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Arms Flows to North and South Kordofan

In letters addressed to the chairman of the Joint Staff Command¹ in late 2008, Defence Minister Abdul Rahim Mohamed Hussein said tribes loyal to the National Congress Party (NCP) of President Omar al Bashir would be armed ‘in order to protect themselves and as a precautionary measure’. The letters, dated 21 October and 1 November 2008, were marked ‘Personal and Confidential’ and carried the heading: ‘Armament of Tribes’. The defence minister, who retained his portfolio in the government formed after Sudan’s April 2010 general elections, said the arming had been decided at a meeting of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. He said deliveries would be made in batches, ‘in order to maintain the secrecy of the information and distribution’.

Speaking after the letters were reported on an Arabic-language Sudanese website, an army spokesman denounced them as a fraud—despite the marks of authenticity they bear, including official stamps and hand-written signatures. But senior members of the Sudan People’s Liberation Army (SPLA) who challenged the NCP said their veracity had been confirmed privately in meetings with military counterparts in the Sudan Armed Forces (SAF).

The NCP has frequently been accused of arming Arab tribes, especially in front-line areas and regions in rebellion, but it has repeatedly denied doing so.

Senior sources in the SPLA say the arms transfers stopped after the documents were exposed on the Internet—but only after more than 50,000 weapons had been distributed. The sources claim that shipments of AK-47s and machine guns, have resumed in recent months, initially ‘at a low level’. The most recent reported deliveries, in September 2010, have targeted three localities—Rashad and Abu Gibeha in the east of the mountains, and Dilling in the west. Almost 2,000 AK-47s were sent to the eastern mountains, according to one source, and 6,000 AK-47s plus more than 600 machine guns to the west, distributed among eight armed camps.

The sources speculate that the deliveries are part of preparations for war in the event that NCP hardliners refuse to accept the result of a January 2011 referendum in which Southern Sudanese are expected to vote for separation. Since the number of regular SAF in South Kordofan is judged more than enough to control the area, many in the SPLA believe that irregulars are being armed for two purposes: first, to hinder the demarcation of the still-undecided North–South border; and second, to prevent a simultaneous referendum in which Abyei is expected to throw its lot in with the South, notably by arming Misseriya in the west of the region, around oil-rich Abyei.

The 2008 deliveries—detailed on 1 November by the logistics department of the Joint Chiefs—involved small arms and light weapons, including machine guns and mortars. While intended for the two states of Kordofan, North and South, they were also earmarked for areas of northern Sudan where protest movements have arisen and for Darfur in western Sudan—specifically, for tribes living along the border between South Darfur State and SPLA-controlled Southern Sudan.²



The SPLA officials said the reason given them for the deliveries to Kordofan was a recruitment drive there by Darfur’s Justice and Equality Movement armed opposition group following its May 2008 attack on Khartoum’s twin city, Omdurman. A document dated 8 November 2008 and headed ‘Transfer of Armed Conflict to Southern Kordofan’ appears to confirm this concern. It claims that rebel forces from Darfur entered the Nuba Mountain area of South Kordofan and were ‘trying to transfer their conflict to Southern Kordofan’. Many Nuba fought with the SPLA against the Khartoum government in the 1983–2005 civil war.

All the shipments destined for Kordofan (bar one) went to Baggara tribes, cattle-herding Arab pastoralists who began moving into the valleys of the Nuba Mountains in the 19th century in search of water and pasture for their growing herds. Their penetration into the mountains at the start of the civil war, as the grazing land available to them was squeezed by mechanized agriculture and drought, drove the Nuba out of the lowlands and into the hills and contributed to the outbreak of large-scale armed conflict.

The greatest number of weapons sent to the Baggara went to the Hawazma tribe³—including to the Togiya sub-section of the Hawazma, found in the Um Burumbita area⁴ of South Kordofan, and to the Biridiya, pastoralists who live among the Hawazma immediately north of the Nuba hills.⁵ The shipments to these groups included:

- 400 AK-47s to the Hawazma and Biridiya combined.
- 600 AK-47s and ten 7.62 mm machine guns to the Togiya.
- 400 AK-47s, ten 7.62 mm machine guns, and ten 60 mm and 75 mm⁶ mortars to Hawazma answering to Osman Gadim, a leading member of the Awlad Himeid sub-section of the Hawazma and identified by numerous sources as an NCP hardliner closely connected to Sudan’s security services.

