

White bull of peace: sudan's forgotten conflict

by [Jonathan Frerichs](#) in the [October 10, 2001](#) issue

As part of a campaign to stop one of the world's longest wars, peace coordinator Telar Deng begins and ends peace conferences by sacrificing a white bull. The Sudanese traditional ritual was recently included in the seventh such conference brokered by Deng and the New Sudan Council of Churches (NSCC). As the conference ended, 200 negotiators representing six ethnic groups signed a 33-point plan that calls for a military no-fly zone in the South (the North sporadically bombs civilians and aid programs there), more women peacemakers, an end to slavery (exacerbated by war and by outside redemption schemes) and the establishment of "peace desks" within Sudan's armed movements that would establish communication between fighters and the NSCC peace process.

Deng describes Sudan's conflict with words like "invisible" and "forgotten." When he speaks of the war, statistics become questions. Has the world noticed that nearly 2 million people have perished from the war and war-related causes? Does anyone realize that 4 million people have been driven from their homes? There are three conflicts tearing the country apart: the North is fighting the South, southerners are fighting among themselves, and ruling clans vie for power in the North.

With two regional intergovernmental peace processes moribund, the church peace effort offers a fragile ray of hope. The People-to-People Peace Conference is already reducing the level of conflict in the South. Deng's grass-roots initiative is sustained by five NSCC denominations: the Episcopal Church of Sudan, the Roman Catholic Church, the Presbyterian Church of Sudan, the Sudan Inland Church and the African Independent Church. The peace program receives help from three church aid groups active inside Sudan: Christian Aid (of the UK), Mennonite Central Committee and Lutheran World Relief plus two churches with ties to Sudan—the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and the Church of the Brethren.

A more complex conflict would be hard to imagine, let alone solve. Land, oil, food, droughts, floods, infestations, technology, traditions, ruling clans, slave raiders and religion—all of these figure in Sudan's long suffering and war.

Deng and Sudanese refugee women's leader Pauline Riak explain the conflict with passion and patience. Religion is not really the issue, they insist, only an alibi used for incitement and subjugation. Riak scoffs at the Muslim credentials claimed by the three clans that have dominated Sudanese politics since British rule ended in 1956. "They have imposed Islamic law while violating the human rights aspects of the Qur'an," she says. "Religious persecution becomes racial reprogramming as the North tries to 'Arabize' as well as 'Islamize' the southern Sudanese."

In the Nuba mountains, there is an enclave of "southerners" that migrated many years ago to this northern territory and embraced Islam. Yet the government of the Muslim North bombs their mosques anyway, because the Nuba people refuse to be "Arabs."

Oil buried in the South and extracted by the North fuels the conflict. Canadian, Chinese, Malaysian, Swedish, French and Austrian companies are involved. Talisman Oil of Canada told Deng that the Khartoum government has agreed to use royalty payments for national development programs. Southerners cite the North's new military hardware as proof to the contrary and demand that oil companies leave Sudan until there is peace.

"Oil has brought death," a Nuer chief said earlier this year.

Fertile areas of the South are the breadbasket for the mostly Saharan North. Resource disparity between North and South has sparked conflict in Sudan since at least the Ottoman era of the 1800s.

Riak, who heads an interethnic association of 450 Sudanese women refugees in Kenya, adds gender to Sudan's grievances. "Eighty percent of the war's casualties are women. They and their lives are violated by armed men of both the North and the South." The NSCC, which represents churches outside of the government-controlled areas, condemns parties in both regions for violations of human rights.

In the days of premodern war, there were some restraints and obligations. The casualties were almost always men. Fighting took place in fields far away from villages. There were limited goals—water or grazing land. Women were permitted on

the field of battle to retrieve the wounded, and could gather food and water from enemy territory. Enemies raiding food stocks would not take everything. Unarmed opponents were spared. Sick people were safe. Ghosts were believed to haunt anyone who killed in secret.

Certain people were responsible for stopping conflicts, and there were ways to deal with provocations and ways to make peace. After a killing, the person involved had to stop at the edge of his compound and make a public sacrifice before entering. Ritual blood was let from the shoulder of the killer. The sacrifice of a white bull was a sign that the conflict had been resolved.

Today the rules have changed. “AK-47s and bombs leave no room for forgiveness,” Riak says. When one kills with a foreign weapon, the ghosts of the dead will not haunt you. The Sudan Peoples’ Liberation Army has been known to label bullets: “To Whom It May Concern.”

Against such depravity Sudan’s People-to-People Peace Conferences have gathered seven times in four years. One met at Wunlit, where Deng has an uncle who gave the white bull. Each time a peace village is built for up to 400 people, and they arrive at the site by plane, by car and on foot.

The conferences are open to anyone committed to peacemaking. Each one starts with the sacrificial sharing of a white bull. “This commits all at the conference to peace and ensures unity,” Deng says. Then a period of dialogue begins. Past atrocities and acts of violence are recounted. Those who have been wronged are given time to share their story.

“After the recounting of the past, the people begin to construct a way to make peace that will be sustainable in the future,” Deng notes. “Past atrocities are usually forgiven in their entirety, while barriers are put in place to ensure that they are not committed in the future.” Stolen goods—and stolen people—are returned. Trade deals are made. Land and water rights are reapportioned.

There are prayer meetings and times of worship. After several days, when the treaty is signed, a second white bull is killed. The people leave and the peace village stands empty. As a result of this and other conferences, abductions and raids have stopped, trade between ethnic groups has started, and intertribal courts have been set up to deal with treaty violators.

Church leaders seek to maintain momentum with the Sudanese government and people. The Catholic and Episcopal bishops of Sudan met in Nairobi in August and issued a joint call for a negotiated end to the war. They are asking that no oil be extracted until peace is achieved, and that Sudan's Christians and Muslims begin dialogue. The bishops addressed both the government of Sudan and rebel movements in the South.

Meanwhile, Sudanese exiles in the U.S. planned a people-to-people peace conference in Washington, D.C., for September 15-16, but in the aftermath of the September 11 tragedy, it was postponed. The exiles' aim is to support peacemaking in Sudan and to build good relations and well-being among Sudanese ethnic groups in the U.S.

Despite the seeming impossibility of peace, these and other actions are being taken to promote peace. And they are working, Deng told U.S. audiences in July. "Slowly, peace is making itself known in southern Sudan."