

# Operation Lifeline Sudan

war, peace and relief in southern Sudan

## Lam Akol

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In 1988, the United Nations Secretary-General, Javier Perez de Cuellar, appointed James P. Grant, Executive Director of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) to organize a special relief operation in Sudan. This decision was taken against the backdrop of repeated media reports of a high death toll resulting from war-induced famine. For southern Sudan, some sources put the figure as high as 500,000 persons, most of them children and the aged. The conference was to take place in Khartoum and to be attended by representatives from the United Nations, donor countries, relief NGOs and the Government of Sudan (GoS). The Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A) was not invited, despite a string of recent military victories that left it in full control of the international borders between Sudan and its neighbours: Uganda, Kenya and Ethiopia, east of the Bahr el Jebel and south of the Sobat river. The International Conference on Sudan Emergency Relief opened on 8 March 1989. Grant declared his wish that the parties to the conflict agree a six-month ceasefire in order to stock food on site for the needy population.

## Genesis of the operation

SPLM/A Chairman Dr. John Garang sent an urgent letter to the Khartoum Conference commending the international community's concern and expressing the SPLM/A's readiness to co-operate with the organizations and agencies meeting in Khartoum in assisting the needy populations.

Grant took the letter seriously and once the conference closed, he flew to Addis Ababa to discuss the issue. As the Director of the SPLM/A Office of Co-ordination and External Relations, I met Grant on 10 March 1989 in the company of two of my assistants. He briefed us on the deliberations that took place in the conference and excitedly added that Dr. Garang's letter was well received by the participants. Finally, he outlined the issues he wanted SPLA agreement on. The six-month ceasefire was to facilitate the implementation of a



massive relief operation to deliver food into southern Sudan by land, river and air from across the borders of Ethiopia, Kenya and Uganda. I gave my initial response but promised him that I would convey our discussion to the Chairman so that a firm decision could be made. We agreed to meet again.

The Chairman ruled out a ceasefire for any length of time but instructed me to continue dialogue on the suggested relief operation. He pointed out that the UN needed to secure the agreement of the neighbouring countries for any cross-border operation to be possible.

I met Grant again, as well as the US Embassy Chargé d’Affaires in Addis Ababa and his Deputy Chief of Mission (DCM). I communicated to them that the SPLM/A was not prepared for a ceasefire but more than ready to explore other modalities for the relief operation. We then got locked into a series of meetings to explore these modalities with the US embassy staff led by Bob Frasure, the DCM. It was not an easy task. At the final stage Julia Taft, a senior official of the US Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance in Washington, joined the talks.

The problem was how to carry out the operation without a ceasefire. Ultimately, I suggested that it may

be easier for the SPLA to consider a ceasefire along the relief routes rather than all over the south. This would take care of the land and river routes. Air routes needed more discussion. All agreed there and then to a ceasefire along the routes followed by UN relief convoys. Bob Frasure termed those ceasefire axes “Corridors of Tranquillity”, a phrase later adopted by the relief operation. The Chairman gave his final approval. It proved to be a turning point for the SPLM/A in terms of international exposure and its dealings with the UN system.

### **OLS I (April – December 1989)**

The Chairman instructed me to represent the Movement for the negotiation and implementation of the relief operation. I left Addis Ababa for Nairobi on 17 March, and met Grant again to conclude the agreement. It aimed to get sufficient food aid into southern Sudan to feed approximately two million civilians, bringing in 100,000 tons of food over a six-week period before the rainy season made the roads impassable. The cost of the operation was estimated at US\$132 million. It was code-named Operation Lifeline Sudan (OLS), and officially launched on 1 April 1989 in Nairobi when Grant flagged off the first convoy of trucks taking food to Kapoeta and Torit through Lokichoggio.

