



Northern Sudan: IMS support for media development

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Content

1.	Introduction.....	3
2.	The conflict and current peace initiatives in Sudan.....	3
3.	Conditions for the media in northern Sudan	5
3.1	Censorship	6
3.2	Self-censorship	8
3.3	Dialogue with the government	8
4.	Media organisations in Sudan.....	9
5.	International support for media development in northern Sudan	9
5.1	Monitoring of conditions for the media in northern Sudan	10
6.	IMS support for the media in northern Sudan.....	11

1. Introduction

International efforts to promote sustainable peace in Sudan have intensified since the last half of 2001 and further accelerated in 2002.

In order to support these efforts an IMS staff member visited northern Sudan from 2 – 11 June 2002 and identified potential avenues for rapid IMS assistance to the Sudanese media.

The signing of a significant accord between the government in Khartoum and the Sudanese Peoples Liberation Army on 20 July 2002 in the town of Machakos in Kenya highlighted the rapid changes taking place in Sudan. It quickly inspired new hopes of a lasting solution to the war, even if the accord fell short of announcing any halt to the armed confrontations.¹

The IMS mission was carried out in close collaboration with DanChurchAid, for which IMS would like to express its gratitude.

The mission met with editors, publishers and journalists of several newspapers in Khartoum, with human rights activists, with representatives of civil society, including the Sudan Council of Churches, political parties and NGOs, with diplomatic missions, with UNICEF, EURONAIID, academics, and with officials of the National Press Council and of the Ministry of Information. IMS would like to thank all of those who so readily availed themselves for this purpose.

The focus of this document is on the media in the government controlled northern Sudan. IMS is keenly aware of the need for intensified focus also on the needs and aspirations of the media community of southern Sudan, mainly in the hands of the SPLA, and a supplementary mission with this focus is under consideration.

2. The conflict and current peace initiatives in Sudan

The conflict have raged in Sudan since 1983 with re-current but so far unsuccessful attempts to reach agreement between the main conflicting parties, the military government of Sudan (GoS), formed in 1989 by the National Islamic Front in Khartoum, and the Sudanese Peoples Liberation Army (SPLA).

In recent months, however, the main parties have agreed to important confidence-building measures, most recently the Machakos Protocol of July 2002. A ceasefire agreement covering the important Nuba mountain region fell into place in January 2002 after mediation by US, Norwegian and Swiss officials. The ceasefire agreement is likely to be extended in July to the end of 2002.

¹ According to press reports of the accord the NIF government recognized the right to freedom of religion – in effect agreeing that southern Sudan may choose a legal system other than Sharia. The accord also appeared to herald a possible solution to the thorny issue of self-determination in Southern Sudan: The parties agreed to a framework indicating that a referendum on the status of southern Sudan may take place after a six year transition period and that until then mechanisms for power-sharing in Sudan should be established. Interpretations of the accord quickly differed; negotiations were to continue in August and September 2002.

A prolongation beyond 2002 may depend on the extent to which the international monitoring machinery set up to implement the cease-fire, the Joint Monitoring Committee (JMC), can persuade the GoS and the SPLA to allow for free and equal access of humanitarian and other assistance to all parts of Dar Nuba.

Beyond Dar Nuba, the civil war continued unabated. Since January several parts of the South had been the focus of intensified fighting: Western Upper Nile, Southern Blue Nile, Northern Bahr al Ghazal and Eastern Equatoria. With few exceptions, GoS was slowly gaining ground over the SPLA. The Nuba ceasefire had given back GoS control of most of the southern Kordofan-region. It had also effectively allowed re-deployment of a large number of government troops, which were now pushing SPLA hard in the rich oil fields of Western Upper Nile (WUN). A GoS offensive in this region since late 2001 had forced more than 100,000 people on the move adding to Sudan's several million internally displaced. This offensive had been pursued with a zeal and recklessness in regard to the civilian populations, which made it stand out in the history of war in Sudan.

