, July, 1998.

<sup>21</sup>Deng, Francis Mading & Minear, Larry, *The Challenges of Famine Relief: Emergency Operations in the Sudan*, p.90.

<sup>22</sup>Minear, Larry, *Humanitarianism Under Siege: A Critical View of Lifeline Sudan*, 1991, p.26.

## "Institutional Amnesia"

The structure of OLS remains an ad-hoc, loose amalgamation of organisations with no singular operational structure or leadership. The hostile environment that OLS works in guarantees a high staff turnover rate that leads to the common relief organisation disease known as "institutional amnesia", where the same mistakes are cyclically repeated, the same imported assumptions are used and the relief food is consistently misappropriated. The UN/NGOs argument that the denial of access by the GOS was the major cause for the inefficient humanitarian response appears exaggerated considering the ban only occurred in February and March, 1998 (in March four C-130 planes were actually authorised clearance) and even after the ban was lifted, the OLS response time in April remained slow while civilians in Bahr-el Ghazal faced the worst famine conditions. A well-planned response in April could have rectified the damage caused by the ban, but the greatest response to the 1998 famine occurred in August, a point when the famine was largely over. Nor can food diversions from either warring party rest solely to blame for the inefficiency of the OLS, as Carol Bellamy, director of UNICEF, claimed in a July 1998 press briefing, "..no large-scale diversions have occurred in the South, there have not been any specific information about significant looting of foodstuffs in the recent past."<sup>23</sup> Without a certain level of donor/NGO accountability towards its recipients and the international community, the high turnover rates of relief staff will ensure the same mistakes will be made and the structural problems of the OLS will never be addressed.

In 1990 Douglas Johnson, managing director of James Currey Publishers and an expert on the Sudan, accompanied a team of researchers to Yirol (a town in Northern Bahr-el Ghazal) to make an OLS assessment. In their study, they concluded that the OLS had come too late and focused its assistance in areas that were not the worst hit and that the best assistance to the area did not come in the form of large amounts of food assistance, but rather tactics to revive the local economy. Eight years later and Bahr-el Ghazal faces another famine. The results of the research remain unheeded; the same mistakes are made while the suggested solutions have largely been ignored. The WFP continues to send large amounts of food aid despite suggestions of alternative assistance partly because this is its specialty, and sending food aid is the only thing WFP is mandated to deliver. In 1990, UNICEF got involved in several agricultural projects and livestock rehabilitation programmes. At the Southern OLS headquarters in Nairobi, UNICEF decided to implement a programme to control

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<sup>23</sup>UNICEF Press Briefing, 27 July, 1998.

rinderpest. This, in its own right, appears an admirable objective if it was not for the fact that, as the 1990 OLS assessment pointed out, the people of Yirol were suffering far more from trypanosomiasis (sleeping sickness) a disease that, in comparison to the costly and time-consuming remedies needed for rinderpest, could be cured quite easily by the local populace with minimum expenses or expertise. In March-April 1998, the same poorly coordinated, top-down management approach was used by UNICEF in a polio campaign. Though polio is of great concern in Southern Sudan, according to Luka Biong Deng, an SRRRA member, it is not by any means one of the most pressing priorities, which include measles and guinea worm. Luka Biong Deng had witnessed this fatal error as refugees came in search of aid:

"..some of those who came had walked for more than four days. Then they spent more than two days waiting for food distribution which was then suspended for an extra three days for the polio campaign. During this time when food distributions was suspended because of the polio campaign I witnessed some people fainting and more than five persons from Awiel county died while waiting for food distribution."<sup>24</sup>

Clearly, the OLS remained more accountable to their poorly informed, western donors and more concerned about meeting global targets rather than averting the looming famine. The rinderpest and polio campaigns represent a case of "institutional amnesia," in which a western agenda was blindly imposed (twice) as a priority in a situation where people were on the brink of imminent famine.

### Imported Assumptions

The transfer of funds away from governments and towards NGOs, which after the Cold War has been a growing trend in the donor/NGO system, has probably never been discussed by donors with any African governments.<sup>25</sup> It has emerged as a condition imposed by donors, all too often founded on ill-defined and assumed western roles. There appears to be, for instance, a major discrepancy between what western donors believe a famine *ought* to look like and what actually occurs during the early stages of famine. Famine is still consistently defined for its victims by outsiders. Despite high mortality rates among the resident and displaced population in April, the situation was often described as experiencing 'extreme stress' or a 'crisis' but not yet as a famine.

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<sup>24</sup>Deng, Luka Biong, *Famine in the Sudan*, p.82.

<sup>25</sup>Duffield, Mark, *War and Famine in Africa*, p.29.

