Sudan: the double imperative

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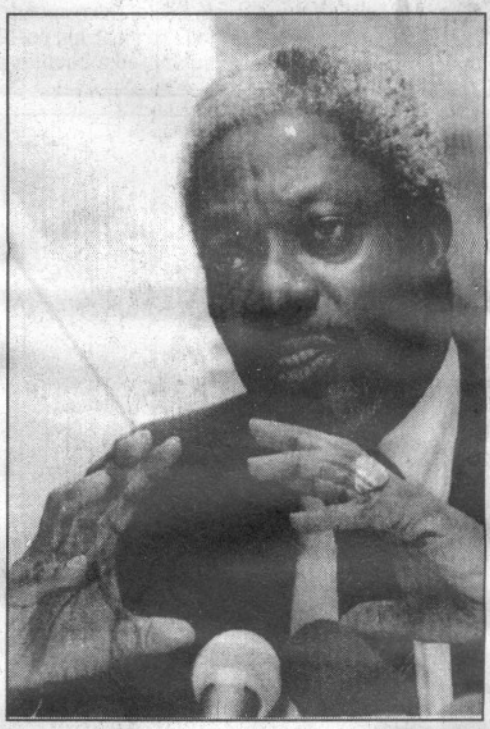
For much too long, Sudan has been the scene of one of the most heart-rending civil wars in the world. In the past 15 years, more than one and a half million people have died there, as a result of war and famine. About four million have been displaced.

Warnings by the United Nations World Food Programme (WFP) of a new famine this year have now become a grim reality. More than 1.2 million people in southern Sudan alone are at risk of starvation. There are towns where 50 people die of malnutrition every day. War has devastated agriculture. If, as feared, the Bahr Al Ghazal region has a poor harvest this October, hardly any food will be produced there for at least another 14 months.



The pain of the Sudanese people has been felt through the world. A moral impulse to end the suffering has activated a massive humanitarian effort. Since 1989 Operation Lifeline Sudan (OLS) — a unique humanitarian coalition between UNICEF, the World Food Programme, and 38 voluntary relief agencies - has delivered food and essential supplies to the Sudanese people. Both the Sudanese Government and its main opponent, the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM) agreed to give the UN and its voluntary partners unhindered access to the innocent people whose lives they were trying to save. And tens of thousands of lives have been saved, often against almost impossible odds.

OLS has now launched its most comprehensive relief operation yet, aiming to deliver 15,000 tons of food each month to 2.4m people. War, the terrain and the climate make many parts of the region inaccessible by road. So the World Food Programme has put in place the largest and most expensive air-drop operation it has ever managed. Thirteen aircraft are shuttling back and forth to carry food into the area. Yet conditions are such that it is not possible to reach all of the population, or even to know for certain whether some of them have been reached or not.

Worldwide indignation at the Sudanese people's plight has prompted many governments to respond generously. But such an effort cannot, and should not have to be, sustained indefinitely. Only peace can bring a solution to this crisis. Unless and until there is a negotiated settlement between the government in Khartoum and its opponents, the people of southern Sudan will continue to face displacement, famine and death. Although geography and natural causes have hampered the aid efforts, the unrelenting armed conflict is both the main cause of the famine and the main obstacle in the way of those trying to relieve it.

On July 15, a partial cease-fire was declared. I welcome this, and its recent expansion by the government. But both parties should extend it in time as well as place. The emergency affects the whole south of the country, and the famine will not finish within three months.

So we are faced with a double imperative. On the one hand, the world cannot passively acquiesce in the deaths of civilian men, women and children. We must maintain and step up our relief efforts as long as the emergency continues.

But at the same time we must redouble our efforts on the political front. The governments of the region have been leading the search for peace, and have just held a new round of talks in Addis Ababa. The United Nations stands ready to assist these in any way it can. But only Sudan's political leaders can make the crucial decisions.

The people of Sudan, who have suffered so much, have a right to demand that their leaders at last summon up the political will to forge a permanent peace. The rest of the world, while continuing to help the victims, must support that demand with all its might.

The writer is Secretary General of the United Nations