

UNITED NATIONS RESEARCH INSTITUTE FOR SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

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**A POLITICAL ECONOMY
OF REFUGEE FLOWS
FROM SOUTH-WEST SUDAN,
1986-1988**

by David Keen

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PREFACE

This paper forms part of the Institute's research project on refugees, displaced persons and humanitarian assistance, co-ordinated by Hubert Morsink. Over the past four years, this research has focused on two themes: the interaction between refugees and the host society and the integration of returning refugees in their country of origin. The former issue was explored in case studies of Angolan and Guatemalan refugees in Zambia and Mexico respectively. The latter topic has been covered in studies in Chad, Ethiopia, Mozambique, Sudan, Uganda and Zimbabwe.

The present paper contains an analysis of refugee flows from south-west Sudan over the period 1986-1988. The author focuses on an area that was subject to severe and intensifying famine and that generated a major flow of refugees to Ethiopia as well as very large numbers of "internal migrants" who moved to northern Sudan. He argues that all too often there is a tendency to take a purely "humanitarian" attitude to the problems of famines and to regard refugees as an unfortunate product of civil wars and social conflicts. A deeper examination of the events leading to famines and refugees reveals a disturbing picture of active intervention by powerful agencies and groups to create such situations to serve their political and material interests.

After a brief survey of the history of southern Sudan, the author examines the pull and push factors which drove the Dinka people to abandon their homes. The pull factors include their ethnic ties with people across the border, trading possibilities in the refugee camps, the prospects for better education for their children in the camps and security in the SPLA-controlled areas. The journey to the camps was, however, extremely hazardous and nearly a quarter of the people perished en route. Thus it was the push factors which were predominant in the Dinka people's decision to brave the onerous journey. These included murderous raids by the enemy, the loss of cattle and grain, impoverishment, hunger and starvation.

The author argues that these conditions were deliberately created by successive governments and powerful interest groups to serve their own ends. Military authorities encouraged Baggara tribesmen to launch raids in the Dinka areas to steal cattle and grain and to drive them from their areas. The "captured" Dinka were used as cheap labour in slave-like conditions. The merchants profited from grain scarcity and forced sales of cattle and often collaborated with the raiders and military authorities. Soldiers and officials in successive administrations also shared in the profits from transport, trading and expropriation of cattle and other assets. The government was interested in gaining complete control of areas potentially rich in oil and other resources. The vast land resources of the region appeared to provide a solution to the land-hunger generated by horizontally expanding mechanised agriculture. This constellation of interest groups went so far as to obstruct relief supplies to the beleaguered people. The author alleges that the donor community and international agencies made little attempt to go beyond government definitions of when and where relief would be acceptable.