Chief Ayii in Ajiep, Gogrial county define *cok* (famine) generally in the context of historical change in vulnerability, not as some form of sudden destitution.<sup>26</sup> Western media has been heralded for its role in spreading awareness of famine conditions and prompting large-scale international relief responses, but this is not the same as actually helping to *prevent* a famine. As draconian as it may sound, a famine does not become 'newsworthy' until it reaches critical levels. This in part helps explain why OLS responded so slowly; essential funding emerges when the international media arrive, not necessarily when it is most needed. Several scholars (De Waal, Keen, Duffield, Devreux) believe these tardy famine responses result from misguided western perceptions, but considering the wealth of information in famine monitoring systems, it is more likely a fundamental problem with the NGO/media funding system. In addition, the management of information by OLS officials has been focusing on western media (since this is their gateway to further donor funding) without cultivating Sudanese, Kenyan, and other Arab and African media.<sup>27</sup>

While imported western assumptions may or may not dominate relief workers perception of famine, the actual relief distribution certainly reflects this limitation. Each village is asked by the relief workers to elect a trusted representative, *tieng wui* (woman with stick), who will do the targeting of relief supplies on the spot. The elected *tieng wui* will then select (in many cases not on the basis of vulnerability) the specified number of women to be targeted from the village. Although from the outside this may look democratic and gender empowering, it is a rather alien and imposed structure which only reflects the relief workers perception of equality. Quite often the *tieng wui* has no adequate information about the situation of the entire village and inevitably bases her selection on extremely subjective criteria. Furthermore, it places women in a socially vulnerable position as the *tieng wui* must take on the entire responsibility or blame for exclusion or inclusion errors of food distribution. One SRRA county secretary stated, 'we have taken off our necks the job of targeting blame to the relief committees who in turn passed it over to the poor *tieng wui*.'<sup>28</sup>

Many agencies throughout OLS focus their attention on household food security, with a particular emphasis on the problems faced by female-headed households.<sup>29</sup> This proves difficult considering there is no agreed working definition of a "household" in the Southern Sector on which to base inquiries, many NGO staff note that the working

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<sup>26</sup>Deng, Luka Biong, p.7.

<sup>27</sup>Deng, Francis Mading & Minear, Larry, p.95.

<sup>28</sup>Deng, Luka Biong, p.85.

<sup>29</sup> Atual, Karim, *Operation Lifeline Sudan, A Review*, 1996, p.171.

definition has changed from year to year. As such, identifying "female-headed households" proves even more taxing, particularly considering that widows do not normally remain on their own in Southern Sudan, but often move into the households of their kin, and that, over time, women may move from one kin group to another. Confusion on this concept can be seen from the major discrepancies found in assessing the number of female-headed households. In 1993, WFP found 30% of households in Bahr el-Ghazal were female headed while the UNICEF 1994 seeds and tools survey concluded that 13.61% of all households in Bahr el-Ghazal were female headed. A similar survey of Northern Bahr el-Ghazal carried out by SINGO SUPRAID in 1995 concluded that almost all household heads were male.<sup>30</sup> These discrepancies in data represent just one example of the frustrating dilemma OLS faces: the research and expertise from external and internal sources exists, but the lack of a unified operation results in a disorganised, ad-hoc operation. After eleven years, the OLS still remains a loose amalgamation of NGOs with different criterias and interests that, based on a competitive funding system, remains an "ad-hocracy" without any unified leadership or even a consolidated information system.

### The "Ad-Hocracy" Factor

During the 1980s, a wealth of information was developed in monitoring potential signs of famine to encourage quicker relief responses. Peter Cutler, for instance, identified the large-scale selling of goats and sheep as an initial sign of an impending famine as pastoralists will often sell off smaller livestock earlier on before resorting to selling cattle since they constitute a more vital resource for future sustainability.<sup>31</sup> The food economy approach also proved useful for its qualitative methods and the introduction of a common framework for assessing and understanding food security. In Southern Sudan alone, there are five monitoring systems that are managed by FAO, WFP/SCF, FEWS/USAID, NGOs, and SRRRA. But this wealth of information remains ineffective unless a unified system for data monitoring between the various agencies that make up the OLS takes place.

The information between NGOs remains fragmentary; subsequently OLS policies are uncoordinated and reactive. The cumulative effect of a series of ad-hoc decisions has

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<sup>30</sup>Ibid., p.171.

<sup>31</sup>Cutler, Peter, 'Famine Forecasting: Prices and Peasant Behaviour in Northern Ethiopia', *Disasters*, Vol. 8, No.1, pp 48-56.

come to be policy by default. The Famine Early Warning System [FEWS] used by USAID in 1997, for instance, gave a reliable early warning of the likelihood of a deteriorating food security situation during 1998 in Southern Sudan and the Bahr el-Ghazal region in particular. Despite its competency, the FAO monitoring system is used far more often even though the FAO has no physical presence in Southern Sudan and relies heavily on its Global Information and Early Warning System [GIEWS] which is food-production oriented with minimal contact with the communities.<sup>32</sup> The FAO is based on the assumption that local food crop production can be used as a proxy for the amount of food available to the average household. The FAO's estimates of food production and subsistence consumption requirements are based on the population estimates provided by the GOS, which has, for obvious reasons, continually underestimated the civilian population under the control of the rebel movements. With a biased census, the FAO needs assessment claimed that the food security situation in 1998 in Bahr el-Ghazal was better than in 1997 and projected a deteriorating food security in the areas under the GOS (please see Fig.1, Appendix A).<sup>33</sup> Despite its apparent inaccuracy, donor agencies put more weight on the FAO/UN assessment since it appears to possess the international stamp of credibility.<sup>34</sup>

