

WagingPeace

Park Place, 12 Lawn Lane
London, SW8 1UD
United Kingdom

T +44 (0)20 7243 0300
W www.wagingpeace.info
E info@wagingpeace.info

BEJA PEOPLE AND BEJA CONGRESS: HUMAN RIGHTS CONCERNS IN EASTERN SUDAN

**By: Lindsay Helén Sanders
On Behalf of Waging Peace and Lord David Alton**

August 2014

I. Background of Beja and Beja Congress

The Beja are ethnically non-Arab people consisting of the Hadendowa, the Amar'ar, the Beni-Amer, and the Bishariyyn tribes.¹ They live mainly in the eastern region of Sudan which includes Kassala, Red Sea, and Al Qadarif states. The Beja Congress formed in 1958 and became a political party in 1965.² They called for a "fairer distribution of resources" and "devolution of power to all regions".³ Over subsequent decades, the Beja Congress lacked adequate representation in government. They were banned, along with all other political parties, during the 1958 military coup⁴ and, again, in 1989 after the National Islamic Front coup which brought the current regime to power.⁵ In 1995, the Beja Congress joined the National Democratic Alliance ("NDA"), campaigning for political autonomy and improving the welfare of its people.⁶ Denied political representation, the Beja Congress resorted to armed struggle.⁷

By the time of the Cairo Peace Talks in 2004, the Beja Congress believed the goals of the people in the east of Sudan were inadequately represented by the NDA leadership.⁸ Consequently, the following year, the Eastern Sudanese Front ("Eastern Front") was created through an alliance between the Beja Congress and the Rashaida Free Lions.⁹

II. Conflict and Attempts at Peace in the Last Decade

The Beja Congress continues to call for fair representation for the eastern region and for the Beja people which it believes has endured decades of marginalisation. One of the most memorialised events in Beja Congress history was at Port Sudan in 2005; an area that is home to many Beja people¹⁰ and a large hub for foreign trade.¹¹ Government special forces attacked a peaceful demonstration by the Beja Congress, resulting in more than 20 deaths and 150 arrests of Beja Congress members.¹² Subsequently, the Beja Congress attacked oil pipelines, since the unfair distribution of oil revenues is a contentious issue in Sudan.¹³ Peace talks between the Eastern Front and the government of Sudan commenced in June 2006 and resulted in the Eastern Sudan Peace Agreement ("ESPA").¹⁴

However, implementation of the ESPA has moved at a slow pace, if at all, fomenting discontent and instability.¹⁵ Member groups of the Eastern Front have been breaking off and joining other rebel factions. In January 2011, a "splinter group" of the Eastern Front, known as Federal Alliance of Eastern Sudan ("FAES") merged with the Justice and Equality Movement ("JEM"), a large Darfur rebel group.¹⁶ They seek an end to domination by the National Congress Party, the current government led by President Omar Al-Bashir.¹⁷ Additionally, in November 2011, a UK-based faction of the Beja Congress announced it was joining the Sudan Revolutionary Front ("SRF"), an alliance of various armed opposition groups.¹⁸ Some groups have been calling for a separate state and even for restoration of the "Greater Beja Kingdom".¹⁹

III. Human Rights and Humanitarian Concerns in Eastern Sudan

Eastern Sudan has received less attention from the media, decision-makers and researchers than Sudan's other regions, despite serious and deteriorating humanitarian conditions. There is sparse information on the region in comparison to other parts of Sudan. However, as the recent

International Crisis Group report²⁰ shows, the situation in Sudan has not improved in ten years. Dr. AbuAmna, a Beja leader and human rights activist, has stated to this author:

“...the most basic right is the right to live. For this, one needs food, water, healthy environment and shelter. In eastern Sudan, even these basic rights are not available. The people live under constant famine conditions without enough food, water, education, and community health. The morbidity and mortality rates are the highest in the country, probably in the whole world.”