Overall, two main factors appeared to be in favor of GoS in this phase of the war: Oil money had improved its arsenal considerably (most importantly with the much feared helicopter gun-ships) while improved relations with Ethiopia and Uganda had resulted in tactical advantages so far materializing in a successful GoS offensive in Southern Blue Nile.

Reports continued of a low intensity conflict in Darfur. This area is the historical base of the largest northern opposition party Umma led by Sadiq al Mahdi, whom the current government pushed from power in a state coup in 1989. Unruly Darfur has never been an easy place to govern but in June 2002 things seemed to be on the brink of spinning out of control.

The Danforth-initiative

In May 2002, the special US envoy to Sudan, senator John Danforth, presented his findings to President Bush recommending a continued US commitment to an active search for an end to Sudan's war. Danforth reported some progress on the four tests he had put before GoS and the SPLA: 1) Nuba ceasefire, 2) An agreement to protect civilians, 3) Progress on the issue of abductions and slavery and 4) Days of tranquility for vaccination campaigns.

Other parts of Danforth's report prompted protests from particularly southern Sudanese. In fairly straightforward language Danforth ruled out secession of the South as a realistic model for obtaining peace in Sudan; this, of course, was before the Machakos Protocol of July 2002.

The US approach has been not to launch any new peace initiatives, but to push for progress in the long-standing regional peace initiative within IGAD (The Horn of Africa + Kenya and Uganda); an approach widely accepted by other actors, including the EU, and which resulted most recently in the Machakos Protocol.

The EU presently conducts a so-called "critical dialogue" with the GoS, which may pave the way for resumption of trade- and aid-relations in 2003.

Until July 2002 few observers were optimistic that an end to the conflict in Sudan was anywhere close. Among the many intricate issues on the table, SPLA has consistently demanded that Sharia should be dismantled as an integral part of the Sudanese Constitution; that self-determination including the right to secession for the South should form part of any agreement and that oil-revenue should be shared equitably between the north and south of Sudan.

While the Machakos Protocol of July 2002, presented as a framework for peace, may have delivered possible solutions on two of these issues, interpretations of the accords quickly differed, and the potent question of the oil-revenue remained unresolved.

Economic growth and civic space

In June 2002 a continuing sense of an expanding economy and a slowly growing "civic space" in Khartoum and the major cities in northern Sudan was evident. In May 2002 a group of southern students in Khartoum openly celebrated the anniversary of the SPLA in their campus. They were subsequently arrested and jailed. In early June 2002 and to the surprise of most observers and lawyers in Khartoum, the students were sentenced to only three weeks in jail, a further three months suspended sentence and a fine.

Oil revenue continued to fuel the economy; Malaysian, Chinese, Canadian and Swedish oil companies have large interests in Sudan. Private housing was shooting up in the better areas on the outskirts of Khartoum, as were fuel stations for a growing number of cars. A modest trickle down-effect is evident, marginally improving living conditions even for some of the hundreds of thousands of internally displaced people who work as day laborers in the capital.

3. Conditions for the media in northern Sudan

The military government of the National Islamic Front, which took power through a coup in 1989, continued to employ a wide array of tools in its continued attempt to control the media in Sudan. These ranged from arrests, beatings and threats against journalists to economic obstruction in several forms. While a vicious war raged in many parts of southern and eastern Sudan, the majority of the population in the northern half of the country, including those living in the capital city of Khartoum, still had little or no access to independent information on the war and its terrifying, humanitarian costs.

This severe shortage of information prevented any serious public debate even on less controversial, non-military matters. As a key example, the war in the south has driven more than 1,5 million internally displaced people to the greater Khartoum area, but through direct censorship the media in Khartoum have generally been prevented from covering the real implications of this enormous shift in population patterns.

At the same time, however, opportunities for more informed journalism in northern Sudan have increased significantly over the last three-four years. Among the many factors inspiring this change many observers counted internal pressure, noticeably from the media itself, and the government's growing desire to rid itself of an image in the outside world linking it to international terrorism – an image which made much desired international recognition, increased access to the IMF and the World Bank and normalized economic relations difficult to establish.

