

## Opinion Piece from Bishop Macram Max Gassis of El Obeid Diocese, Sudan.

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From the barren foothills of Sudan's Nuba Mountains plumes of black smoke rupture daily across the landscape. Each explosion marks an aerial bomb attack and the killing or injury of another innocent person from El Obeid Diocese, where I serve as Bishop.

In remote villages, children run from the drone of Antonov planes, cramming themselves between rocks for cover. Mothers shield their children in foxholes, praying that they will be spared as the sound of destruction rumbles nearby. These are the daily experiences of Nuba's people, hidden from the world in one of its most isolated corners.

I was exiled from my diocese in 1988 after speaking out against the killing of indigenous farmers in Darfur. Now I serve its suffering people from exile in Kenya. Gravely I am watching history repeat itself as the atrocities borne in Darfur are being repeated in the Nuba Mountains.

Last July my diocese, El Obeid, became the only Catholic diocese in Africa to be split between two countries with the independence of South Sudan, a mainly Christian and animist state, from the predominantly Arab north. After years of fighting, which took 2million lives, Sudan, north and south, had a chance at peace for the first time in decades.

The Nuba people live in the north's border state of South Kordofan, a place rich in oil, gold, copper, and agriculture. South Kordofan is the main oil-producing state left in the north since the South seceded. It is also home to thousands of militia who fought against Khartoum during the last civil war. As an ethnicity the Nuba people identify with the black African Christians, and traditional belief of South Sudan.

After independence, the two new states were to decide upon the division of oil revenues and the rights of border citizens. But negotiations have been fraught and conflict-fuelled, eclipsing the peaceful solution so many of Sudan's ordinary people had hoped for.

African Christian farmers living in this contentious territory have been left vulnerable. They are considered by the north's government as historically linked with South Sudan's insurgency. But they have been cut off from South Sudan by

the border and are now ruled by a government that does not want them on such valuable land.

Last June, the Khartoum government's armed forces unleashed its might on the Nuba Mountains in an assault against the South Sudanese militia called the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLA).

No-one has been spared.

Daily attacks carried out by military planes are targeting ordinary, peaceful Nuba civilians, killing, maiming and forcing the mass movement of thousands desperate to escape. The UN estimates that over 36,000 have left their homes and villages so far; but the majority of Nuba are living in their fathers' land amidst the danger of aerial bombardment and hunger which has become malnourishment and in the near future will become deadly starvation.

In El Obeid diocese we have worked tirelessly to protect the God-given rights of all people to live in peace and security. I have been attacked on pastoral visits to the Nuba Mountains where I sought to provide relief support to all without distinction to tribe, creed, or gender. Walking through burnt-out ghost villages, once thriving with life and industry, I see decades of long-term development reversed by bombs and bullets. Families describe seeing their farms raided by advancing troops and running for their lives under threat of aerial attacks and long range artillery shelling.

In a scene that resembles the Stone Age, thousands have taken refuge in caves, the only bomb-proof shelter in South Kordofan's exposed landscape. Families huddle together for safety as shelling strikes outside, sharing their dwellings with dangerous snakes and surviving on leaves. They say they've no food, no hope and nowhere else to go.

The Khartoum government has imposed a ban on movement of aid into the region, making it virtually impossible to reach the sick, injured and starving. My diocese has much experience of providing for refugees and has been able to distribute food, blankets, mosquito nets and other essentials despite the ban.

We are thankful to the efforts of Trócaire and the Irish people for providing medical supplies to the Mother of Mercy Hospital, the only medical facility for 300 miles. The hospital was build for 80 beds but now has 500 patients. Our medical courageous staff works around the clock, repairing horrific injuries, often without anaesthetic. Patients include children with severed limbs and facial disfigurements caused by

shrapnel, traumatised mothers whose babies have been killed in their arms and weak, malnourished children.

When the rainy season starts this month, roads leading to the Nuba Mountains will turn into muddy swampland, cutting the area off from the outside world. Its people will be left to the mercy of further attacks and completely isolated from reaching or growing food. The rains will add to an already critical situation, with more than 400,000 expected to face famine.

The citizens of Sudan, north and south, do not want a return to war. This week, on behalf of the people of El Obeid diocese, I will be meeting with representatives from Ireland, Europe and the US to sincerely appeal to the international community to help the Nuba Mountain's innocent and voiceless people. Irish people can also help by raising awareness through their own political representatives.

To bring an end to this needless suffering, all parties to this conflict must immediately cease military operations including aerial bombardment in South Kordofan, most particularly attacks on civilian communities and violence against women. A peaceful solution must be sought in line with what was agreed under Sudan's Comprehensive Peace Agreement in 2005, to end civil war, agree democratic governance and a peaceful sharing of oil revenues. The "POPULAR CONSULTATION FOR THE NUBA" was not honoured by Khartoum's Islamic Government. This consultation should be revisited and adhered to with honesty.

Without immediate international aid we will soon witness a sharp increase in deaths from hunger which in my opinion is deadly famine of vulnerable groups: children, women, and elderly. The Government of Sudan and all involved must allow safe, unhindered access for international aid to all in need in accordance with International Humanitarian Law so we can reach the most isolated people.

This is our only hope to prevent more bloodshed in Sudan and to avert what is becoming the world's next major humanitarian catastrophe. A change is needed that treats all Sudanese cultures as equal and that determines a peaceful future protecting vulnerable citizens from repeated suffering. Right now and most urgently, the citizens in need are the Nuba people.

*Bishop Macram Max Gassis of El Obeid Diocese, Republic of Sudan, has been nominated for the 2012 Nobel Peace Prize for his life-saving humanitarian work throughout the Sudanese conflicts. He is in Ireland as a guest of Trócaire from 12<sup>th</sup> to 15<sup>th</sup> May 2012.*