A. Concerns Specific to Beja People

Marginalisation

The Beja people believe they have been continually marginalised and oppressed by the government in Sudan. They are considered a minority community at risk by Minority Rights Group International; Sudan ranks second of the 70 countries where minorities are considered under threat.²¹ The Beja maintain this marginalisation takes the form of a policy of “Arabisation” by the Sudanese regime.²² Beja people have reported suppression of the Beja language with complete lack of television, books, or radio in the Beja language.²³ The government also prohibits the Beja Club, a local place for Beja people to meet, from keeping books written in the Beja language.²⁴

Employment and Land

The Beja people have reported discrimination in matters of employment, for instance, at the harbor in Port Sudan.²⁵ They report that workers are brought in from Khartoum and given higher wages than Beja employees.²⁶ Unemployed Beja receive no government assistance,²⁷ living in slums where the walls of their “homes” are constructed of wood fragments and fabric.²⁸ There is also the issue of illegal land occupation: the Beja claim they are losing their land to “mechanised agricultural schemes”, disrupting their livelihoods and pushing them to urban slums in Port Sudan.²⁹

Political Representation

Politically, as discussed above, the Beja Congress Party has lacked adequate representation in government and has been twice banned. Per the ESPA, Sudan’s President Bashir appointed eastern Sudanese and Beja Congress members to roles in government.³⁰ However, following the 2010 national elections, few of these appointees remained in their positions.³¹ The government’s failure to implement the ESPA, even eight years later, was foreseen by different Beja peoples at the ESPA’s inception. In 2006, they believed the regime would not implement the ESPA and they felt the situation in eastern Sudan would not improve.³² Recent dissatisfaction resulted in a protest by Beja Congress fighters at the National Congress Party’s (“NCP”) headquarters.³³ With the intervention of mediators eight hours into the protest, it was agreed a meeting about implementation would take place on August 25, 2014.³⁴

In recent years, President Bashir’s NCP has mirrored the divide-and-rule tactics it employs in Darfur and elsewhere in Sudan, establishing tribal militias, and increasing support to Arab tribes

whilst ignoring others.³⁵ The government has encouraged the Rashaida peoples' settlement in Beja territory, which Beja peoples see as part of NCP's policy to "Arabise" their region.³⁶ In 2009, the Beja Congress appealed to the International Association of Democratic Lawyers to bring those responsible for the 2005 Port Sudan Massacre, mentioned above, to the International Criminal Court (ICC).³⁷ Dr. AbuAmna contends that the Beja people are being killed by the government's security forces through the use of land mines and "by leaving [Beja people] alone to face famines, natural disasters, diseases, and extinction."³⁸

Port Sudan Fallout

There has been neither compensation nor justice following the massacre in Port Sudan. Victims' families appealed a 2011 decision by the state general prosecutor who found no grounds for criminal charges, but their appeal was dismissed.³⁹ Moreover, the victims' families have been subject to harassment and their legal representatives have been dismissed from work.⁴⁰ In 2009, the victims' families established a committee commemorating those killed at Port Sudan in 2005.⁴¹ However, the committee members have been subject to detention and torture. Further they believe security agencies have infiltrated the group to sow division between pro-Beja Congress and anti-Beja Congress factions.⁴²

Recent Concerns

The Beja people remain greatly disappointed by the lack of ESPA implementation, compounded by the eastern Sudan poverty rate; the country's highest.⁴³ Young people in Kassala state have little access to education or employment.⁴⁴ In January 2012, six members of a student-led movement called Girifna, were arrested after taking part in a public forum to commemorate the massacre at Port Sudan.⁴⁵ They were detained without charge and without access to lawyers until their release in February.⁴⁶ One of the students was reportedly tortured and ill-treated.⁴⁷ Other arrests include that of Beja Congress Party leaders during a 2013 march to commemorate the Port Sudan massacre⁴⁸ and the arrests of students in 2014 for protests demanding the release of political prisoners.⁴⁹