The Khartoum Monitor, an English-language daily representing mainly the interest of the southern Sudanese, published its first issue in 1999 and now publishes information on a daily basis, which would have been unheard of only two years ago. Other Khartoum-based newspapers similarly try to strike a balance between the notoriously arbitrary and harsh censorship of the security apparatus and the increased space for independent reporting and commentary made possible by the NIF government. While the over-all picture is still one of heavy-handed control and virtual information blackout even on less controversial issues, the media fraternity in Khartoum currently acknowledges a significant 'window of opportunity'.

3.1 Censorship

Electronic media

There is no independent electronic broadcasting in Sudan or any signs that this will be allowed in the near future. The Sudanese radio and TV remain firmly under the control of the NIF government. The governmental radio and TV-structure is in the process of being transformed into a semi-autonomous corporation but this has brought no added independence to its broadcasts.

Sudan TV regularly airs programmes portraying the war in southern Sudan as holy jihad and no dissenting views on the war efforts or on other key policies of the government are allowed on either radio or TV.

The state broadcaster controls also about 15 regional broadcasting stations, all equipped to produce and broadcast both radio and TV. These regional broadcasters, operating not in the vicinity of the central government, may offer some additional room for independence, but there is little evidence of this.

The Sudan state broadcaster relays several hours of the BBC World Service (Arabic) every day.

Satellite dishes for receipt of foreign broadcasts are tolerated in private households, even if they are still subject to (expensive) government license. Hotels and other private enterprises often make satellite broadcasts available to customers.

Print media

All print media are subject to a publishing license, issued by the National Press Council (NPC). The secretary general of the NPC is appointed by the President of

the Republic of Sudan. This semi-judicial body must license all editors of Sudanese newspapers, all working journalists and all other regular contributors (columnists, specialist writers etc). Newspapers are licensed only after scrutiny of their financial status, budgets, accounts and board of directors; scrutiny that may be resumed at any given moment. Journalists are subjected to a written examination on a series of subjects before they are granted license to operate within the profession. A license may be revoked by the NPC at any given moment if any breach of 'The Press Act of 1999' or its by-laws is registered by the NPC.

In addition, the security apparatus of the NIF government actively censors the print media. Until late 2001 all newspapers in Khartoum were subjected to pre-printing censorship, which entailed a daily visit by a security officer who would order the removal of or re-editing of any number of articles prior to printing without reference to any written guidelines or instructions. In November 2001 this pre-printing censorship was lifted from all but four of newspapers; in early June-July 2002 also from the last four – but the pre-print censorship was replaced by daily telephone calls from the censors to the editors instructing them on editorial restrictions.

According to the Sudan Organisation Against Torture (SOAT) there were five main patterns to the persecution and harassment of media personnel in 2001:

- Journalists and editors arrested, charged and tried under the Criminal Act of 1991, Press and Publications Act 1992 and the National Security Act 1994. Breaches of any of these laws would often carry fines so heavy as to seriously threaten the economic survival of the paper in question.
- Journalists arrested for long periods without charge or trial
- 'Part time arrests' where journalists are ordered to report on a daily basis to the Security Forces Headquarters and detained from morning to night
- Surveillance, harassment and threats
- Confiscation of personal belonging, computers, diaries etc.

Economic measures

In addition to the direct censorship by the security services, newspapers are subjected to economic obstruction if they pursue editorial practices not condoned by the NIF government or the security apparatus. Several newspaper offices have had contracts for advertisements cancelled at the last minute, or have been told not to print certain ads by visiting security personnel. Others have had entire print-runs confiscated at the printing-press, others again have enjoyed exemption from import-duty on newsprint for years, only to be presented with the accumulated bill if and when their editorial practice was no longer in accordance with the demands of the security apparatus. Still others enjoy privileges like a daily order of several thousands of copies from the government – privileges carefully designed to encourage editorial policies favourable to government positions.

