

This article was first published in The Jerusalem Post Magazine Eradicating slavery By Niv Elis

One man's passion to end slavery in Sudan may be making a significant impact, but why don't human rights groups seem to be doing their job? And what does this all mean for Israel?

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Charles Jacobs with freed slaves (January, 2011)

Photo by Christian Solidarity International

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Indeed, the secret of modern day slavery was out in the open, available to anyone who bothered to find out about it. A 2002 State Department report on the topic said the practice of slavery in Sudan was "extensively documented" by groups such as Human Rights Watch (HRW), Anti-Slavery International and the UN.

"The revival of Sudanese slavery was documented and well known in governmental and NGO circles since the mid-1980s," says Christian Solidarity International, an NGO active in the cause of Sudanese slavery.

From the time it declared independence from Britain and Egypt in 1956, Sudan has been ravaged by war over land, religion, race, oil resources and freedom. Half a million people died in

its 17-year first civil war, which began before the country's official independence, and some two million people died when the conflict flared up again in 1983. The second civil war lasted 22 years and resulted in the South's secession as the world's newest country in July 2011.

It was during the latter civil war that slavery made a comeback in Sudan. Although "hostage-taking" was common practice between feuding tribes and agrarian groups that depended on shared resources, these abductions were usually resolved through payment. But one group, the Muslim Arab Baggara of the North, took a different approach, taking members of the Dinka tribe, their Southern neighbors, as slaves during raids.

Jacobs with South Sudan's President Salva Kiir (January, 2011)

Photo by Christian Solidarity International

According to the US State Department, "it is only in Baggara raids on non-Muslim southerners that some people are taken as slaves." Part of the reason is that the Sudanese government supported and armed the group, giving it both implicit political backing and resources, meaning that it did not have to resolve disputes with the Dinka to gain access to their land and water.

Arab, Islamized groups attempting to dominate or assimilate peripheral groups like the Dinka referred to them using derogatory terms like zuruq (blacks) and abid (slave). There were also racial and religious components to the attacks; reading about them was the first time Jacobs had ever encountered the word jihad.

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"There are slaves in Pakistan, there are debt-bonded slaves, chocolate slaves, there are people that weave the rugs that we walk on in our nice middle-class lives." But in Sudan, it was the worst. "Horrible. As a Jew, I saw it as: you're a small people, nobody cares, you're going to get really hurt."

As one might imagine, the life of a slave is unforgiving.

Men are typically forced to tend livestock in cattle camps or work agricultural fields, while women perform domestic and field labor, according to CSI. "Sexual abuse of slaves is widespread, especially, but not exclusively, amongst female slaves. Beatings, death threats,

forced conversions, forced labor, racial and religious insults are commonplace," CSI says. Horror stories abound; the US State Department reports stories of a boy who saw his brother murdered during his abduction, an eight-year-old beaten for losing a goat, a teenage girl raped, impregnated and left to raise the child of her captor. "Some slaves are executed if they displease their masters," says CSI.

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Frank gave him sage advice: get good evidence, and build a strong coalition. At this task, Jacobs turned out to be a master. It may have seemed odd, but he figured that as a Jew, he could create a partnership with Mauritians Muslims and Christian South Sudanese; all had suffered slavery in their histories.

It took some persuading.

"The Sudanese complained to me, 'we lost two million people, there's a war of extermination against us - some people are calling it a genocide.'" The enslavement of a few thousand people was surely not as worthy a goal as ending the relentless killing, they argued.

Jacobs had come to believe, however, that people interested in human rights were more likely to act if they felt some link to the oppressor, not the victim.

"It's about expiation. It's about getting off the shame and guilt of colonialism or enslaving of blacks," he said.

To get anything done at all, he explained, they had to "market" what was going on by focusing on the aspect that people would feel guilty about. "America is an abolitionist nation. If we focus on slavery, no one here will be able to not respond," he argued. Without a resonant issue, war in Sudan was to Western eyes "just one more African tragedy," and nobody would take action.