Most recently, in July 2014, Sudanese Police Forces arrested ten civilians in Gedarif state after clashes between inhabitants of Salmeen village and the owner of an agricultural project resulted in the latter's death.⁵⁰ The police arrested 27 civilians, including children, taking them to an unknown location.⁵¹ Also in July, there were clashes between the Sudanese police force and Salmeen village inhabitants, resulting in the death of an 11 year-old boy from a gunshot wound to the head.⁵²

Access to human rights monitoring and humanitarian aid has been severely restricted due to the Sudanese government's ban of several foreign aid organisations from operating in eastern Sudan.⁵³

B. General Humanitarian Situation in Eastern Sudan

Eastern Sudan is suffering from a significant but under-reported humanitarian crisis. When an International Rescue Committee programme coordinator for east Sudan visited the country in 2005, he remarked it was "the most under-served, most remote area that I have ever worked

in, with huge humanitarian needs—even in basic issues of nutrition and safe water, up to more complex health and education needs”.⁵⁴ This situation continues to this day.

Hashim⁵⁵, a man who fled from eastern Sudan, told this author:

“On October 16, 2013, I fled [from] Eastern Sudan, and came back to Canada on the 21 of March. It is a horrible situation. Children died from malnutrition, tuberculosis, cancer, and HIV. I visited the hospital of Port Sudan which is the biggest city in the Red Sea province. Imagine, every two or three children are lying on one bed. They have malnutrition. 70% of those who have malnutrition in Sudan are in Eastern Sudan. In a village near Kassala city, women could not get pregnant for 10 years. Moreover, there is no clean water, especially in Port Sudan. It really is a bad situation.”

International humanitarian aid experts have been prohibited from accessing the region.⁵⁶ The government has prevented regional funds getting loans on the grounds that usury is illegal under Islamic law.⁵⁷ Malnutrition and the infant mortality rate are notably high in the region and have been so for many years.⁵⁸ Hospitals are few and far between and the large, poor population has neither the money to access the hospitals that do exist, nor the money to pay for services.⁵⁹

III. Conclusion

Although the situation in eastern Sudan receives less attention than the other regions of Sudan, it is no less worthy of concern. Beja continue to be marginalised and oppressed by the government. The population lives in great poverty with substandard health facilities. With the dismantling of the Eastern Front in 2011, the Beja Congress joining the Sudan Revolutionary Front, and the failure of the regime to fulfill its commitments under the ESPA conditions, the situation in eastern Sudan is likely to deteriorate further. It is possible fresh conflict will erupt as these new factions coordinate their activities. This could have a knock-on effect on the rest of Sudan and the wider region.

¹ International Crisis Group, *Sudan: Preserving Peace in the East*, (26 Nov., 2013), Page 2, Available at [http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/africa/horn-of-africa/sudan/209-sudan-preserving-peace-in-the-east.pdf](http://www.crisisgroup.org/~/media/Files/africa/horn-of-africa/sudan/209-sudan-preserving-peace-in-the-east.pdf).

² International Crisis Group, *Sudan: Preserving Peace in the East*, (26 Nov., 2013), Page 3, Available at <http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/africa/horn-of-africa/sudan/209-sudan-preserving-peace-in-the-east.pdf>.

³ International Crisis Group, *Sudan: Preserving Peace in the East*, (26 Nov., 2013), Page 3, Available at <http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/africa/horn-of-africa/sudan/209-sudan-preserving-peace-in-the-east.pdf>.