Access to the war-zones

The Khartoum based Sudanese media do not have access to the war zones in southern and western Sudan. All travel beyond the central, government controlled region of Sudan is subject to travel permits issued by the security organs and few Khartoum-based journalists have ever been to southern Sudan unless on trips with government representatives or the security forces.

The very few journalists, who have ventured into disputed areas in southern Sudan without official permission, have generally found that they cannot themselves publish in Khartoum the information they collect as this would be in direct contravention of rules established by the security organs.

3.2 Self-censorship

Any breach of the laws governing the media will often be punishable by incarceration, heavy fines or both. The threat of physical abuse by security officers protected by a culture of impunity is constant. Subsequently, journalists and editors in Khartoum exercise a hard regime of self-censorship.

A few have the necessary skills to observe the rules and still produce constructive and informative journalism. A small community of dedicated media professionals actively defies the threat of immediate repercussions and continue to publish journalism that challenges the limits of official tolerance.

3.3 Dialogue with the government

In early 2002 an increasing number of confrontations between the government, its censors and the newspaper community in Khartoum was becoming a serious embarrassment for the government. After a joint complaint from the newspaper community, the Minister of Information of the NIF government held talks with a group of editors and a new set of general rules for coverage of sensitive issues (mainly military, religious and racial issues) were agreed upon.

Pressure from diplomats in Khartoum to ease restrictions on the media co-incident with delicate developments within the process of US-led negotiations on cease-fire modalities between the government and SPLA, and the government agreed to the formation of a new ad hoc committee for dialogue with the media.

In June 2002, in this committee two newspaper editors, representing an informal network of newspaper editors and publishers, were discussing matters of censorship with the chairman of the Journalists Association of Sudan, and representatives of the armed forces, the security apparatus and the National Press Council.

Members of the media community in Khartoum regard this development as significant, but also warn observers not to harbour illusions as to its actual effect. Veteran media professionals have limited faith in the committee's ability to actually

influence the ways in which censorship is administered, particularly by the security apparatus.

4. Media organisations in Sudan

There are no media organisations in northern Sudan working with any significant degree of independence from the NIF government and none in the south. The National Press Council in Khartoum, which has 21 members, is a corporate body directly under the supervision of the president of the republic. It organises training seminars for journalists on a regular basis.

The Sudan Journalists Association, which was previously regarded as relatively representative of the media fraternity, was banned in 1989 (along with the Writers Union) and only re-emerged as a body perceived to be firmly under control of the NIF government.

Editors and publishers of the newspapers in Khartoum have discussed repeatedly over the years the possibility of establishing a formal forum (a Publishers Association, Editors Forum or similar) for collective handling of matters of common interest, but no such body has yet been established.

5. International support for media development in northern Sudan

Foreign diplomats from the UK, Switzerland, Holland, Norway, Italy, Germany and the EU keep matters of media freedom high on the list of subjects on their continued dialogue with the government in Khartoum. Future EU relations with Khartoum are presently subjected to a so-called 'critical dialogue' in which censorship and the harassment of journalists is often a key issue. Many members of the media community find this diplomatic pressure crucial to their own situation and have concluded that it has indeed produced important results.

The Joint Monitoring Commission overseeing the cease-fire in the Nuba-mountains has a mandate to inform the population in the Nuba Mountains of the nature of the ceasefire and the JMC. The JMC employs its own information officer and use the Sudanese broadcasting corporation's regional broadcaster in the Nuba region, community drama sessions and other media as vehicles for pre-designed messages.

UNICEF has run training seminars for journalists on matters pertaining to the UNICEF mandate. The agency has offered to cover travel costs and other expenses of a reporting scheme, which would bring reporters from the Khartoum Monitor on several trips to regions in central Sudan seldom visited by the media. Articles by the Monitor reporters would be translated into Arabic and made available to other papers in Khartoum. A larger UNICEF training programme involving three regional chapters of the state broadcasting corporation was expected to start late in 2002. This will focus on local peace building initiatives and bring radio producers and civil society actors together in a combined production- and training cycle. This programme will be partly managed by *SudMedia*.