Discrepancies in needs-assessments and targeting can be far more consequential than originally perceived. The internal displacement factor, for instance, is crucial for relief targeting. According to the ICRC, once word spread that relief food and a relative degree of safety existed in Wau, by May 47,000 newcomers came to the town, a daily influx of 1-2,000 people.<sup>35</sup> The relief magnet phenomenon caused a catastrophe. The massive migrations to Wau resulted in a large concentration of people with little sanitation or relief supplies, inevitably leading to rampant fatal illnesses that, in total, caused far more deaths than from starvation. Consequently, Eric Reeves believes nearly half of the famine victims in Bahr el-Ghazal in 1998 came from this town and the neighbouring area. Similar to Wau, towns such as Aweil had a population of roughly 14,000, of whom 5,000 were internally displaced. Considering the Sudan has the highest displaced population in the world (roughly 5 million people), the need to assess internal migration movements and develop communication links with different African regions is apparent. But without a single, cohesive targeting system in place,

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<sup>32</sup>Deng, Luka Biong, p.96.

<sup>33</sup>Deng, Luka Biong, p.97.

<sup>34</sup>Buchannen-Smith, M. & Davies, S., *Famine Early Warning and Response: The Missing Link*, London, 1995, p.38.

<sup>35</sup>ICRC News Releases, No. 98/28, *International Committee for the Red Cross*, 16 July, 1998.

relief supplies will continue to arrive too little and too late. Partly from a lack of funding, UNHCR has had to scale down its programmes and has never included the internally displaced (even certified refugees).

Given the highly politicised context of OLS, the provision of objective, needs-based assessments is used as a sign of neutrality by OLS agencies. But since OLS lacks an inclusive policy and that all NGOs (in their scramble for individualized funding) create their own "self-assessments", there was no single, accurate needs-based assessment to coordinate future operations. The UNICEF Programme Coordinator indicated that more than 200 assessments were carried out in the Southern Sector alone during 1995.<sup>36</sup> Despite all these myriads of reports made by various NGOs (which are predominantly used simply to appease apathetic donors), during the 1990s, NGOs in Southern Sudan were not an integral part of the assessment process for future plans of action. Failing to include NGOs in the OLS programme planning not only results in a loss of potential expertise, but also leads to ineffective coordination -- a vital component in any relief operation. Throughout most of the 1990s, the WFP had no agreements with NGOs to provide their own food aid which meant that food aid could not be adequately prioritised to areas most in need. It is essential that food aid and non-food deliveries (especially seeds) be coordinated in a well-planned, timely fashion. Otherwise, cases such as that of the Panthou villagers who, during the famine, resorted to eating seeds and consequently grew sick, will inevitably occur. Although regional meetings in South Sudan between NGOs, WFP, UNICEF, and SRRA were planned, few actually were able to attend due to time constraints and logistical problems.

Inconsistent donor funding has often caused contradictory strategies between NGOs and the UN. While donors provide resources for NGOs whose activities are generally consonant with Lifeline's objectives, there is no specified accountability to the UN, even though these same donors expect the UN to exercise overall coordination. Perhaps the best example of this loose coordination between NGOs and the UN appears on the monthly OLS updates themselves. The monthly OLS updates are basic activity reports sent internally and externally to donors, each report requests NGOs to fax the UNICEF/OLS report officer the last week of every month a simple update on their endeavours. Quite often this monthly fax stating operations was the *only* communication link between NGOs and UNICEF. Certainly, larger organisations collaborated more closely (UNICEF, WFP, Oxfam, etc.) but what of the 30 other smaller

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<sup>36</sup>Atual, Karim *Operation Lifeline Sudan, A Review*, 1996, p.113.



NGOs that worked in Bahr el-Ghazal and whose regional expertise remained virtually ignored? In one case in Akobo, even communication between WFP food monitors and UNICEF household food security officers was marginal. Both teams were assessing the same area at the same time, but the WFP monitor was unaware of what the UNICEF officer was going to recommend, and vice-versa.<sup>37</sup> Even less communicative are the two OLS relief sectors, with the limited exception of periodic visits from the Special Envoy for Humanitarian Affairs, there is still no single UN meeting to decide wider policy issues on a continuous basis.

