

Operation Lifeline Sudan: Challenges During Conflict and Lessons Learned

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Abstract

Operation Lifeline Sudan signaled one of the first major coordinated humanitarian efforts to bring relief to suffering civilians in the midst of an active war zone. This paper recounts those efforts and the challenges faced by the humanitarian operations due to the manipulation of aid by both sides in the conflict. The question is asked whether it is actually beneficial to provide aid to suffering civilians when that aid is also serving as a tool for prolonging conflict.

(Keywords: humanitarian corridor, SPLA, Operation Lifeline Sudan)

The Sudanese Context:

Operation Lifeline Sudan (OLS) materialized in the midst of the Second Sudanese Civil War between the Khartoum-based government in the North, and the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) in the South. The war broke out in 1983 when the government of Sudan, after a string of broken promises, announced its intention to implement Islamic Shar'ia law in direct contradiction to earlier agreements it had made with the South. The SPLA emerged that same year, promoting an ideology that pushed for a "New Sudan" free from religious, tribal, or racial discrimination, and opposing the "tyranny" of the Khartoum government. The SPLA made significant gains during the first few years of the war. By 1989, they controlled crucial border areas and more than 90 percent of southern territory.¹

The Birth of Operation Lifeline Sudan and Initial Success:

The war had detrimental effects on the civilian population of South Sudan. Most of the fighting took place in and around southern towns and villages, leaving civilians enveloped in an atmosphere of violence that they could not escape. In an attempt to halt SPLA advances, the government armed northern militias and unleashed them on southern villages and towns. The militias destroyed cattle herds and crops in a deliberate effort to deny the SPLA – and its local support base – food. Displacement and starvation occurred on a large scale. In 1988 alone, an estimated 250,000 Sudanese died as a result of war and famine.² In 1989, famine still loomed menacingly over the South, with the United Nations estimating that 100,000 Sudanese faced starvation by the end of the year.³ Attempts by the ICRC and other organizations to deliver humanitarian aid in the previous year had been denied by both sides in the conflict, neither of

¹ Bruce Van Voorhis, "Food as a Weapon for Peace: Operation Lifeline Sudan" (*Africa Today*, 3rd & 4th Quarters, 1989), 32.

² Larry Minear, *The Humanitarian Enterprise: Dilemmas and Discoveries* (Bloomfield, CT: Kumarian Press, Inc., 2002), 89.

³ Van Voorhis, 35.

whom wanted Western humanitarian workers in the conflict zone as accidental targets or potential witnesses.

Into this reluctant atmosphere, the United Nations initiated negotiations with the government of Sudan for the delivery of aid to suffering civilian populations in the South. The Khartoum conference took place in mid-March 1989 and included representatives of the United Nations and the Sudanese government, as well as international NGOs and donor governments. The SPLA were notably excluded from the conference, although external communication with SPLA leaders occurred complementary to the proceedings of the conference. The U.N. delegation first attempted to convince the government (and the SPLA) to agree to a six-month cease fire to allow the delivery of crucial supplies to suffering civilians. But when neither side would acquiesce to a blanket ceasefire, it was instead suggested that ceasefires be implemented along pre-arranged routes to ensure the safe transport of humanitarian aid to the populations in need. These routes were dubbed humanitarian “corridors of tranquility”. Though neither side would commit to an established, formal cessation of hostilities, both sides did agree to allow the safe and unhindered transport of relief supplies throughout the South. According to Lam Akol, the two sides mutually assented to the following “understandings”, though no formal written agreement was produced at that time:

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.⁴

Operation Lifeline Sudan thus rested merely upon the word of the belligerents to allow the safe transport of relief supplies through their respective territories.

⁴ Lam Akol, “Operation Lifeline Sudan: War, Peace, and Relief in Southern Sudan”, 2005 (Conciliation Resources: <http://www.c-r.org/our-work/accord/engaging-groups/operation-lifeline.php>).

