

Legacy of colonialism

"Britain," according to an African diplomat, "is responsible for most of the Third World's political problems. Her colonial policies have left us today with the conflict in Palestine, endless trouble between Pakistan and India, and a huge mess in Africa."

In fact it was not colonialism, as such, that caused today's chaos in Africa. It was the eagerness to disengage from the stigma of being a colonialist that did so much harm.

In the unseemly haste with which Britain divested itself of its Empire (thus speeding up the withdrawals of the French, Dutch, Belgians and Portuguese from their African holdings) little thought was given to the artificial and arbitrary borders of the independent countries being formed almost weekly.

So a continent came into being with countries made up of warring tribes, unable to speak each other's languages, united by a common nationality in name and virtually nothing else.

Sudan on the brink

No African nation better typifies this colonial legacy than Sudan, the continent's largest and potentially richest country. In spite of extensive economic and political support from the West, Sudan is today teetering on the brink of total collapse. Sudan's myriad problems tell us a great deal about what is wrong with modern Africa.

Created by Britain during the last century, Sudan is an unhappy amalgam of northern Muslims and southern black animists and Christians, a nation that lies half in the Arab world and half in the very heart of black Africa. Regionalism and tribalism, vast distances, poor communications and different languages all create dangerous centrifugal forces that are threatening to rend apart this important nation.

Almost every major development project started over the past decade has foundered due to bad management, lack of foreign exchange, corruption and inefficiency. Sudan's 19 million people exist in a subsistence economy that appears impervious to any sort of improvement.

Britain, in her rush to unburden itself of the former Empire, left Sudan, and many other African nations, with only a rudimentary government and inherent political instability. The 20-year-old regime of Sudan's leader, Gen. Jafaar el-Numieri, mirrors this unfortunate legacy.

The rule of the Sudanese government hardly extends beyond the capital, Khartoum, where it is maintained in power by the 55,000-man army and extensive support from the West and Egypt. In the western province of Kordofan, the Mahadist movement, heirs to those original Islamic revolutionaries, the Dervishes, are plotting to overthrow Gen. Numieri. In the north, and even in Khartoum where there have been at least 18 attempted coups over the past two decades, anti-Numieri factions are gaining strength.

In Sudan's remote southern provinces, the sporadic 22-year-old black secessionist rebellion has

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again broken out. This revolt, supported in the past by the odd combination of Israel and various Christian church groups, poses the very real threat of breaking Sudan into two separate countries.

As if Sudan did not have enough problems, the Khartoum regime is threatened to the east by the unfriendly Marxist regime in Ethiopia whose continuing wars with Somalis, Tigreans and Eritreans may spill over Sudan's southern borders. Now Sudan has become deeply involved in the growing civil war in remote Chad, supporting the forces of Hissan Habre and serving as a conduit for CIA-supplied arms.

Chad has become a focal point for the enmity between Sudan, Egypt and the U.S., on one side, and Libya's Col. Khadafy on the other, who is a bitter foe of Gen. Numieri. The Egyptians and Sudanese have somehow managed to convince the U.S. government that their regional squabbles with Libya constitute a threat to America's vital interests. Washington has responded to this spectre of nefarious Libyans by pouring more arms and aid into Sudan — and thus becoming increasingly involved in supporting its unstable and expensive ally.

Open to exploitation

This illustrates the West's major problem in Africa. The legacy of colonialism has left a continent of permanent instability, creating easy and inexpensive opportunities that are being rapidly exploited by the Russians and other regional troublemakers. By responding to these threats, the West is being drawn ever deeper into the morass of African regional and tribal quarrels, forced, as in the case of Sudan, to support shaky, unpopular regimes that are becoming increasing liabilities and debilitating distractions.

What is to be done with Sudan? Continue to lavish more aid on a regime that may soon be overthrown, allow the country to split asunder, or simply pull back and ignore the whole mess. The latter course is most tempting, but it ignores the very real threat that some unknown, pro-Russian colonel is waiting in the wings, ready to turn Sudan, like Angola, Mozambique, Guinea and Ethiopia into a new Russian beachhead in Africa.

Perhaps the time has come for Western leaders to finally decide which nations are truly worth supporting and which ones must be left to their own fate. As Frederick the Great said, "He who defends everything, defends nothing."

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