Considering the politicised nature of the crisis, where attempts to manipulate aid by the warring parties is a possibility, the lack of political coherence is a severe liability. Without adequate communication and a lack of consensus in OLS management, tensions inevitably rose between the NGOs and the UN. Although the following statement was actually made in 1996, it illustrates, among other things, these growing tensions in the field as one NGO staff member remarked:

I personally feel extremely angry that WFP, against the advice and reports from their field officers, continue to dispose of their (food) surplus..in places which neither require nor at present want it. Over the last few months they have even had difficulty of giving the food away, let alone finding enough people to whom to distribute it. It is entirely irresponsible and is putting other aid workers at risk, as it seems that Kerubino Kuanyan Bol is specifically targeting distributions of food.<sup>38</sup>

This lack of cohesion in such an immense relief operation undoubtedly leads to a series of programming errors.

The culmination of a deficient level of coordination between UN OLS and NGOs concerning priorities in OLS programming and a limited air capacity for relief deliveries led to tremendous pressures and disputes over prioritising cargo inputs. In the end, the people who decide on cargo priorities are logisticians, who have little knowledge of programme requirements or the critical issue of seasonality for some inputs. During the first months of the famine, for example, most of the WFP food distributed was wheat flour. Local people have limited knowledge about its preparation and subsequent cases of diarrhoea occurred due to poor preparation and cooking. The alternative cereal food supplied until July 1998 was mainly hard imported maize that requires considerable efforts to pound; weak famine victims often resorted to boiling maize that lead to further cases of diarrhoea and death. Some NGOs had been consistently supplying by accident parts of Bahr el-Ghazal grass instead of proper

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<sup>37</sup>Atual, Karim, *Operation Lifeline Sudan, A Review*, p.149

<sup>38</sup>Atual, Karim, *Operation Lifeline Sudan, A Review*, p.69.

seeds!<sup>39</sup> The end result has been a waste of enormous resources in terms of costs of imports and farmers' time and labour. Finally, the SRRA complained of the predominance of camp supplies for OLS staff over relief supplies, they estimated, these supplies constituted 34% of the cumulative non-food airlift deliveries to Southern Sudan.<sup>40</sup> The greatest error driven by a lack of adequate assessments or unified direction, however, is the fact that there were no defined criteria for relief deliveries. Relief was given with seemingly illogical regional preferences that had no relation based on actual need.

This is not, unfortunately, a novel discrepancy that can only be associated with the OLS in Bahr el-Ghazal. Stephen Devreux made an interesting survey of five countries in eastern and southern Africa affected by drought in the early 1980s, and claims "the response of the donor community appeared to be unrelated to the severity of the situation, the amount of information available or the resources of the country to deal with the problem on its own."<sup>41</sup> Relief shipments in Bahr el-Ghazal prove no exception. Even before 1998, Bahr el-Ghazal only received 51% of that of the Upper Nile in 1994 and 54% in 1995, even though there are 2.4 m inhabitants in Bahr el-Ghazal in comparison to 1.8m in Upper Nile. (please see Fig.2 in Appendix A)<sup>42</sup> The difference cannot be explained by ease of access as both areas are primarily accessed by air. The real reason may lie in the split between SPLM and SSIM (under Riek Machar) in 1991. In a futile attempt to provide equal amounts to both warring parties, many more NGOs were encouraged to work in Upper Nile where the SSIM are based. Thus, OLS is not only flawed in its assessment process, but also in its constant breach of its own neutrality mandate --food aid is heavily intertwined with politics whether the humanitarian agencies admit to it or not. Impartial assistance based on an objective assessment of need is supposed to form the basis of OLS neutrality. However, the identification of need is largely determined by the quality of access. A heavy presence of aid workers in Equatoria (the most developed area of Southern Sudan that probably needs the least aid), during the 1998 Bahr el-Ghazal famine exemplifies this trend. Without centralised coordination by the UN of NGO operations, NGOs by and large decide where they want to work in the Southern Sector. Hence, the pattern of NGO coverage does not correspond to a rational division of labour but continues on an ad-

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<sup>39</sup>Deng, Luka Biong, p.78.

<sup>40</sup>Deng, Luka Biong, p.79.

<sup>41</sup>Devreux, Stephen, *Theories of Famine*, Hertfordshire, 1993, p.169.

hoc basis according to individual NGO interests and capacities. Equatoria, for instance, is accessible to East Africa and is an area where existing resources and infrastructure offer the best chance of success for an NGO. Thus, in their continual quest for donor approval and subsequent funding, difficult areas such as Bahr el-Ghazal tend to be ignored by NGOs.