SudMedia, (Sud for Sudan) is a small Dutch media development organisation, supported by amongst others the Dutch reformed church. *SudMedia* has run a training course for journalists at the Khartoum Monitor, and will do this again late in 2002, also inviting journalists from other papers. *SudMedia* will also manage a training package for radio producers from the state broadcasting corporation in Khartoum who will co-produce radio programming with representatives from civil society NGOs. *SudMedia* does media training and productions for the Sudanese Council of Churches and has established its own radio-studio and radio and TV editing facilities in Khartoum.

The British Council in 2001 organised a training seminar for journalists in Khartoum on human rights reporting, involving two trainers from the Thompson Foundation. A BBC training project aimed at employees at the state broadcasting corporation's headquarters was scheduled for 2001 but the BBC cancelled its input due to other commitments.

The Sudan Council of Churches – with support from Dutch and British churches – and the Norwegian Church Aid office in Khartoum were instrumental in the establishment of the Khartoum Monitor and remain prepared to support the paper. The Canadian High Commission in Khartoum sponsors a weekly page in the Khartoum Monitor focussed on human security to the tune of more than 20.000 USD per year.

The EU-commission was to call for proposals for Sudan development projects in July 2002. The call was to invite proposals focussing on, among other issues, freedom of speech and to possibly include calls for proposals promoting freedom of the media. Sudan is among the 29 countries selected for special focus of the European Initiative for Democracy and Human Rights.

PANOS has developed a programme focussing on the role of media in conflict prevention in sub-Saharan Africa. A regional board of advisors to PANOS in the Horn of Africa includes a key member of the Khartoum media community.

5.1 Monitoring of conditions for the media in northern Sudan

In June 2002, international pressure on the NIF government was regarded by the media community in Khartoum as one of the most important components of media development in Sudan. Diplomats designing this pressure, however, had limited sources of precise and up-dated information on the conditions for independent media work in Sudan.

Most incidents of arrests of journalists, court rulings against the media, closure of newspapers, confiscations and other incidents of direct obstruction of media work in Khartoum are soon reported by international media monitoring agencies, in particular Reporters sans Frontieres and the Committee to Protect Journalists.

The collection of information by these professional agencies, however, do not rely on any developed net-work of trained reporters/observers in Khartoum and reports

from Khartoum rarely reflect the array of other, less visible means of censorship applied by the NIF government and the security services.

The Sudan Organisation Against Torture (SOAT), which runs an office in Khartoum reporting to the SOAT headquarters in London, is currently the best source of information on the conditions for media work in Sudan. A SOAT staff member vigorously monitors inter-action between the media and the government, the courts and the security apparatus, relying on a network of close contacts in the media community. Incidents are swiftly reported to the SOAT London office and from there relayed to international organisations like Amnesty International, Reporters Sans Frontieres and others. The SOAT annual report contains details and analysis of the reported incidents.

6. IMS support for the media in northern Sudan

Following consultations with the media community in Khartoum, with academics, civic society organisations in Khartoum and in exile and others, IMS intend to pursue four inter-related lines of activity in support of the Sudanese media.

The four streams of activities envisaged are designed to support media developments in Sudan already initiated by the Khartoum media community or to facilitate firm aspirations of this community as expressed by members of this community.

Furthermore, IMS will actively share information and cooperate with all interested parties in Sudan and with other interested media organisations in the international community.

Key to IMS's considerations have been the need for increased exchange of information between the Sudanese media community and regional and international actors in the field of freedom of expression. An increased flow of information is key to sustained international support for freedom of expression in Sudan, and IMS intends to support immediately capacity building for enhanced reporting on freedom of speech issues in Sudan as well as increased exchanges between Sudanese media professionals and their peers in the international community.

In addition, IMS intends to support two key developments, which have the potential of quickly enhancing the capacity of the Sudanese media to handle professionally the current efforts towards peace, stability and freedom of speech in Sudan: Capacity building for and facilitation of reporting from regions affected by conflict, and the establishment of a collective body within the newspaper industry. Both developments have been high on the list of priorities of the Sudanese media community for some time.