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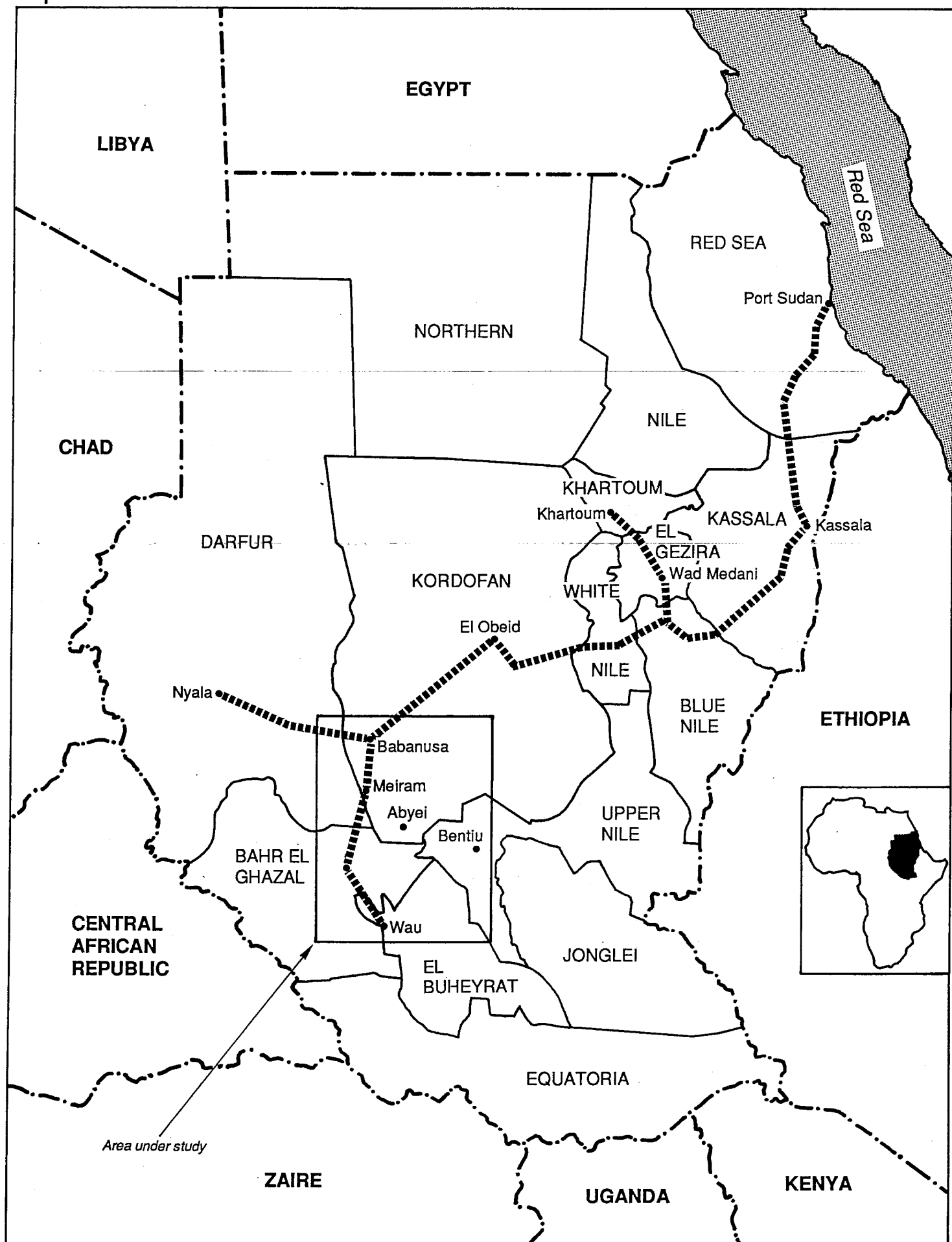
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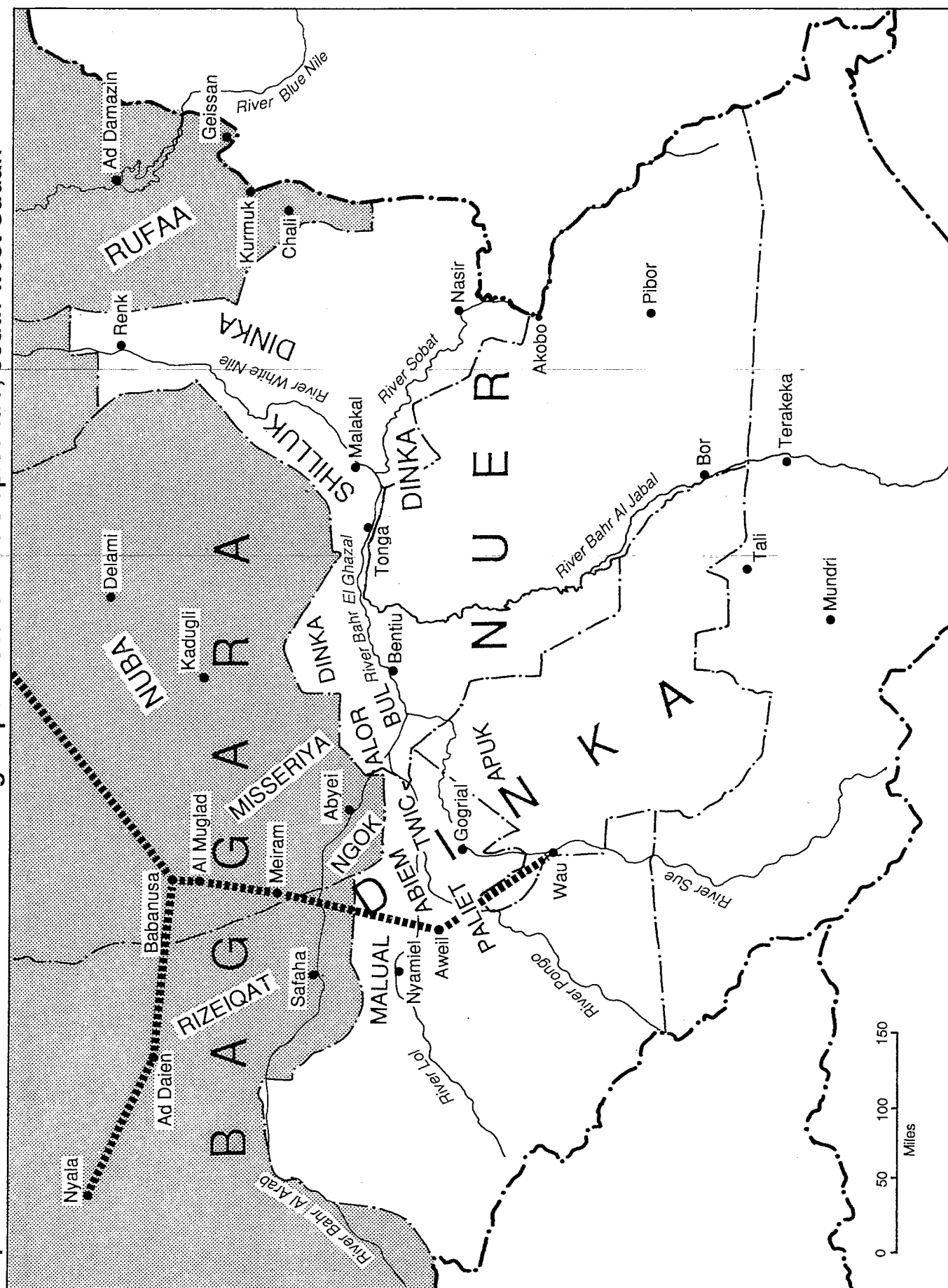
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Map 1. SUDAN