The operation involved 40+ NGOs organized under the umbrella of the U.N. The initial plan consisted of delivering 120,000 metric tons of food and emergency supplies to specific locations in the South within a six-week period.⁵ The time frame was short because supplies needed to be delivered before the start of the rainy season when roads and landing strips would make certain areas inaccessible. The deliveries were to be made by boat, train, and plane from staging areas in Uganda, Kenya, and Ethiopia. The operation was plagued by problems from the beginning, however, including inaccessible routes, delays, rising costs, and security concerns.⁶

OLS did not come close to its perhaps unattainable goal of delivering 120,000 metric tons of food and relief supplies within six weeks. But the operation did manage to deliver 32,800 metric tons of goods in that time frame, goods that significantly helped to relieve suffering throughout the South.⁷ By the end of 1989, more than 111,000 metric tons of food and relief supplies had reached southern Sudan through the efforts of OLS.⁸ In addition, OLS had – through the medium of the U.N. – initiated conversations between the government and the SPLA for the first time since the outbreak of war in 1983. The prospects of delivering adequate relief, and perhaps even a negotiated peace, seemed positive for the future. But the continued success of OLS was called into question on 30 June 1989, when a military coup brought Omar al-Bashir to power in Sudan.

The Manipulation of Operation Lifeline Sudan:

After Bashir came to power, negotiations begun under the previous regime quickly broke down and war resumed by the end of the year. Bashir's first move was to indefinitely suspend all OLS flights bringing relief to South Sudan, an operation that he viewed as opposing the

⁵ Van Voorhis, 35.

⁶ Ibid., 38; "Food Convoy Ambushed," *The Washington Post* (30 May 1989).

⁷ Van Voorhis., 39.

⁸ Larry Minear, *Humanitarianism Under Siege: A Critical Review of Operation Lifeline Sudan* (Trenton, NJ: The Red Sea Press, Inc., 1991), 41.

government by “feeding its enemies”.⁹ OLS was forced to re-negotiate the terms of access and to re-secure humanitarian corridors of tranquility with the new regime. In their eagerness to keep the government of Sudan committed to OLS, the UN gave Khartoum the power to bar humanitarian flights to areas that were considered “too dangerous” for relief efforts to be conducted. But this one, seemingly small concession allowed Khartoum to wield a significant amount of control over OLS operations.

The government of Sudan deliberately sought to hinder, manipulate, and even attack relief efforts throughout the lifetime of Operation Lifeline Sudan, despite its claims to the contrary. Bashir continued to give assurances for the safety of OLS personnel and deliveries, and yet the actions of his government demonstrated an overt intention to deter relief operations. Aid workers were harassed and denied visas. Relief shipments were purposely delayed by bureaucratic pretext.¹⁰ The government also instigated thinly veiled bombing campaigns in the South with little indication that efforts were being made to avoid the attack of civilians or the destruction of relief shipments.¹¹ In July 2002, the government of Sudan launched an indiscriminate bombing raid in southern regions, damaging 33 aid centers and several hospitals. In a *New African* article, a UN spokesperson revealed the Janus-faced assertions of the Khartoum government at that time:

We were assured by the Sudan government in late July that our flights would be safe. Just as we received the assurances on 27 July, Sudanese air force planes bombed another five relief locations. We again went and requested the Sudanese to provide assurances. Again, after we were given those assurances, our planes were bombed on the ground.¹²

In addition to outright obstruction of relief efforts, the government also sought to manipulate when and where aid was delivered. They exercised their veto power over relief flights with highly suspect motivations. Though many areas of southern Sudan were legitimately

⁹ Akol.

¹⁰ Nicholas Coughlin, *Far in the Waste Sudan: On Assignment in Africa* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2005), 60.

¹¹ Rigalo and Morrison, 175.

¹² Peter Moszynski, “Food Becomes a Weapon of War” *New African* (October 2000, Issue 389), 9.

unstable, the government often denied flights for strategic military purposes rather than for the protection of international workers. Sometimes the government would veto up to six or seven proposed OLS relief flights at a time.¹³ An aid worker commented: “Every single time Khartoum tells us not to fly to a specific location, it is always an indication that they will attack that place or some other place in the vicinity.”¹⁴ One governmental ploy was to bomb an SPLA-held area and then refuse humanitarian access to the area because of the resultant “insecurity” – an insecurity that the Khartoum regime had purposely created.¹⁵ In other instances, the government would deny OLS access to SPLA-held towns and villages that they deliberately sought to weaken through starvation and denial of basic needs.

While the Sudanese government retained significant control over when and where access was granted for aid, the SPLA retained significant control over how the aid that reached their areas was distributed. Though aid was distributed to both government-held and SPLA-held towns in the South, as SPLA territory expanded, so too did the proportion of aid received in their domain. Accusations abounded that the SPLA was diverting aid meant for civilians and using it to feed their own soldiers. These accusations held some truth, though the situation was often more nuanced than it appeared. The family members of SPLA soldiers were civilians and thus legitimate recipients of aid, which they undoubtedly used to sustain their entire families. As Lam Akol revealed, “The truth is that, as civilians, soldiers’ spouses receive food aid which they share with their partners and children.”¹⁶

More concrete examples of SPLA indiscretions exist, however, to reinforce the fact that it was not only the government which sought to manipulate aid to its own advantage. One tactic

¹³ Coghlin, 65.