-
- ⁴ Omer M. Shurkian, “The Beja: The Plight of a People Dispossessed”, sudantribune.com, (31 August, 2006), <http://www.sudantribune.com/spip.php?article17365>.
- ⁵ International Crisis Group, *Sudan: Preserving Peace in the East*, (26 Nov., 2013), Page 3, Available at <http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/africa/horn-of-africa/sudan/209-sudan-preserving-peace-in-the-east.pdf>.
- ⁶ Omer M. Shurkian, “The Beja: The Plight of a People Dispossessed”, sudantribune.com, (31 August, 2006), <http://www.sudantribune.com/spip.php?article17365>; International Crisis Group, *Sudan: Preserving Peace in the East*, (26 Nov., 2013), Page 3, Available at <http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/africa/horn-of-africa/sudan/209-sudan-preserving-peace-in-the-east.pdf>.
- ⁷ Omer M. Shurkian, “The Beja: The Plight of a People Dispossessed”, sudantribune.com, (31 August, 2006), <http://www.sudantribune.com/spip.php?article17365>.
- ⁸ International Crisis Group, *Sudan: Preserving Peace in the East*, supra, at 4; See also Beja Congress UK Facebook page, <https://www.facebook.com/BejaCongressUK/info?ref=stream>.
- ⁹ International Crisis Group, *Sudan: Preserving Peace in the East*, (26 Nov., 2013), Page 5, Available at <http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/africa/horn-of-africa/sudan/209-sudan-preserving-peace-in-the-east.pdf>.
- ¹⁰ “East Sudan Insurgency”, TRUST.ORG, (20 July, 2013), <http://www.trust.org/spotlight/East-Sudan-insurgency>.
- ¹¹ International Crisis Group, *Sudan: Preserving Peace in the East*, (26 Nov., 2013), Page 2, Available at <http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/africa/horn-of-africa/sudan/209-sudan-preserving-peace-in-the-east.pdf>.
- ¹² International Crisis Group, *Sudan: Preserving Peace in the East*, supra, at 4. (numbers vary by source); See also John Slight, *Eastern Sudan: A Forgotten Catastrophe*, Conservative Party Human Rights Commission (July 2006), Page 13.
- ¹³ *East Sudan Insurgency*, TRUST.ORG, (10 July, 2013), <http://www.trust.org/spotlight/East-Sudan-insurgency>.
- ¹⁴ International Crisis Group, *Sudan: Preserving Peace in the East*, (26 Nov., 2013), Page 7-9, Available at <http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/africa/horn-of-africa/sudan/209-sudan-preserving-peace-in-the-east.pdf>.
- ¹⁵ International Crisis Group, *Sudan: Preserving Peace in the East*, (26 Nov., 2013), Page 18, Available at <http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/africa/horn-of-africa/sudan/209-sudan-preserving-peace-in-the-east.pdf>.
- ¹⁶ *Eastern Sudan rebels merge with Darfur JEM*, SUDANTRIBUNE.COM, (9 January, 2011), <http://www.sudantribune.com/spip.php?article37539>.
- ¹⁷ *Eastern Sudan rebels merge with Darfur JEM*, SUDANTRIBUNE.COM, (9 January, 2011), <http://www.sudantribune.com/spip.php?article37539>.
- ¹⁸ International Crisis Group, *Sudan: Preserving Peace in the East*, (26 Nov., 2013), Page 23, Available at <http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/africa/horn-of-africa/sudan/209-sudan-preserving-peace-in-the-east.pdf>; Radio Dabanga, “Beja Congress Joins Sudan Revolutionary Front”, (16 Nov., 2011), <https://www.radiodabanga.org/node/21016>.
- ¹⁹ International Crisis Group, *Sudan: Preserving Peace in the East*, (26 Nov., 2013), Page 24, Available at <http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/africa/horn-of-africa/sudan/209-sudan-preserving-peace-in-the-east.pdf>.
- ²⁰ International Crisis Group, *Sudan: Preserving Peace in the East*, (26 Nov., 2013), Page 2, Available at <http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/africa/horn-of-africa/sudan/209-sudan-preserving-peace-in-the-east.pdf>.
- ²¹ “Peoples Under Threat, Republic of Sudan”, Minority Rights Group International, (2014), <http://peoplesunderthreat.org/countries/sudan/>.
- ²² Beja Congress UK. “Basic Info”. *Facebook.com*, Available at <https://www.facebook.com/BejaCongressUK/info?ref=stream>.
- ²³ John Slight, *Eastern Sudan: A Forgotten Catastrophe*, Conservative Party Human Rights Commission (July 2006), Page 10.
- ²⁴ John Slight, *Eastern Sudan: A Forgotten Catastrophe*, Conservative Party Human Rights Commission (July 2006), Page 10.