Eventually, the group agreed, and in 1994, Jacobs founded the American Anti-Slavery movement, and co-authored a New York Times op-ed with his Mauritanian colleague Mohamed Athie, pushing the issue of Sudanese slavery into the American consciousness.

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Even as political awareness arose, however, nothing was being done to free the slaves. Until John Eibner came along. The head of the US branch of international charity and development group Christian Solidarity International, Eibner approached the issue of Sudanese slaves up close, documenting case studies, getting photographs and organizing the first US anti-slavery conference since the civil war.

In Sudan, Eibner discovered that slave-holding Arabs who wanted a de-escalation with the Dinka - and access to their markets and grazing fields - were willing to sell their slaves back into freedom. For \$50-110 apiece, he could free slaves and provide them with temporary shelter and food to help them get on their feet. In Jacobs's words, Eibner was "an Indiana Jones traipsing through the desert with bags of cash to buy back slaves."

Jacobs climbed on board, teaming up with Eibner to release as many slaves as possible. The two were understandably taken aback when their efforts were publicly denounced by unlikely critics: the human rights community.

"The problem of slavery in Sudan is a complex one; it cannot be ended solely by efforts to 'redeem' or buy back slaves," Human Rights Watch wrote in a 1999 brief on the issue. A joint statement with the Sudan Council of Churches and the New Sudan Council of Churches said, "With all the good intentions in slave redemption, it does not end slavery." Slavery is a byproduct of the war, they argued, so only reaching a peace agreement could eradicate it. Not only that, but buyback attempts might exacerbate the problem.

"Knowledge that there are foreigners with deep pockets willing to pay to redeem slaves could spur on unscrupulous individuals to make a business out of 'redemption,'" actually creating incentives for more enslavements. Buybacks pose a "real danger of fueling a market in human beings" HRW's advocacy director Reed Brody said at the time.

Some other anti-slavery groups refrained from the practice. Anti-slavery International says it doesn't pay for slaves because of "the danger of perpetuating the cycle of slavery. Slave masters have been known to buy more slaves with their redemption money." Another group, Christian Solidarity Worldwide, stopped redeeming slaves in 2002 after discovering that their interlocutors in the slave-freeing business were defrauding them, "releasing" many people who had never been enslaved.

Jacobs and Eibner dismiss this line of thinking out of hand. Slavery in Sudan, they say, is not driven by economic forces, but political ones, and there is no evidence of a slave market being created. With the local community leaders and the families of the victims on board, and no

better alternatives being offered, why not free as many people as possible? In addition, the human rights world had made compromises of its own. The Sudanese government managed to water down a 1999 UN Human Rights commission resolution, ridding it of any mention of slavery whatsoever, substituting the euphemism "abduction."

The Jacobs/Eibner approach received some vindication when, in 2005, the North and South signed a peace deal ending the civil war and paving the way for a referendum that would see the creation of South Sudan as the newest sovereign state in July 2011. As the human rights critics had hoped, the slave trade ended with the war. CSI estimates that more 35,000 slaves remain captive in the North, but without their efforts, there would have been many more - to the tune of 80,000 more, they say

Through continuing his efforts to free slaves, Jacobs has set his sights on a new goal as well: finding ways that Israel can help South Sudan, and vice versa.

The new state is inherently pro-Israel, Jacobs says, having fought off an Islamist enemy and overcome a history of slavery.

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In his view, Israel has a lot to offer South Sudan, one of the poorest countries in the world. After all, Israel has some experience making the desert bloom.

"Five Israeli agriculturalists sitting there for two weeks could double their agricultural output!" he says. Jacobs even sees opportunity in the waves of Sudanese refugees in Israel, many of whom are eager to return home to their newly independent state. "Israel has an enormous opportunity to educate them while they're here. It would be a wonderful thing. A magnificent thing."

And for its part, Israel, which has already hosted South Sudanese President Salva Kiir Mayardit, might gain something valuable in return from South Sudan: an ally in the UN and the notoriously anti-Israel Human Rights Council in particular. Given the Council's past positions on slavery, South Sudan will surely find the chance to make its voice heard there extremely satisfying.

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