

# Bombed but not beaten, forgotten victims of persecution in Sudan



**By Baroness Caroline Cox**

**P**ersecution is escalating. Many are suffering for their faith, including the Baha'i people in Iran; Muslim minorities in various countries, including the Rohingya in Burma; and Christians, especially in the Middle East and parts of Africa.

As Christians, we have a biblical mandate to speak for all who are oppressed and I founded my small NGO, HART (Humanitarian Aid Relief Trust) to provide aid and advocacy for victims of oppression and persecution, often trapped behind closed borders and generally off the radar screen of international aid organisations for political and/or security reasons. One of today's most systematic and violent arenas of persecution is largely unreported and unknown: the Republic of Sudan.

The peoples of Sudan have suffered civil war for most of the years since independence. War escalated in 1989 when an Islamist regime took power by military coup and declared military jihad against all who opposed it: Muslims, traditional believers and Christians. That savage war resulted in two million dead, four million displaced, many thousands of women and children taken into slavery, and devastated infrastructure throughout South Sudan and the Nuba Mountains.

A Peace Agreement was eventually signed in 2005, resulting in independence for South Sudan in June 2011. But war and persecution persist in the Republic of Sudan, still ruled by President Al-Bashir, who has been indicted by the International Criminal Court. He has declared his intention to turn the Republic of Sudan into "a unified Arabic, Islamic nation".

In Khartoum, his regime has perpetrated ruthless policies of displacement of South Sudanese, especially Christians, brutal suppression of protests and expulsion of Christian NGOs.

But the most brutal, large-scale suffering is inflicted in attempted ethnic and religious cleansing of the predominantly black African people in Southern Kordofan and Blue Nile. In urban

areas such as Kadugli in the Nuba Mountains, civilians have been killed, churches destroyed and a reign of terror imposed. Further afield, military offensives and aerial bombardment have forced half-a-million civilians to flee their homes and seek shelter in caves, in hollows dug out of river beds or under trees.

Please travel with me, in imagination, as a small team from HART crosses into Blue Nile State and Southern Kordofan. Antonov aircraft carrying their deadly cargo of bombs fly regularly over the terrain, targeting schools, clinics, markets and civilians working in their fields.

Please visit people hiding in snake-infested caves in the Nuba Mountains. The people say: "We are more afraid of the bombs than the snakes."

Now, come to Blue Nile State as we visit crowds of people near the river Yabus, ready to flee into the river when the bombers come. The market is a pile of burnt rubble. Children greet us holding pictures of aircraft dropping huge bombs on to civilians running for shelter; village elders display the only 'food' they can scavenge (roots, bark) and they tell their stories – how they had to flee their homes because of constant aerial bombardment; how their markets, schools and clinics have been destroyed; how they cannot plant or harvest crops because the aircraft "bomb anything which moves", and how hungry they are.

Our final destination for today's 'virtual visits': a deserted village in Blue Nile State, where the majority of people are Muslims – but Al-Bashir's bombing and shelling target everyone. In the village where we come to a stop, a simple wooden cross lies on the ground. Our guides tell us that this is a Christian village and the cross would be used for worship. But no-one is in sight: 450 people had already died of starvation; the remainder had fled into the bush from recent bombing. We heard the sound of voices – and sought out survivors hiding in the trees. Then we received a little news which brought some comfort to us as we agonised over the raw, rampant suffering: we had obtained funds for food relief for the people of Blue Nile from generous supporters – and our local partners had succeeded in taking this life-saving donation to these people suffering and dying, far off the radar screen of other aid organisations. They thanked us with poignant gratitude, saying: "Thank you for this help. Now we have food, we can now stay in our own land and we do not have to flee to South Sudan to survive. Even if we die of bombs, we would prefer to die in our own land than flee into exile."

As already emphasised, as Christians, our aid and advocacy must be for all who are oppressed. Therefore, HART

works for all victims, whatever their faiths and beliefs.

However, St Paul wrote in his letter to the Church in Corinth: "When one part of the Body of Christ suffers, we all suffer."

Therefore, when we are with Christians suffering persecution, we assure them of our solidarity in faith and prayer. When we have the privilege of worshipping with them, we are always humbled and inspired beyond words by the joy and grace with which they worship.

Wishing to make information about the persecuted Church more widely available, I recently co-authored a book with Benedict Rogers, *The Very Stones Cry Out*. The message from the persecuted Church in 17 countries is humbling: churches are indeed destroyed but Christians will be worshipping in the ruins and the stones do cry out – but with praise. The persecuted Church survives, grows, worships and loves. The message from our brothers and sisters is never one of hate or revenge – always love.

As we leave the anguish of the peoples of Sudan, I am reminded of a sermon preached many years ago by the Sudanese Catholic Bishop of El Obeid who frequently travelled with me into the ravaged conflict zones of the earlier war. A local church had been destroyed and the people worshipped under a tree. I will never forget Bishop Macram Gassiss's words as he spoke to his people's most hurting needs:

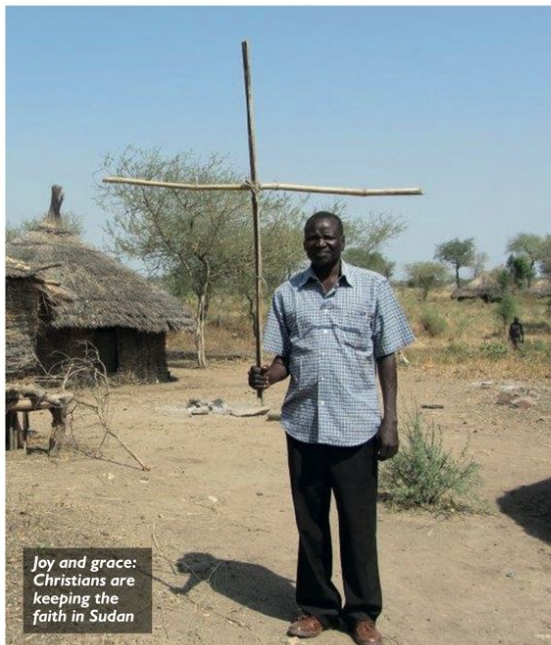
"Here we are, in this cathedral, not made by human hands but by nature and by God. And it is filled with the people of God, especially children."

**"Y**ou people in Sudan always smile. Your smiles put us to shame. Many of you are embarrassed because you are naked and try to cover yourselves. Do not be embarrassed. Yours is not true nakedness. True nakedness is to do evil: it is the oppressors who carry out their crimes against you who are truly naked."

"We must leave you. But we will pray for you as people who every day are obeying God's command to take up your cross and follow him. But prayer without deeds is dead, as love without action is dead. Our prayer and our love must be in action for you."

"I came, I saw; I heard; I touched – and I am blessed." We still return from visits to the persecuted profoundly blessed by their courage, faith and grace as they hold front lines of faith and freedom for the rest of the world. Please join us in holding them in your hearts and praying for them.

**Baroness Cox is cross-bench member of the House of Lords, who champions a range of Christian causes, including action on forgotten wars in Africa**



**Joy and grace: Christians are keeping the faith in Sudan**

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