The following terms formed the basis of Operation Lifeline Sudan:

1. The UN has to deal with all the parties to the conflict that control territory through which relief items pass or to which they are delivered
2. The parties to the conflict commit themselves to the safe and unhindered passage and delivery of relief items to the needy population
3. The UN, as a neutral body, was to co-ordinate the operations with the parties to the conflict

There was no written agreement between the parties to the conflict (the SPLA and the GoS) and the UN when OLS came into being on 1 April 1989. It was only the express commitment of the parties to the above terms that kept the operation going. Although the UN does not confer formal recognition of any kind to the SPLA, it had to deal with it in order to reach the needy population. Indeed, Grant made it clear that the choice of UNICEF as the UN lead agency in OLS was in part to stress non-recognition of the SPLA while dealing with it on this humanitarian undertaking.

Kenya and Uganda readily agreed to allow cross-border relief operations through their territories. Since the Ethiopian government did not give its consent, the plans for river and land cross-border operations envisaged through Gambela were shelved. Lokichoggio was chosen as the main relief centre to serve the SPLA-administered areas of southern Sudan, especially by air. During this period, relief items were delivered into the areas of southern Sudan controlled by both the SPLM/A and the GoS by river, rail and air. Improved health conditions among the population became noticeable.

The advent of OLS provided an opportunity for the SPLA High Command to have a presence outside Addis Ababa, facilitating sustained direct access to the SPLM/A leadership for the international community and the press. In fact, for the first time in the SPLA's history, journalists were milling around in previously out of bounds SPLM/A-administered areas.

There was a profound connection between OLS and opportunities for peacemaking, even if peace was not its stated aim. The operation was mounted to ameliorate the suffering caused by war-induced famine, hence, the final solution to the problem lay in achieving peace. OLS also provided the donors, especially the US, with leverage or influence on the SPLM/A. In a meeting between the SPLM/A leader and Grant at Panyagor in April 1989, the latter raised the issue of how he and the donors could assist in bringing about a peaceful resolution to the conflict. This was followed by an

announcement from the Chairman of a unilateral one-month ceasefire to commence on 1 May 1989. It will be recalled that this was one of Grant's initial requests. The ceasefire was renewed several times. The SPLM/A's initiative had the effect of exerting tremendous pressure on the government of al-Sadiq al-Mahdi, and led to the first peace talks between the parties in Addis Ababa in June 1989. This was a very significant shift for the Movement, which had previously held meetings only with political parties and not with the sitting government. The talks made considerable progress and the two sides agreed to reconvene on 4 July. The process was, however, interrupted by the *coup d'état* on 30 June 1989.

## OLS II (April - December 1990)

The new regime's seizure of power, supposedly in defence of Islamic laws (sharia), was widely seen as an attempt to derail the peace process. Clearly, the junta wanted the peace process on its terms.

The ceasefire collapsed in October 1989 with renewed fighting on a number of fronts. In November, the military junta suspended all OLS relief flights to southern Sudan. It saw the relief operation as feeding its enemies. Thus, the breakdown of the ceasefire led to the breakdown of the humanitarian partnership with the GoS. The renewed fighting brought about a new peace initiative mediated by former US President Carter and talks took place in Nairobi in November-December 1989. These efforts were undertaken in close co-ordination with the US government.

Negotiations for the second phase, or what became known as OLS II, did not lead to an agreement between the three parties similar to that of OLS I. The relief operations took on an *ad hoc* nature, and the GoS slowly became the dominant partner, dictating terms to both the SPLA and the UN. This dominance was particularly evident in the GoS approval of destinations in southern Sudan to be reached by air. To the SPLA, the GoS was motivated by purely military considerations, using food as a weapon of war. To make things worse, these approvals always came late and sometimes whole months passed without any flights at all. The keenness of the UN system not to push the regime to the point of withdrawing from the OLS prevented them from reacting strongly to the junta's machinations, a situation further exploited by the regime. There were also allegations that the SPLA was itself diverting food aid to feed its army. These allegations remained unsubstantiated; however, the truth is that, as civilians, soldiers' spouses receive food aid which they share with their partners and children.