¹⁴ Jok Madut Jok, *Sudan: Race, Religion, and Violence* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2007), 203.

¹⁵ Ian Smillie and Larry Minear, *The Charity of Nations: Humanitarian Action in a Calculating World* (Bloomfield, CT: Kumarian Press, Inc., 2004), 111.

¹⁶ Akol.

utilized by the SPLA was to simulate an attack on a town that had recently received a large shipment of aid. Foreign aid workers would scramble away to safety, leaving the shipments unprotected and vulnerable to pillage. Reports also abounded that the SPLA was, in some instances, distributing food to civilians in the presence of OLS workers, and then forcibly recollecting the food from civilians or mandating that civilians transport the food to SPLA stockpile locations after OLS workers left. Furthermore, the SPLA may have inflated the number of civilians requiring food aid and used the excess to feed their army.¹⁷

The practices of OLS served to facilitate these abuses by the SPLA. In order to ease the distribution of food aid within territory claimed by various factions, OLS formalized agreements with the humanitarian offshoots of the SPLA, tasking them with conducting evaluations of need and with the distribution of aid to civilians in their areas of control. These organizations, such as the Fashoda Relief and Rehabilitation Association (FRRA) and Sudan Relief and Rehabilitation Association (SRRA), were required to be impartial in their distributions. The 1996 agreement on ground rules between OLS and the SPLA-United stipulated that “humanitarian aid must be given according to considerations of human need alone... its granting, or its acceptance must not be made dependent on political factors.”¹⁸ Despite this ethical-sounding statement, the reality was that the humanitarian branches of the various rebel factions were both highly influenced and indirectly controlled by their military counterparts. OLS was in effect placing highly sought-after goods directly in the hands of biased parties and expecting them to distribute the goods in an equitable fashion. Though the SRRA and FRRA did contribute significantly to the allocation of much-needed aid to the civilian populations, they were also given greater opportunity to misappropriate and manipulate these goods. In agreeing to allow these groups even a modicum of

¹⁷ Lavergn and Weissman, 154-155.

¹⁸ SPLM-United/Operation Lifeline Sudan Agreement on Ground Rules, May 1996, Section A, Bullet 21 (Conciliation Resources: <http://www.c-r.org/our-work/accord/engaging-groups/operation-lifeline-agreement.php>).

control over distribution, OLS was not only feeding the conflict, but also lessening the chances that relief supplies would reach intended beneficiaries.

Additionally, just as Khartoum maintained a veto on when and where relief flights could go, the SPLA maintained a veto of sorts on which organizations could access and operate within their territory. Individual organizations that did not play by the SPLA's "rules" were stripped of their access and expelled from SPLA-held areas.¹⁹ Furthermore, the SPLA would attempt to influence aid organizations by purposely placing agency headquarters near rebel bases where workers could be monitored and where their presence could serve as a potential deterrent to government attacks. Aid organizations essentially permitted this sort of manipulation in order to remain in the good graces of the SPLA.

Though neither side would admit to it, both the government and the SPLA clearly saw OLS as a tool of war and sought to manipulate the distribution (or non-distribution) of aid for their own benefit. Unfortunately, the main sufferers in this situation were the already-victimized civilians of South Sudan.

Lessons Learned: From Feeding Civilians to Feeding the War:

Operation Lifeline Sudan provided a number of valuable lessons for the future delivery of humanitarian aid into war zones. The first lesson learned was that it was possible to negotiate access. The coordinated response by the U.N., NGOs, and donor governments to the war-induced famine in Sudan was one of the first of its kind in terms of the large scale of operations, the multiple actors involved, and the negotiation of access to areas of conflict. Rigalo and Morrison point out that OLS "set an important, innovative precedent in gaining access to victims of civil conflict."²⁰ OLS marked the first time that aid agencies received acknowledgements from both

¹⁹ Lavergn and Weissman, 155.

²⁰ Rigalo and Morrison, 177.

belligerent sides of the need to provide civilians with humanitarian relief and to allow the safe passage of this relief.²¹ All the food and relief aid in the world would do no good without access by, and to, the people who need it. The negotiators of Operation Lifeline Sudan understood that access was a paramount issue and did what they needed to do to secure access at the outset.