-
- ²⁵ John Slight, *Eastern Sudan: A Forgotten Catastrophe*, Conservative Party Human Rights Commission (July 2006), Page 9.
- ²⁶ John Slight, *Eastern Sudan: A Forgotten Catastrophe*, Conservative Party Human Rights Commission (July 2006), Page 9.
- ²⁷ John Slight, *Eastern Sudan: A Forgotten Catastrophe*, Conservative Party Human Rights Commission (July 2006), Page 10.
- ²⁸ John Slight, *Eastern Sudan: A Forgotten Catastrophe*, Conservative Party Human Rights Commission (July 2006), Page 16.
- ²⁹ Gunnar M. SÃrbÃ, and Arne Strand, "Land Issues and Poverty Reduction: Requirements for Lasting Peace in Sudan", Sudan Vision Daily, (17 February, 2014), <http://news.sudanvisiondaily.com/details.html?rsnpid=232335>.
- ³⁰ International Crisis Group, *Sudan: Preserving Peace in the East*, (26 Nov., 2013), Page 10, Available at <http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/africa/horn-of-africa/sudan/209-sudan-preserving-peace-in-the-east.pdf>.
- ³¹ International Crisis Group, *Sudan: Preserving Peace in the East*, (26 Nov., 2013), Page 10, Available at <http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/africa/horn-of-africa/sudan/209-sudan-preserving-peace-in-the-east.pdf>.
- ³² John Slight, *Eastern Sudan: A Forgotten Catastrophe*, Conservative Party Human Rights Commission (July 2006), Page 10.
- ³³ "Beja veterans occupy ruling party's office in Port Sudan", RADIO DABANGA, (July 28, 2014), <https://www.radiodabanga.org/node/77556>.
- ³⁴ "Beja veterans occupy ruling party's office in Port Sudan", RADIO DABANGA, (July 28, 2014), <https://www.radiodabanga.org/node/77556>.
- ³⁵ International Crisis Group, *Sudan: Preserving Peace in the East*, (26 Nov., 2013), Page 23, Available at <http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/africa/horn-of-africa/sudan/209-sudan-preserving-peace-in-the-east.pdf>.
- ³⁶ International Crisis Group, *Sudan: Preserving Peace in the East*, (26 Nov., 2013), Page 23, Available at <http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/africa/horn-of-africa/sudan/209-sudan-preserving-peace-in-the-east.pdf>.
- ³⁷ Dr. Abu Amna, *An Appeal to the IADL, Subject: The Massacre of Port Sudan on the 29.01.05*", (May 2009), Available at http://www.newsudanvision.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=1690:beja-congress-of-eastern-sudan-calls-on-international-bodies-to-investigate-2005-massacre&catid=1:sudan-news-stories&Itemid=6.
- ³⁸ Dr. Abu Amna, *An Appeal to the IADL, Subject: The Massacre of Port Sudan on the 29.01.05*", (May 2009), Available at http://www.newsudanvision.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=1690:beja-congress-of-eastern-sudan-calls-on-international-bodies-to-investigate-2005-massacre&catid=1:sudan-news-stories&Itemid=6.
- ³⁹ International Crisis Group, *Sudan: Preserving Peace in the East*, (26 Nov., 2013), Page 20, Available at <http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/africa/horn-of-africa/sudan/209-sudan-preserving-peace-in-the-east.pdf>.
- ⁴⁰ International Crisis Group, *Sudan: Preserving Peace in the East*, (26 Nov., 2013), Page 20, Available at <http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/africa/horn-of-africa/sudan/209-sudan-preserving-peace-in-the-east.pdf>.
- ⁴¹ International Crisis Group, *Sudan: Preserving Peace in the East*, (26 Nov., 2013), Page 20, Available at <http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/africa/horn-of-africa/sudan/209-sudan-preserving-peace-in-the-east.pdf>.
- ⁴² International Crisis Group, *Sudan: Preserving Peace in the East*, (26 Nov., 2013), Page 21, Available at <http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/africa/horn-of-africa/sudan/209-sudan-preserving-peace-in-the-east.pdf>.
- ⁴³ AFP, "Peace brings disillusion and poverty to Sudan's east", (21 January, 2012), Al Arabiya News, <http://english.alarabiya.net/articles/2012/01/21/189698.html>.
- ⁴⁴ AFP, "Peace brings disillusion and poverty to Sudan's east", (21 January, 2012), Al Arabiya News, <http://english.alarabiya.net/articles/2012/01/21/189698.html>.

