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Searching for Peace

Living History (887)

With talk of war in the Middle East and the fears that it will contribute to yet further suffering in Africa, it has been refreshing for me to see that the leadership of Uganda is making a diplomatic effort to bring peace to their long border with the Sudan. This certainly is statesmanship at its best. It has been a long war causing only suffering for both sides and it has been an opportunity for African leadership to end the conflict, not foreign powers and donors.

Over the last weekend a protocol has been signed between the two countries that will prevent the once American supported Sudanese People's Liberation Army (SPLA) carrying arms whilst in Uganda and receiving military training on Uganda soil. For some months now the Sudanese government has allowed Uganda access across their border in pursuit of gangsters who have crossed and then re-crossed after committing murderous acts against civilians and this certainly has helped in creating an improved relationship. Both countries have powerful and responsible leaders in the African context and many of us have thought for years that if only they work together there will be no bounds to the economic achievements that will come their way. Years ago and certainly in President Museveni's memory we had enormous Mississippi type rear paddle propulsion boats coming out of the Sudan on the River Nile to off load weekly in Uganda thousands of tons of prime cotton (saffi) and skins, all bound for Europe.

Sadly war saw an end to this in the 1960s. The giant boats sunk from neglect and the railway rusted out of existence. These two leaders can bring back prosperity from tourism and agriculture. It will be the Great Lakes miracle. Here's hoping. Although President George W. Bush has got America into a gigantic tangle that is sure to spell misery within the Middle East and for the rest of us who will have to dig deep into our pockets to pay for it all, even perhaps to use wind power to drive our cars along the highway, he may be able to take a little credit for the possible peace initiative with Sudan and Uganda. Certainly before the tragedy of the 11th September he had given some little thought to this region with his act of nominating former Senator John Danford as his "Special Envoy for Peace in Sudan". That was good news. The previous regime had made the mistake of seeing the Sudan as a pariah, even to the extent of bombing an aspirin factory, something that could be described as ill considered.

Certainly I was disappointed that such a super power had 'got its knickers in a twist' when Clinton announced an overwhelming victory because Sudan had been denied a seat on the UN Security Council, despite fifty three countries of Africa choosing Sudan in preference to Uganda and Mauritius to represent them and the continent. It was a decision ominous for the future of the UN at a time when this African country and others were making every effort to shake off the influences of the Cold War and seeking peace. "Oil !" was the shout of reaction by the fifty three African countries. Clinton, they said, had his sights on the Sudanese oil. Certainly his Secretary of State was not seeking peace and the end of war. Even former President Jimmy Carter was very candid about whom he perceived as being to blame for the continuation of the Sudanese conflict: "The people in Sudan want to resolve the conflict. The biggest obstacle is US government policy. The US is committed to overthrowing the government in Khartoum. Any sort of peace effort is aborted, basically by policies of the United States...Instead of working for peace in Sudan, the US government has basically promoted a continuation of the war."

My own correspondence at the time encouraging hand shaking between Uganda and the Sudan provoked replies that I was involving myself with a country that had harboured Osama bin Laden.

At the time we had seen the end of the Afghan/Russian war. It was in the 1990s and all of us were just losing the smell of blood from so many conflicts: the Vietnam war; Greece in turmoil; Cuba in revolution; Cypriots fighting Turks; Ho Chi Minh had done his worst; Algiers, Tibet, Palestine, Yemen, Lebanon, Oman and even Borneo; never mind America and the Soviets at one another's throat. The world had been turned upside down with political criminals scattered in four star hotels yet it was poor Sudan that took the flak as an Islamic country that was allowing one Osama bin Laden to take accommodation in Khartoum. So who was this extremely wealthy Saudi Arabian called Osama bin Laden? Surprise, surprise! He was a former American protege. Afghanistan had been seized by the Soviets and no doubt correctly America decided to stop the Soviet expansion. The CIA brought in this Saudi Arabian who became their principal recruiter and fundraiser for the formation of the mujahidin who were used with great tenacity under an equally tenacious CIA command to fight against both Afghans and Russians. He played his part well but after the Russians beat a retreat back into Russia, America pulled out of Afghanistan leaving thousands of so called foreigners who had been recruited by bin Laden to take refuge in the Pakistan NWFP camps. These men Osama bin Laden called his al-Qaeda .

Deserted by America in their rapid pull out from Afghanistan after the exodus of the Russians these mujahidin, re-named al-Quada, became so troublesome on Pakistan soil that Pakistan insisted to the USA that they be removed somewhere else on this planet. Indeed, Pakistan threatened to transport Osama bin Laden's men to the compound and grounds of the U.S Embassy in Islamabad. History records that the US government, now alarmed at the 'whirlwind' they had released and using some forceful 'diplomatic' pressure asked Saudi Arabia and other countries in the Persian Gulf to issue passports to these discarded fighters.

This done they were flown out of Pakistan. Some 900 arrived in Algeria and joined up with the murderous 'Group Islamique Armee'. Others re-appeared in Kashmir, Bosnia, Lebanon, Azerbaijan, Philippines Chechnya and Yemen. Meanwhile, bin Laden took up a new cause, to remove Western non-Muslim troops whom he regards as allies of the 'Great Satan' from Saudi soil. A 'whirl wind' had indeed been sown. Bitter with America and the fact that European and Americans were on Saudi Arabian soil Osama bin Laden now had a 'cause' that made him a general danger to this planet and we were first to see the bombing in 1992 against US troops in a Yemeni hotel, along with a failed attack on American aircraft. The rest is history and we live with a constant threat of bombs and other dirty tricks. There is no stopping him now except death. We have seen the terror he has caused with the Khobar Towers bomb at the King Abdul Aziz air base, the Kenya and Mombassa bombings, the attack on the Planet Hollywood restaurant in South Africa and explosives used against the USS Cole, and these are only a few I have listed in my notes. He will recruit and recruit. The major powers must take care not to step into the traps he is carefully laying out. He certainly will use the Iraqi situation to suit his own lethal planning. The recruits he needs will be found when families look upon their dead, victims as they see it of 'the Infidel'.

The Sudanese recognised their error in allowing him to take up abode in their country after he had quarrelled with his superiors in Saudi Arabia. There is no question but that the Sudan government has helped the Bush administration since the 11th September. They have bent over backwards to create peace. Now with a chance of Uganda and Khartoum getting together let's hope that Washington accepts this opportunity to end at least this one war that has cost millions of lives.

Bob, 27th February 2003