## A Question of Accountability

Ever since the criticism of humanitarian interventions in Somalia and Rwanda, the NGO debate about accountability has come to the fore as theorists such as Macrae and Zwi (1994), de Waal (1997 and 2001), Duffield (1994), and Keen (1994), etc. have confronted aid agencies. The central question to the debate is whom the NGOs are actually accountable to -- the donors who provide essential funding, or to the famine victims. Although a politically adept NGO would claim the latter, the fact remains that they do not have to account in any way to the communities they work with. So long as the NGO has kept within British charity law, the broader strategic/political accountability for the longer-term implications is not relevant to the Charity Commissioners but it is critical to the communities whom the assistance is aimed at.<sup>43</sup> Unlike donors, recipients of famine relief cannot choose or even protest against potential failures within the humanitarian system. Essentially moral obligation is the only binding concept, an idea that, attempted in the Soviet-style of communism, unfortunately proved to be severely ineffective. Instead, the accountability and interrelationship between the NGOs in the OLS and the international community takes precedence as an integral part of Lifeline's operational structure. In Southern Sudan, OLS has developed into a form of safe area programme that does not rely on military protection, but depends on the vulnerability of the warring parties to international pressure. In the case of the GOS, this has largely been the desire to avoid punitive diplomatic action. Meanwhile courting international recognition has been a central theme for the opposition movements. Hence, international pressure is crucial for the continued operation of the OLS. But the OLS continues to meet donor complacency, opinions are tainted with potential prospects for oil development or a simple aberration to political involvement in a complicated, on-going civil war. This in part explains the donor community's preferences for relief operations in Ethiopia; a war is rife with political nuances, while the Ethiopian famines have been predominantly (although

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<sup>42</sup>Deng, Luka Biong, p.71.

<sup>43</sup>Guttman, Nick, 'The Accountability of Relief in South Sudan: The Challenges of Working with Civil Society', Thesis, Msc Development Studies - SOAS, 2000, p10.

certainly not entirely) based on natural causes. In 1988, the House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee held a series of hearings on famine in the Horn of Africa, the hearings and reports devoted nine times as much time to the supposed famine in Ethiopia as they did to the actual famine in Sudan.<sup>44</sup> This donor apathy towards Sudan's seemingly endless civil war has crippled OLS operations. Carol Bellamy, Executive Director of UNICEF remarks, "the solution to this won't come from humanitarian intervention, it has to be political. The pressure for resolving this war has to come from outside."<sup>45</sup> But despite such strong advocations for firmer, donor political conditionality in OLS relief operations, the international donor community in Sudan remains passive. One comment from a British Deputy High Commissioner portrays this only too well: "How people choose to use the assistance is up to them. So long as I can stand up in parliament and say that the assistance has been delivered to those who we say it would be, then I am happy."<sup>46</sup>

### Food, Power and the Complicity of the International Community

Considering the cataclysmic disasters that have plagued Southern Sudan, the complicity of the international community appear extremely callous until one recognises that humanitarian relief is just as much a political agenda as all other Western foreign interventions. Unlike other African guerrilla movements, it has only been recently that the SPLM have been able to attract international support (mostly from the "anti-slavery" campaign led by American Christian right-wing groups). In comparison, the EPLF and TPLF had received international support via Cold War politics and a well-designed public relations campaign. The case of GOS relations with the donor community is a bit more complex. In the case of the U.S., the House of Representatives actually voted 416-1 to label the actions of the GOS as genocidal and former Secretary of State Madeline Albright had condemned Khartoum for its role in the civil war, and yet crucial American pressure in relief operations was nonexistent during the 1998 Bahr el-Ghazal famine. The answer for this was of course political: A botched missile attack on a baby food factory in August 1998, the desire to maintain

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<sup>44</sup>De Waal, Alex, *Starving in Silence*, London, 1990, p.130-131

<sup>45</sup>Shenon, Philip, 'U.S. Urges Sudan to End Restrictions on Food Airlift to South,' *New York Times*, May 3, 1998.

<sup>46</sup>Guttman, Nick, 'The Accountability of Relief in South Sudan: The Challenges of Working with Civil Society,' 2000, p.9

good Chinese trade relations (the Chinese are major oil developers in the Sudan), and finally, to ensure continued Sudanese support for the Camp David agreements all ensured U.S. government forbearance. Meanwhile, the ever-complicit IMF has never criticised the NIF regime in hopes that they shall eventually agree to pay off their massive debts. Furthermore, western financial institutions have always preferred authoritarian governments and economics to liberalism and politics since democracy tends to 'slow things down' and political conditions are always harder to define and monitor than numbers.

For the U.S., providing food aid has often been a secondary consideration, its primary purpose has been to reduce American surpluses and to further integrate Third World agrarian societies into the capitalist sphere of the world economy.<sup>47</sup> Food hoarding for politico-economic gain by Sudanese army officers and merchants should not be viewed as a solitary case: the American government has done similar acts in Bangladesh in 1974, only on a larger scale. Repeated requests by the Bangladesh government in 1973 and 1974 for additional US PL 480 food aid were ignored or refused. The U.S. even withheld its normal allocation of food aid, providing just 10 percent of that delivered. The reason for the embargo rested on U.S. objections to sales of jute sacks by Bangladesh to Cuba on the grounds that this violated legislation which prohibited the allocation of US food aid to any nation trading with Cuba or North Vietnam. Controlling international relief aid is not only a matter of politics, it is also big business. Despite the global importance of the commodity, the grain trade remains an unregulated oligopoly that is predominantly owned by seven powerful families. Without any public shareholders, these companies also have no accountability to the public or even obligation to disclose information.<sup>48</sup> Like the merchants who withheld grain from starving citizens in Wau, these companies have unprecedented power to manipulate the demand for food on the world market to their own ends. Taking this broader perspective, it becomes clear why NGOs remain so weak and unresponsive to the warring parties *and* the international communities' seemingly fickle and often hostile responses.

