

Current slavery in the Sudan

by Francis Bennion

In a recent article¹ I examined the question whether we should apologise for slavery, colonisation and imperialism in the former British Empire. I said that far from Europeans having invented African slavery, it was a feature of life there long before European traders arrived. I should have added that, as we enter the 21st century, some Africans still sell their own people as slaves.

This was borne out by a report from Robin Lodge in Nairobi². Robin's report said that a United Nations agency had accused a Christian human rights group of encouraging the slave trade in southern Sudan by handing over \$100,000 (£64,000) to Arab traders to buy the freedom of more than 2,000 slaves. Julianna Lindsey, a spokeswoman for the United Nations Children's Fund operation Lifeline Sudan, said that while she appreciated the benefits to the individuals concerned there were fears that paying money to redeem slaves could serve only to support the market.

"The issue is the same whether it is 500 or 2,000 slaves," she said. "Money in Southern Sudan is very attractive and the people involved in the trade will use that."

Her remarks followed the announcement by Christian Solidarity International, an organisation based in Switzerland, that it had paid Arab middlemen the equivalent of \$50 a head to obtain the freedom of 2,035 slaves in a seven-day trip to southern Sudan - bringing the number of slaves that it has redeemed to more than 11,000 since 1995. For the newly freed slaves, this can mean an end to a life of appalling hardship and cruelty, where unpaid hard labour is often combined with physical and sexual abuse. The victims, mostly women and children from the Christian Dinka tribe, are sold off by the slave dealers to Muslims in the north for as little as \$15 each. Boys are forcibly circumcised and girls subjected to ritual genital mutilation. Women abducted as slaves are frequently raped, and thereafter forced to bear the children of the unknown men who violated them.

It seems that Arab militias, armed and organised by the Government in Khartoum, come down from the north on horseback to loot and burn, and also to abduct women and children to sell as slaves. In the small southern village of Yargot Robin Lodge saw more than 600 slaves gathered in the shade of a large tree to await their freedom. The boys told of working as cattle herders, the girls as domestic servants in the north. The young women reported stories of violence, rape and murder at the hands of their Arab captors.

Ayak, aged 20, was pregnant when she was abducted three years ago from her village of Rianwei. 'When one woman tried to escape we were all beaten with axes and sticks,' she said. 'I fell unconscious. When I woke my leg was paralysed and I was bleeding. Then I lost my baby.' She still walks with a limp but is lucky in one way. She has heard that her husband is still alive and hopes that he will accept the young baby she has brought home with her, the product of rape by her Arab master.

¹ *Oxford Times*, 9 July 1999.

² *The Times*, 9 July 1999.

The United Nations critics argue that the redeemers of the slaves are playing into the hands of slave dealers. Carol Bellamy, the head of Unicef, wrote recently: 'At \$50 a head in a country where most of the people subsist on less than a dollar a day, the practice has encouraged more [slave] trafficking.' There are also reports that the well-meaning redeemers are frequently exploited by people posing as slaves, who have never been abducted, as well as by families willing to sell their children or other relatives to slave traders several times over for financial gain.

This teaches that we British should not be so quick to abase ourselves as wicked exploiters and racists.

[Written in 1999 but not published.]