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## Feature - Ecological aspects of the conflict

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**NAIROBI, 17 March (IRIN)** - The long running conflict in Sudan, Africa's largest country, and the historical marginalisation of the mostly Christian south by the Arabised Islamic north, has largely been explained from political, religious and ethnic perspectives.

Recently, however, scholars have included a new component in their analysis of the Sudanese conflict - the environment.

In a study, "Oil and water in Sudan", a group of researchers have highlighted ecological aspects of the conflict in southern Sudan, where most of the fighting between government troops and the rebel Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A) has been raging.

According to Paul Goldsmith, one of the researchers who conducted the study, ecological issues are intricately linked to the historical political context of the Sudanese civil war.

The Kenyan-based consultant, told a meeting last week in Nairobi that conflicts in Sudanese society began during the pre-colonial period, when the country was subjected to a long history of natural and human resource exploitation by the West and the East. These invasions and exploitation also have involved religious and cultural dynamics characterising the north-south divide, he added.

The findings of the research are documented in the book "Scarcity and Surfeit: The ecology of Africa's conflicts", jointly published by the Nairobi-based African Centre for Technological Studies (ACTS) and the South African-based Institute of Security Studies (ISS).

### ECOLOGICAL FACTORS

The study explored the interaction between people and their environment in Sudan and illustrated how natural systems have shaped the north-south divide, and how unaccountable methods of management and exploitation of the natural resources have deepened the rifts in the Sudanese society.

Ecologically, the northern part of Sudan is classified in the semi-arid Sahel region, tending northwards into the Sahara desert, the study noted. The southern ecology on the other hand is more identical to the tropical eastern African zone, with a rich diversity of natural resources and arable characteristics.

However, this ecological diversity of the south has acted as a "decentralising" factor, partly contributing to the region's historical marginalisation by the north. The study also noted that while the north had been unified over time by its common Islamic culture, cultural diversity in the south had played a more destructive role, driving it towards more conflicts and ethnic divisions.

"The ecological diversity in the south has acted as a total disaster for the southern movement," Goldsmith

said. "The north has a united front, which is kept together by Islam. The south has this asymmetrical system that brings people apart."

These ecological dynamics to the Sudanese conflict have further been reinforced by ethnic competition along the banks of the Nile, the world's largest river, which passes through the country.

As a result of the marginalisation and predation by the north, southern Sudan runs a subsistence economy and lacks basic infrastructure, while its resources continues to be used to develop the north, the study noted.

"We have a highly centralised north and a resource-rich, but deeply divided, south. The result is a highly predatory relationship between the north and the south," Goldsmith said.

In recent times, however, the conflict has grown much more complex and "fuzzier" with each cycle, its main beneficiaries being the elite on both sides, who camouflage their struggle to control the critical natural resources through ideology and resistance, Goldsmith explained.

"Past experience indicates that the ethnic protagonists of the border zones, [mainly Dinka and Baggara communities] can manage local conflicts and even achieve high levels of cooperation when left to their own devices," he said.

## **DIPLOMATIC EFFORTS**

Sudan has been at war for most of its independence period which began in 1952. The current conflict, which began in 1983, following the decision by Khartoum to impose Islamic Sharia law in the country, has directly resulted in the deaths of an estimated two million people and the displacement of four million people.

Diplomatic efforts to end the conflict have been bogged down mainly by issues of religion, ethnicity, and resource control.

The role of regional interests Sudan's current peace process, especially those of neighbouring Egypt, also appear to have been underestimated. This became clear in the light of recent progress which, among other issues, led to an agreement on self-determination for south Sudan.

Egypt - which since 1999 has brokered a Libyan-Egyptian peace initiative prioritising national unity - is especially opposed to the landmark Machakos Protocol, signed on 20 July 2002, which allowed for a possible secession of southern Sudan from the north. [See IRIN report: [http://www.irinnews.org/report.asp?ReportID=29415&SelectRegion=East\\_Africa&SelectCountry=SUDAN](http://www.irinnews.org/report.asp?ReportID=29415&SelectRegion=East_Africa&SelectCountry=SUDAN)]

Analysts argue that Egypt's opposition to a possible split of Sudan may lead to increased competition for the Nile waters - the economic lifeline.

However, the most valuable of Sudan's contested resources, according to Goldsmith, is the oil in western Upper Nile region. "The discovery of oil in Sudan, has given a new impetus to the government of Sudan's determination to forestall a lasting rapprochement with the southern demands for autonomy," he noted.

"It sustains conflict primarily by generating revenue that is used to sustain the armed conflict. The effect has been to strengthen the position of the government of Sudan against the southern rebel movements," he added.

## THE OIL FACTOR

The discovery of oil has assumed critical importance in the Sudanese conflict, adding a new dynamic that had even more severe humanitarian consequences, with civilians forcefully removed from their homes to pave way for oil exploration, the report noted.

The oil factor also has become the new foremost ecological dimension in the Sudanese conflict, as oil proceeds go into government's war machinery. "The predatory relationship has expanded into a new phase characterised by oil exploitation, bringing in a new spin to the conflict, characterised by international capital," Goldsmith said.

A policy paper, presented at the Nairobi meeting by ACTS, noted that nearly 200,000 barrels of crude oil were produced daily in Sudan, contributing an annual US \$500 million to government revenue, little of which benefited the people of Southern Sudan.

Instead, the oil has been a source of much suffering for the southern Sudanese people and has compromised ongoing efforts aimed at peace building, the research paper noted.

## ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT

The environmental impact of oil exploration has also emerged as a major source of conflict between the Khartoum government and local communities in the South.

According to Goldsmith's research findings, large-scale oil production and transport have had a significant impact on the landscape and local environment, thereby resulting in the loss of traditional livelihoods of the local traditional Dinka and Nuer communities.

Some of the major environmental concerns for Sudan include the possibility of soil and water contamination, burning of excess gases and oil spills. Neither has the impact of a potential accidental or intentional breakage and leakage of the Sudanese pipeline been assessed, the report pointed out.

It noted that the unregulated environmental and social aspects of oil production also had a significant impact on the "conflict dynamic" in the country.

"If the international community is sincere in seeking peace for Sudan, it must take multilateral measures to regulate petro-revenues in the region," the report stressed.

[ISS website at: <http://www.iss.co.za/> ]

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