Facing Scylla and Charybdis, the NGOs in OLS must contend with both the threat of potential expulsion by the GOS and severe financial cutbacks from the donor community. In 1986, the UN Resident Representative, Winston Prattley, was expelled after attempting a relief airlift to the South and in 1987, four relief agencies working in the South were expelled for their advocacy of famine relief. Even the big agencies

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<sup>47</sup>Devreux, Stephen, *Theories of Famine*, 1993, p.173.

<sup>48</sup>Ibid., p.165.

remain entirely accountable to their donors; during the mid 80s, Oxfam was expelled from Nicaragua for speaking out against American backing for the Contras. These historical 'warnings' have induced an allegedly neutral OLS to play a series of complex political manoeuvres. Incredibly, the recent interminable report on Southern Sudan by UNICEF Representative Thomas Ekvall made no mention of the GOS policy of bombing villages to clear the areas for oil development -- fears of losing access to donor support and an NIF insulated by international business support ensured this complacency.

### Neutrality in Principle Only

Referring back to Sven Tore Rode-Christoffersen's acumen remark, "the principle is the best part of Operation Lifeline Sudan," the OLS operation is only neutral in principle, and, despite its political weakness, the operations themselves can never be wholly neutral. According to de Waal for many NGOs:

Neutrality is an aspiration rather than a fact. There is a tendency to believe that neutrality need only be asserted to be proved, that humanitarianism is so transparent that it is immediately accepted by all parties to the conflict. This is of course grossly naive, and opens up the agencies to manipulations by the controlling authorities.<sup>49</sup>

While OLS neutrality has helped to ensure a thin, safe link to their operations, almost all of the major NGOs within OLS have published advocacy for stronger political pressure to implement a peaceful resolution. In many ways the OLS relief agencies resemble the common paradoxes found in politicians -- endorsing action in one direction while stepping back from this position to appease another constituency. The end result is inevitably an almost neutralised effort. It is also extremely difficult for the OLS to claim neutrality considering the uneven levels of NGO involvement/expertise on either side. Considering that NGOs with programmes on either side face a kind of double jeopardy, two political pressures as opposed to one, few actually work in both locations. In addition, some of these NGOs working for one particular side have chosen to do so because they discreetly support one of the warring parties. As Egil Hagen of Norwegian People's Aid admits, "Relief in war situations *is* politics... I am one hundred percent with the SPLA. I don't make public statements to

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<sup>49</sup>taken from: Guttman, Nick, 'The Accountability of Relief in South Sudan: The Challenges of Working with Civil Society, p.27.

that effect but I do the maximum to see that they get the material aid they need, apart from weapons."<sup>50</sup> As the war continues, the OLS becomes further entrenched into the politics of the conflict, whether these relief agencies desire this or not. According to Johnson, even back in 1996, "safe havens" (negotiated areas for peaceful distributions) in the South were often negotiated on the basis of an unspoken political understanding that war affected populations in the North remain outside of OLS jurisdiction. The inexplicable lack of OLS attention towards the plight of the Nuba is an appalling example of this predicament. The management of relief agencies has become so politicised that staff seek to disguise the inner working of the agency to protect its shell of impartiality. In the end, the relief agencies are not accountable to their recipients nor their donors, as fears of funding termination and expulsion has reduced OLS humanitarianism into a clandestine activity lacking the original, benign intentions of conducting a neutral, transparent operation.

### Conflicting Truths

Truth is not simply the first casualty of war, it is typically an on-going casualty. Being steeped in politics, the language for Sudanese statistics is always unclear. The GOS claimed there was a small population in Bahr el-Ghazal to sway from claims of SPLM control while humanitarian agencies also provided low estimates to match their resources and success rate. Civil society, however, claimed high estimates in Bahr el-Ghazal to attract humanitarian assistance. Throughout Sudanese history, all Sudanese leaders from Numeiri to Beshir, have perpetually dismissed allegations of famine conditions in Southern Sudan to the international community, even when certain areas experienced crisis levels. The reason for this of course lies in the overall importance of maintaining and attracting foreign investment and aid. The relative prominence of aid in Africa (in comparison to South Asia) comes about because at the same time the international community gives with one hand, it takes with the other.<sup>51</sup> The commodity prices for unrefined products have fallen drastically in Africa, President Julius Nyerere of Tanzania tells of how in 1972, 38 tons of sisal bought a 7-ton truck; by 1982 it took 134 tons.

Politically calculated miscalculations by the OLS agencies are a bit subtler. OLS agencies tend to switch back and fourth from claims of severe famine mortality to less

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<sup>50</sup>Minear, Larry, *Humanitarianism Under Siege: A Critical View of Lifeline Sudan*, p85.

