

## Discussion with Nicholas Kristof and Andrew Natsios

*Deborah Amos speaks with Andrew Natsios, is former special envoy to Sudan and the Bush administration, and he is now a professor at Georgetown University School of Foreign Service, and Nicholas Kristof, columnist for the The New York Times who has covered Sudan extensively.*

**Deborah Amos (DA):** We've heard about so many unresolved issues that could lead to conflict after the January 9th vote. I want to focus first on U.S. policy. Is the Obama administration taking the right approach to head off those potential conflicts between the north and the south?

**Andrew Natsios (AN):** It is the right approach in a broad sense. I think they started gauging this very late. I think the senior levels of the administration should have started this six months or year ago, but they did engage. I think there is a little arrogance in the United States, in the media, and in the advocacy community if they think the United States is going to fundamentally save Sudan. The only people who can save Sudan are the Sudanese. We can contribute in a constructive way or we can make things worse. I always worry about us making things worse. Ultimately, this is a high stakes game for the survival of different groups in Sudan. The NCP – the ruling party of Bashir and his other leaders of the Islamist groups in Sudan – knows that their back is against the wall. I think they are losing control of the country. I don't mean just the south. I mean even the north. They are circling the wagons for survival purposes. In that kind of a context, their ability to compromise or follow instructions from the international community is very limited. They are not going to do it because if they see anything that is going to put them at risk for their survival they just won't do it.

**DA:** Do you think that the Obama administration has a policy in place that you are satisfied with? That keeps the referendum on time, but also keeps all those issues that have to be resolved after the referendum on the front burner?

**Nicholas Kristof (NK):** I think the Obama administration largely blew it for the first year and a half. It was not engaged in the issue of the referendum. I think they woke up around September. I think it was driven by President Obama who did not want to be remembered as... President Bush having stopped the war and [Obama] having presided over its revival. So clearly he began a big push to try to really engage in Sudan. I think they actually worked pretty well keeping all these balls in the air and have done a pretty good job.

**DA:** There is some really serious issues at stake here. The way that the oil is going to be distributed is still not settled. There are border issues that are still not settled even though we are marching to this January 9th referendum. Do you think that those particular issues are where the focus should be? Is that what the conflict is likely to be about?

**AN:** I think we are misreading what's really happening here. I think Bashir and the more realist factions of the NCP realize that the south is leaving and that it's going to happen one way or the other. The question is not whether they leave, but how they leave and what deal the north gets. The north is slowing down the referendum to try to use it as a negotiating pawn to get a better deal for the divorce settlement. The southerners don't want to negotiate the divorce settlement until after the referendum is held because they don't want the referendum to be used as a part of any negotiations. It was already agreed to in January 2005 when it was signed. Why renegotiate something that was agreed to long time ago?

But they are both playing a little brinkmanship. They are trying to move the country closer to the edge without falling off. I understand they've actually made an agreement on the oil revenue allocation following the cessation vote. That's not really the big issue at this point. It's the other issues. It's the flood water of the Nile. How much water is the north and Egypt going to get because the south now will control the Nile River water flows. How much of the national debt of Sudan will the south take because a lot of that debt is a result of oil infrastructure which is all in the north. The oil pipeline, the two refineries, and Port Sudan cost billions of dollars to build and the northerners are saying, "Wait a second, we are losing the oil and we are going to have to pay for the debt?" The border hasn't been agreed to. Abyei is a very provocative area – the Kashmir of Sudan. It has not been agreed to. I think some of these issues can be resolved. But the question is not how they are resolved, but when they are resolved – before the referendum or after the referendum?

**DA:** What's at stake if both sides get it wrong and we aren't able to help steer this divorce?

**NK:** I think we would see a return to war. There are a lot of things that if they go wrong might lead to war because there is so much distrust back and forth. On the one hand, it's hugely in the interest of each side to see the oil continue to flow. That is a strong incentive on both sides to work out some kind of a deal. On the other hand, Abyei is a potential flash point. It's very hard for either side to compromise there. There are areas that are actually technically in the north that have strong southern loyalties that could well become very volatile and violent and trigger something broader. There are a lot of local actors who could also be real spoilers. You have a lot of people nearby each other with guns and the stakes are high. Nobody has ever made a lot of money betting on peace in Sudan.

**DA:** Our reporters who are just back report there is intertribal violence. There is cattle rustling. There is not enough police. What does the south have to do to make a country?

**NK:** One of the problems is that governance has been exceptionally bad in the south. To some degree, people have looked the other way because they have been so focused on the problems in the north. There is corruption in the south that has been enormous. Human rights abuses have been legion. There are ethnic conflicts within the south. I think that one of the concerns is that President Bashir will use these kinds of fissures within the south to stoke rivalries, to create conflict, to discredit the south and undermine it.

**DA:** At the same time, can the south become a functioning country?

**AN:** The south has been a functioning country for five years. The north has no governance authority left in the south. The south has been governing itself since the peace agreement. I've been gone since the fall of '07. I was astonished at the changes, particularly in Juba, which is now almost 15% of the population of the country. It was 100,000 people when I was there. It's now 1.1-1.2 million people! Juba has been transformed.

Are there serious problems in the south? Absolutely, Nick is right. I wouldn't quite say that the human rights abuses have been legion. What was a rise in intertribal violence the first six months of '09, there is very little of it right now according to the United Nations and according to an NGO we spoke with. We talked to over a 100 people when we were there. According to donor governments that have consulates there, there is almost no violence going on right now because the one thing the south is completely united around is that they want to be done with Islam, the Islamists from Khartoum and done with the Arabs. I'm just telling you what they think. The question is more what's going to happen in the future.