-
- ⁴⁵ “AI: Sudanese Youth Activists Released”, Sudan Tribune, (11 February, 2012), <http://www.sudantribune.com/spip.php?article41571>.
- ⁴⁶ “AI: Sudanese Youth Activists Released”, Sudan Tribune, (11 February, 2012), <http://www.sudantribune.com/spip.php?article41571>; See also “Urgent Action, Six Youth Activists Detained”, Amnesty International, (6 February, 2012), <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/asset/AFR54/006/2012/en/923244d4-f020-4d20-b0c1-7172333a32ae/af:540062012en.pdf>.
- ⁴⁷ “AI: Sudanese Youth Activists Released”, Sudan Tribune, (11 February, 2012), <http://www.sudantribune.com/spip.php?article41571>.
- ⁴⁸ “Sudan: Arrests numbers of the Beja-Congress Leaders, Before the anniversary of the Beja Massacre in Port Sudan”, All Africa, (23 January, 2013), <http://allafrica.com/stories/201301300463.html>.
- ⁴⁹ “Protesting Student in Port Sudan Imprisoned”, Radio Dabanga, (2 May, 2014), <https://www.radiodabanga.org/node/72204>.
- ⁵⁰ “Arrests in Gedarif State”, Sudan Rights Blog, (July 26, 2014) http://sudrights.blogspot.com/2014/07/arrests-in-gedaref-state_26.html.
- ⁵¹ “Arrests in Gedarif State”, Sudan Rights Blog, (July 26, 2014) http://sudrights.blogspot.com/2014/07/arrests-in-gedaref-state_26.html.
- ⁵² “Arrests in Gedarif State”, Sudan Rights Blog, (July 26, 2014) http://sudrights.blogspot.com/2014/07/arrests-in-gedaref-state_26.html.
- ⁵³ “Sudan: Eastern Sudan on ‘verge of famine’ due to ban on aid groups”, All Africa, (3 June, 2012), <http://allafrica.com/stories/201206040566.html>; See also, United States, Department of State, *Sudan 2013 Human Rights Report*, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, Country Practices on Human Rights Practices for 2013, Page 26, Available at http://www.justice.gov/eoir/vll/country/DOS_HRR/2013/Sudan.pdf.
- ⁵⁴ “IRC in the News: In Sudan, Beja People’s Problems Exacerbated by Rebels—IRIN Report”, International Rescue Committee”, (06 April, 2005), <http://www.rescue.org/news/irc-news-sudan-beja-peoples-problems-exacerbated-rebels-irin-report-3583>.
- ⁵⁵ To respect anonymity and privacy, the author is only using the first name of this man.
- ⁵⁶ *The Human Rights Situation in East Sudan*, Waging Peace, (March 2012), Page 7.
- ⁵⁷ *The Human Rights Situation in East Sudan*, Waging Peace, (March 2012), Page 7.
- ⁵⁸ *The Human Rights Situation in East Sudan*, Waging Peace, (March 2012), Page 7; John Slight, *Eastern Sudan: A Forgotten Catastrophe*, Conservative Party Human Rights Commission (July 2006), Page 10.
- ⁵⁹ John Slight, *Eastern Sudan: A Forgotten Catastrophe*, Conservative Party Human Rights Commission (July 2006), Page 17.