<sup>51</sup>Independent Commission on International Humanitarian Issues, *Famine: A Man-Made Disaster?*, London, 1985, p.102.

depending on whether they are pledging or just completing a relief effort. Such consistent mistruths can have paralysing effects on relief operations: donors have caught on to these preliminary exaggerations and subsequently provide less funding and at a later date, resulting in disastrous circumstances as in the case of Bahr el-Ghazal. At first, however, the OLS did not overstate famine claims but actually refused to define the Bahr el-Ghazal crises as a "famine" until it reached critical levels, fearing the 'crying wolf' scenario that has plagued funding relief operations in the past. In many countries, donors appear to be looking for ways to trim their assistance in relation to what appears to be continuing emergencies that cannot command the attention of Western electorates indefinitely.<sup>52</sup> Cases of journalists exaggerating a food crisis that does not materialise into a "famine" provide a good excuse for donor inactivity. Sadly, effective warnings systems by NGO ground staff in Bahr el-Ghazal became an exercise in futility. Three major relief agencies (Save the Children Fund (UK), Oxfam, and Medecins sans Frontier) did not claim that Bahr el-Ghazal was experiencing a famine until April, despite the fact that February and March were the critical months of duress.

The demands of fund-raising and institutional survival within Lifeline's NGO conglomeration make it imperative not to admit failures. The competition is for funds, not successful famine prevention. This in part explains why all blame is directed at the GOS/SPLM manipulations of relief aid since institutional failures cannot exist. This is not to say GOS/SPLM relief aid manipulations do not exist, but they are certainly over-emphasized in NGO reports. As Eric Reeves points out, food diversions by SPLM or various militia groups (supporting either side) are often overstated. How do you distinguish between a soldier and a farmer when quite often militia forces are essentially peasants with rifles? Conflict tends to blur occupational definitions: is the boy who now guards the cattle with a rifle and telecom device, for instance, considered an SPLM soldier and therefore requires no relief assistance? But OLS relief agency reports have not only suffered from hyperbole, but sometimes outright lies. Perhaps over-confident in the 'plucky' Dinka's coping strategies, OLS reports have actually lowered the acceptable standards of nutrition in Bahr el-Ghazal in an effort to accommodate their levels of success. Rates of malnutrition shown by nutritional indicators that would have prompted emergency intervention at the start of OLS were

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<sup>52</sup>Keen, David, *Famine Needs Assessment and Survival Strategies in Africa*, Oxford, 1993, p.16.



then seen as somehow normal or acceptable.<sup>53</sup> Referring to a World Vision International report written at the end of the crisis, they claimed:

"In Gogrial County, 11.9 percent of children sampled were shown to have global malnutrition (that is, their weight was 80 percent or below what it should be for their height). A previous study, conducted in May at the height of the famine, indicated that 40.8 percent of children were malnourished. More remarkable still, for the most severely malnourished (those whose weight is 70 percent or more below the norm) the figures have fallen from 13.6 percent in May to 1.6 percent now....The work of World Vision, the World Food Programme and other OLS partners has stopped a terrible crisis in Gogrial and Tonj from becoming a complete disaster."<sup>54</sup>

Not only have relief agencies reduced the international standards to what is considered 'severe malnourishment', in this particular case they refrain from mentioning that the fighting in the area had cleared up, allowing market activity and natural migrations to be reinstated. A return to relatively peaceful market activity is probably the key reason for the civilians' nutritional improvement. Funding is almost never based totally on merit, it is the NGOs that report the best results and excel in getting media attention that receive the most funding. Glossy brochures with suffering children on the cover will get an NGO further than an excellent track record for digging latrines. The original director of UNICEF and Southern OLS operations, James Grant, was accused by critics for concentrating too much on publicity gimmicks. As Norman Anderson, 1986 U.S. Ambassador for Sudan mentions, "He [Grant] formally waved off initial convoys departing for southern Sudan under the U.N. banner. It did not matter that the convoys did not necessarily get under way immediately."<sup>55</sup> Nine years later, and little had changed.

## Conclusion - Potential Solutions

The general problems and solutions to these persistent failures within the OLS seem fairly evident. A lack of research, cohesion, and transparency in OLS operations will continue as long as the current donor funding system exists and the Sudan is still at

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<sup>53</sup>Deng, Luka Biong, p.x

<sup>54</sup>News Vision, 'WV figures show good improvements in Bahr el-Ghazal nutrition', *World Vision International*, 23 December, 1998.