Yet with Bashir's takeover and the protracted nature of the war, the evolving complexities surrounding the delivery of aid and issues of access should have also led to a change in operational practices. The early promise of OLS was later overshadowed by the sinister misuse of aid that became fixtures of the operation. Wars cannot be waged without resources or the logistical capabilities to manage resources. When outright victory through superior force is not plausible, a common strategy is to deprive the enemy of the resources required to wage war. Consequently, humanitarian assistance can often thwart deprivation tactics utilized by military actors on one side of the conflict by replenishing their enemies with needed resources, such as food. When this occurs, humanitarian aid allows an otherwise weaker opponent to strengthen its resource base and consequently to mount a more prolonged defense (or even offense).²² In this way, humanitarian aid actually serves to protract war rather than to inhibit it.

Additionally, when resources are scant in a conflict, the material manifestations of humanitarian assistance become a sought-after commodity by belligerents rather than a means of sustenance for victimized civilians. "Wars foster scarcity, and humanitarian assistance is a prize that can easily become an object for struggle among war's agents and victims."²³ In this Darwinian struggle, aid is seen both as a means to victory and a necessity for survival – even if it

²¹ Minear, *Humanitarianism Under Siege*, 28.

²² Peter J. Hoffman and Thomas G. Weiss, *Sword and Salve: Confronting New Wars and Humanitarian Crises* (Boulder: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2006), 14.

²³ *Ibid.*, 71.

must be acquired to the detriment of the civilian population. Aid thus becomes a motivator of conflict rather than an arbiter of conflict.

The most significant lesson that can be extracted from the experience of OLS is that humanitarian aid meant to aid victims of conflict can simultaneously sustain the conflict itself. In South Sudan, humanitarian aid evolved from a deliberate means of feeding civilians to an unintentional tool for feeding the war. The original motivation of OLS was innocent enough: to alleviate the suffering of a victimized population. However, when both the government and the SPLA sought to manipulate aid for their own benefit, the humanitarian community did not know how to halt the abuse without also stopping aid to victims. For them, the “toughest question” was whether it was better to completely withdraw from Sudan, also withdrawing the support to civilians; or to continue aiding civilians who desperately needed help, despite the fact that some of the aid would be misused.²⁴ OLS chose to continue providing aid. In fact, according to Smillie and Minear, “the idea of terminating program operations in the Sudan in order to extract greater compliance from warring parties was seldom seriously considered.”²⁵ In a ridiculous irony, OLS was actually helping to sustain the situation which caused suffering for the very victims that it sought to relieve of suffering. In a twisted sort of way, OLS was keeping itself in business.

Another lesson learned was that in a conflict situation, humanitarian aid must be distributed in a way that promotes an end to hostilities. Though OLS contributed to early peace initiatives, peace was not a part of its official mandate to “negotiate safe access to war-vulnerable populations in Sudan”.²⁶ The fact that peace initiatives were not made a priority is baffling. Lam Akol seems to have hit the nail on the head concerning the need for an intersection between peace and assistance:

²⁴ Smillie and Minear, 114.

²⁵ Ibid., 113.

²⁶ Rigalo and Morrison, 117.

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.²⁷

Akol's commentary alludes to the fact that the best way to alleviate the suffering of people in southern Sudan was to rid them of the situation that was causing their suffering. The best solutions lay in addressing the root causes of the war rather than simply bandaging the symptoms. The problem was not ultimately famine or displacement. The problem was war. Yet OLS appeared to skip over this observation in pursuit of what it deemed to be the more immediate – and thus more pertinent – need: food. Unfortunately, the more OLS strove to provide relief, the longer the war dragged on.

The commitment of OLS to providing short-term relief proved to be both its greatest contribution and its Achilles' heel. The devotion and determination of the operation to saving lives is highly commendable and admirable. OLS not only harnessed the attention of the world concerning the plight of the southern Sudanese, but, in the end, OLS likely did save hundreds of thousands of lives. Yet this achievement came at the sacrifice of seemingly everything else, including humanitarian principle. By showing its cards early on when it buckled to demands and intimidation from the government of Sudan, OLS proved that it was willing to do almost anything to retain access to the victimized civilians in the South. While, again, the dedication to the southern Sudanese is admirable, the ends do not justify the means... ever. The final lesson learned from OLS is that organizations entering conflict zones should have a clear understanding of the principles on which they are not willing to compromise and should have secondary plans (including withdrawal) ready for instances of manipulation or lack of cooperation by belligerent parties.

²⁷ Akol.

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