The second largest consignment went to the Misseriya, one of the largest tribes in Sudan. The Misseriya have been present in the western part of South Kordofan since the end of the 18th century and were the first Baggara armed by the government in the region, including as part of the paramilitary Popular Defence Forces. The tribe is divided into two main sub-groups: the Humr, who are based mainly north of Abyei, and the Zuruq, based mainly in the Lagawa area west of the Nuba hills. Both have seen their migration routes through SPLA-controlled areas blocked. Both claim that the SPLA blocks their grazing, extorts taxes, and abuses them with impunity.

The documents list arms deliveries to the Misseriya in October–November 2008 as follows:

- 600 AK-47s, 27 7.62 mm machine guns, and six 66 mm and 75 mm⁷ mortars to the Missiriya Humr.
- 392 AK-47s, ten 7.62 mm machine guns, and two 82 mm mortars to the Misseriya Zuruq.

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In the 1983–2005 civil war, Misseriya herds were able to access water and grazing land relatively easily, facilitated by government-supported Misseriya militia. Since the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) in 2005, however, the

Misseriya have seen their seasonal migrations to the South curtailed by the SPLA and have lost the grazing grounds—most importantly around Bahr al Arab and Lake Abiad—that made Misseriya pastoralism viable. The tribe has also lost economic opportunities in the South that complemented livestock keeping, including fishing, honey collection, hunting, and the gathering and selling of wild fruits and grasses.

In 2007–09, the Misseriya Zuruq had fierce clashes with Abu Junuk Nuba in the Lagawa area in the west of the Nuba hills over access to pasture. Both sides sustained heavy casualties. The fighting was close to the Lagawa locality oil fields. There is a popular belief that the Lagawa area is rich not only in oil but also in minerals.

Weapons were also sent to two smaller tribes in North Kordofan—the camel-herding Shukuriya, who received 1,000 AK-47s and ten 7.62 mm machine guns, and the Gawama agro-pastoralists, who were allocated 400 AK-47s. Both tribes have disputes with the Nuba.

The Shukuriya migrate to South Kordofan during the dry season and have clashed with Nuba north-west of Dilling. The Gawama migrated into Kordofan in the 16th and 17th centuries, reaching the northern edge of the Nuba Mountains and pushing the Nuba south. The displacement of Nuba by Gawama has continued as the Gawama shifted to farming, requiring more land, after the drought of the mid-1980s killed many of their cattle. There is also a dispute between Gawama and Nuba over the Jebel al Daier region, which was annexed to the Native Administration of the Gawama after independence in 1956 and which Jebel al-Daier Nuba are now demanding be returned to a Nuba administration. The claim was not resolved during the CPA negotiations and has relevance to the ‘Popular Consultation’ process in which an elected legislature in South Kordofan is expected to identify ‘shortcomings’ in the relevant CPA protocol and seek to negotiate its future status with the Sudanese government.

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¹ Gen. Mohamed Abdul-Gadir Nasruddin was replaced in June 2010 by Gen. Esmat Abdel-Rahman Zain al Abdeen.
² The tribes armed in South Darfur were the Ta’aisha, Habbaniya, and Rizeigat, all of whom have recently been involved in conflict with other Arab tribes, as well as the Darfur rebel movements.
³ The Hawazma occupied a large part of the central Nuba Mountains area during the civil war. Armed conflict has often broken out between the Hawazma and Gulfan Nuba over resources and water, and between the Hawazma and Warni Nuba over gum arabic.
⁴ This is an area of high insecurity where Arab tribes are in conflict both with the SPLA and with Kawalib and Kira Nuba.
⁵ In 2007, Bideriya pastoralists from North Kordofan appeared, armed, for the first time in the Nuba Mountains of South Kordofan. They entered Nuba farms with cows and caused widespread destruction, including of water pumps. Local people quoted them as saying the government had armed them.
⁶ The Small Arms Survey is not aware of mortars of 75mm.
⁷ The Small Arms Survey is not aware of mortars of these calibers.