<sup>55</sup>Anderson, Norman G., *Sudan in Crisis: The Failure of Democracy*, Gainesville, 1999, p.183.

war. The next famine that will receive inadequate assistance may not be in Bahr el-Ghazal but looks depressingly imminent in another Southern province, the Upper Nile. As the March, 2001 SCF Emergency Update stated: "According to a UN report only 1% of funding necessary to meet all of Sudan's food needs have been pledged by international donors (who want to see evidence of government action using new oil revenue)."<sup>56</sup> Perhaps centralised legislation that would mechanise relief responses (including funding) according to famine monitoring units as opposed to desperate funding campaigns composed by a loose amalgamation of NGOs might improve future relief responses. Ironically, Garang may have the best solution as he mentioned in a visit to Washington, "At the end of the day, peace is the best relief activity."<sup>57</sup> If peace is really the only option then the international community should apply more political pressure. Just as U.N. resolutions 43/131 and 45/100 give the international community the right of access to victims of disaster and establish humanitarian corridors, the U.N. should adopt the Right of Intervention and come to the aid of famine victims. A weak GOS that desperately needs foreign aid should easily capitulate to forceful donor government pressure. The problem is, of course, an apathetic or politically driven donor government will never actually exert this pressure. The other problem is a question of sovereignty. Such international political or military pressure, even if it is done for truly humanitarian reasons, resembles an ominously neo-colonial response. Having said this, there is absolutely nothing "colonial" about humanitarian relief work. In the Durham Sudanese archives (a superb collection that specialises on colonial records), even the mention of famine is sparsely, if at all, mentioned in any of the documents despite the prevalence of famine during the colonial era. Furthermore, even the parties to the conflict themselves have expressed regret that OLS has failed to help draw the war to an end. President Beshir, although prone to use the "sovereignty ticket" as a means of controlling relief operations, mentions that "one of the major factors that motivates the continuation of war is the lack of confidence and trust between the warring parties...an operation like Lifeline -- a situation in which you have relief moving across battle lines -- might help by building a foundation of trust between the protagonists."<sup>58</sup> Sudan's Ambassador Abdalla, too, lamented the UN failure to provide "a continued and sustained process [leading to]

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<sup>56</sup>SCF Emergency Updates, *Save the Children*, March 2001.

<sup>57</sup>Deng, Francis Mading & Minear, Larry, p.117.

<sup>58</sup>Deng, Francis Mading & Minear, Larry, p.99

political negotiations to settle the conflict altogether."<sup>59</sup> Finally, the SPLM also regretted the lack of sustained pressure by OLS for peace. "Public denunciations of such an affront to the UN were muted," it observed in a press release. "Only the SPLM/A put its point of view across loud and clear that the Khartoum government was bent on blackmail, pure and simple."<sup>60</sup>

If peace induced by political pressure is really the only option for relief operations in the Sudan to be effective, the greatly debated question emerges: should relief aid during conflicts be stopped altogether? As Roman Catholic Bishop of Torit, Paride Taban was quoted in a U.N. Press Release, "Spending on relief alone is like fattening a cow for slaughter. How long can one be doing relief work without spending time, energy and resources on root causes?".<sup>61</sup> After all, it was western relief aid that allowed the Khmer rouge to regroup, prolonged the Biafran war, and the 1989 negotiated OLS respite gave a near defeated GOS the time it needed to re-arm and continue the seemingly incessant conflict.<sup>62</sup> Simply cutting off aid, however, does not constitute a solution. Recently, the NGO buzzword has been "traditional coping strategies" -- as confidence in direct relief aid has swayed, a long overdue observance of indigenous solutions has occurred. This fresh analysis is not unwarranted considering that the greatest relief effort the Dinka have relied upon in all famine cases has been their own traditional strategies such as: fishing, collecting wild foods, bartering, migration, etc.<sup>63</sup> The problem is donor officials may over-emphasise "traditional coping strategies" almost as a way of excusing inaction. Indigenous survival strategies may work but they are often done as a last resort and cause long-term damage. As Dr. Marial Achol stated while working in Tonj county, "For me it is the first time that I have seen hunger of this kind...where people are reduced to digging up termite mounds to eat scraps the termites have buried and scavenge for wild fruits and roots."<sup>64</sup> Just because there are coping strategies available, certainly does not make them ideal.

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<sup>59</sup>Minear, Larry, p.141.

<sup>60</sup>Ibid., p.141.

<sup>61</sup>UNICEF Press Release, 'Potential Tragedy looms in Southern Sudan with Government suspension of relief flights, warns Humanitarian Affairs Office,' IHA/644, 9 February, 1998.

<sup>62</sup>De Waal, Alex, *Famine Crimes*, 1997, p.100.

<sup>63</sup>Certain wild seeds/kernels such as *Akuedha*, *Gor*, and *Thou* have much higher levels of kilocalories per 100g than sorghum/millet.

<sup>64</sup>Mackenzie, Hilary, 'Enmeshed in Conflict and Drought, Southern Sudan Starves', *New York Times*, March 18, 1998.

Perhaps the best strategy is not to remove relief entirely, but to see how it can be incorporated into coping strategies. David Keen suggests that possibly "one of the best ways of moving forward may be by assisting rural people's own efforts to prevent themselves from slipping backwards during a famine."<sup>65</sup> The sad truth is, however, a variety of solutions could be possible if only one key ingredient existed within the warring parties, the donor governments, or even the relief agencies, and that is, genuine concern.

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