Introduction

This study focuses on an area of south-west Sudan (delineated in map 1) that was subject to severe and intensifying famine in the period 1985–1988 and that yielded a major flow of refugees to Ethiopia as well as very large numbers of "internal migrants" who moved to northern Sudan.

The purpose of this research is to analyse the root causes of refugee movements from this area, movements which originated primarily among the Dinka in northern Bahr el Ghazal and elements of the Nuer in western Upper Nile. The analysis will attempt to go beyond the common assertion that war creates famine and refugees, and to throw light on the precise connections between "war" and these phenomena. It seeks to avoid the assumption that war, famine and refugee flows are simply **dysfunctions** and to explore the possibility that they may be **functional** for certain groups.

The role of international donors and the United Nations in addressing this emergency, and their interaction with powerful groups within Sudan, will be examined. It is hoped that by examining the historical, political and economic processes that created a major human catastrophe in this area of southern Sudan, it will be possible to suggest ways in which international interventions could be improved.

This research is informed by field trips to Khartoum and famine-affected areas of southern Kordofan and southern Darfur in 1988. The study draws on a variety of sources and disciplines. The sources include: archives of aid agencies and donor organizations; Sudan government records relating to the distribution of relief; historical material on the area affected by the famine; and interviews with Sudanese government officials, aid officials and people from Bahr el Ghazal who were suffering from famine. By tapping a great variety of sources, it is hoped that the research can highlight the different meanings of famine and upheaval for different groups of people: in this sense, the research is informed by sociological thinking, as well as by political economy. There is a further sociological dimension to the approach adopted here: following Foucault (1978, 1981), the paper seeks to examine not simply the practices of officials (in this case, international donors) in relation to a social problem, but also the relationship between this practice and the way that policy and social problems were discussed.

I. Some perspectives on famine and migration

Contemporary academic discourse on famine and relief has been greatly influenced by the Indian economist and philosopher Amartya Sen. According to Sen (1981), famine was very closely linked with poverty, and specifically with a fall in individual "entitlement" to food. He

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