## OLS III (post December 1991)

Negotiations for OLS III in October 1991 came after the Movement had split into two: the Torit and Nasir factions. The then UN Under-Secretary General coordinating relief for the Horn of Africa, James Jonah, was to blame for the failure to reach agreement on the third phase of OLS. Contrary to the principles adopted by the UN to deal with those parties in control on the ground, the very principles that brought about OLS in the first place, Jonah insisted that the Nasir faction of the SPLM/A should not take part in the October 1991 meeting to discuss the corridors of tranquillity for OLS III. Eventually, the meeting ended in disarray. Soon after this incident the OLS agreed to deal with the SPLM-Nasir and its relief wing, the Relief Association for Southern Sudan. However, the SPLM-United (the name SPLM-Nasir adopted in 1993) split in February 1994. With the backing of the US Embassy in Nairobi, Philip O'Brien, the OLS Coordinator for the Southern Sector, refused to co-operate with the SPLM-United under my command and its relief wing, the Fashoda Relief and Rehabilitation Association, citing the flimsy argument that this would encourage SPLM/A factionalization. The refusal to deal with the SPLM-United, which controlled territory in Southern Sudan, meant denying relief assistance to the population in that territory. It was only O'Brien's successor, Pierce Gerety, who signed the Ground Rules agreement on relief with the SPLM-United on 29 May 1996.

This phase of the OLS saw divisions within the liberation Movement and raised concerns within the international community as to whether the relief operation caused or contributed to fuelling this division. It cannot be overemphasized that factionalism is a political development driven by the political dynamics of the situation concerned. It does not need any prompting or recognition by UN bodies and aid organizations. They just have to deal with the reality. In order for it to reach all the needy population, the UN needs to deal with all the parties to the conflict that control territory. The refusal to deal with any of the parties results in denying relief assistance to the population in the territory controlled by that party. The UN would have put itself in the unenviable position of not only using food as a weapon of war but also taking sides in an internal conflict.

The period also saw a lull in the peace process. Apart from the 1992 Abuja mediation which was planned before the split, no serious peace talks took place. The government sought to exploit the SPLM/A split by playing one faction off against the other. For example, on 23 February 1993 the GoS agreed with Garang in Entebbe that the SPLM-Nasir be excluded from the

'Abuja 2' talks. Thus, there were two parallel talks in May-June 1993 between the GoS and the two factions of the SPLM/A: one in Abuja with the SPLM-Torit and the other in Nairobi with the SPLM-United. The government's intransigence and its attempt to dictate terms on the OLS must be seen in this light.

The expansion of the OLS system, the increased number of parties to the humanitarian engagement, and some violations of the 'gentleman's agreement' by the parties necessitated a change in approach towards written ground rules. These were first developed between OLS and the liberation Movements in 1992 to provide greater security to relief workers. Strengthened ground rules were further developed as an improved framework for OLS engagement with armed opposition movements. As a signed document, it was one of the few international agreements made with non-state entities. Garang signed the Ground Rules for the SPLM/A in July 1995, Riek Machar for the South Sudan Independence Movement/Army in August 1995, and I signed for the SPLM-United in May 1996.

## Conclusion

OLS was innovative in that it was one of the first post-Cold War UN-led humanitarian programmes. It came at a critical historical moment of changing notions of sovereignty, intervention, and engagement with non-state actors. It was the first time that the UN had to deal with a non-state armed group without conferring recognition upon it. With regard to peace, a number of developments took place in this period. Influenced by the stakeholders in OLS, the SPLM/A declared a blanket ceasefire on 1 May 1989 paving the way for the first meeting between the two sides to the conflict in June. The installation of the military regime on 30 June led to the breakdown of the ceasefire, which in turn had a negative impact on OLS. Splits within the liberation movement in the first half of the 1990s also had a negative impact on both OLS and the peace process.

OLS saved lives in southern Sudan. That was its declared mandate. However, it is evident that the initiative created an atmosphere conducive to peace as demonstrated by the accelerated peace efforts during its early period. Although other developments in Khartoum and within the SPLM/A slowed down this process, it is significant that the Inter-Governmental Agency for Development (IGAD)-mediated talks started with an agreement on relief issues in 1994. As with OLS, this agreement helped the parties to start talking about the political issues.