All streams of activity will be implemented in close co-operation with local partners in Khartoum. They will be grouped as follows:

- Promoting reporting from regions affected by conflict in Sudan

- Supporting development of a collective body within the newspaper community in Sudan
- Enhancing local capacity for monitoring of conditions for independent journalism in northern Sudan
- Promoting regional exchanges in the field of media freedom in the IGAD countries (Horn-of-Africa)

Separate project documents serve as guides for the implementation of these activities in Sudan. The following describe the main components of the proposed activities:

Promoting reporting from regions affected by conflict in Sudan:

Through facilitation of field reporting on local peace-building efforts in southern Sudan IMS intend to engage in capacity building for constructive conflict reporting. This will include production of articles from southern Sudan for newspapers in Khartoum and the establishing of mechanisms for a continued flow of information from southern Sudan to the media in Khartoum.

The core activity will be a two-three week reporting trip to a garrison town in southern Sudan facilitated for a group of 4-5 journalists representing Khartoum-based newspapers.

Professional coaching for culturally conscious conflict reporting will be provided to this group of reporters by an international expert, and independent reports from southern Sudan, cognisant of the existing limitations on reporting in Sudan, will be printed in Khartoum-based newspapers. Finally, the participating journalists will establish mechanisms for a continued flow of information from southern Sudan to the newspapers involved during their stay in the south.

This project is intended as a joint venture between the IMS and the British Council (BC) in Khartoum.

Supporting development of a collective body within the newspaper community in Sudan

The media based in northern Sudan play an important role in the pursuit of non-military solutions to the armed conflicts. A relatively strong infrastructure and a nucleus of dedicated, professional editors / publishers form the core of a small but vibrant newspaper industry.

Veteran editors and publishers in Khartoum have discussed the concept of a collective body of decision-makers and owners within the newspaper industry for some years. In 2002 negotiations on this issue became more concrete.

IMS will offer expert advice and quality documentation to the Khartoum newspaper industry based on the experiences of other newspaper communities where

collective bodies have been established, and on accumulated expertise of the World Association of Newspapers and the World Editors Forum.

The exact shape and timing of this intervention is subject to the on-going deliberations within the newspaper industry in Khartoum.

Enhancing local capacity for monitoring of conditions for independent journalism in northern Sudan

International pressure urging the easing of restrictions on independent journalism in Sudan is currently among the more important components of media development in the country. The NIF-government is sensitive to pressure from especially European and US diplomats and, consequently, also to alerts and protests rose by foreign advocacy groups.

IMS will offer support to the monitoring of and reporting to the international community on conditions for independent journalism in Sudan, primarily through capacity building in-put to the group of individuals engaged in such monitoring and reporting in Sudan. The project will assist a process of analysis, and – if relevant – adjustment of existing procedures for the collection, processing and distribution of information on conditions for independent journalism in Sudan.

Promoting regional exchanges in the field of media freedom in the IGAD countries (Horn-of-Africa)

Experiences from other regions in the world, including southern and West Africa, illustrate how regional efforts can often serve as crucial support for local initiatives to promote better conditions for independent media and freedom of speech. Enhanced efforts to bring such experiences to bear in sustained processes in the IGAD region could potentially play an important role in promoting better conditions for independent journalism.

The media community in Sudan have only limited links to those who promote independence of the media in the rest of the IGAD countries. IMS will provide updated information on and contacts to the media community in Sudan to the on-going assessment of prospects for enhanced regional media work in the Horn-of-Africa presently conducted by the Media Foundation for West Africa (MFWA). IMS will support linkage between MFWA and other agencies working in the field of media development in the IGAD region, including the East African Media Institute, and assist the MFWA in visiting Khartoum and identify possible means for continued support for the establishment of sustainable regional exchanges. IMS will also strive to provide opportunities for representatives of the Sudanese media community to take part in international conferences and other events about freedom of speech issues.

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