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## Slavery and the Sudan: Can Good Works Be Good?

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Abstract. This article focuses on the consequences of attempts to free slaves and abolish slavery in the Sudan.

Slavery has had a long-term presence in the Sudan. However, it has become much more salient during the ongoing civil war pitting government forces and their surrogates that formally represent the largely Muslim and Arabic north of the country against various rebel groupings and their surrogates that formally and informally represent the largely non-Arabic, Christian, and/or animist south. Primarily women and children seem to constitute the slave population in Sudan and few if any participants in the civil war appear to be uninvolved in aiding or abetting slavery.

Some private charities--confronting the legal, moral, and ethical contentiousness of slavery--have sought to buy freedom for as many of the Sudan's slaves as these groups can afford. These activities, however, have been strongly attacked by agencies of the United Nations (UN) including the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) and at best treated ambivalently by human rights organizations such as Human Rights Watch.

What are the arguments against buying the freedom of slaves? First, if the civil war is at least somewhat causally related to slavery, as long as the war goes on, so will slavery. More victims may be freed, but more will be created as well. The focus should be on stopping the war. Yet, buying the freedom of slaves often can facilitate the sellers' buying weapons to continue the war. Second, in a country as economically challenged as the Sudan, buying the freedom of slaves significantly serves to maintain a slave market as an economically viable means to survive. According to this argument, people as slaves become ever more commodified (as commodities and commodities), objectified, and dehumanized. Third, if slavery is at least somewhat causally related to attitudes of slave owners that positively value slavery, buying slaves does not challenge such attitudes and may even reinforce them.

What then should be the appropriate response to slavery in the Sudan? Some advocate sending international monitors to the Sudan to identify slaves and secure their release. How this securing is to occur--e.g., through a honeyed tongue--is often left ambiguous. As ambiguous are other so-called "special programs" to identify and free slaves. The specialness of these programs resides largely in their lack of specification. Some advocate international condemnations of slavery. However, such condemnations often are impotent in effecting stated objectives and may even increase the commercial value of a proscribed activity, resource, or product.

By a process of elimination, one might conclude that only through physical force or its threat will Sudanese slavery be abolished--or only when the "laws of supply and demand" deem slaves to no longer be an economic or other sort of advantage. The former may be logistically improbable and even corrupt the formally constituted authorities behind the use of force. It ultimately exemplifies that most ancient of dilemmas: taking a life to save a life. The latter, unfortunately, seems to diverge sharply from what is commonly termed human character. Thus, when it comes to good works, all good works may be bad. (See Ho, D.Y. (1985). Psychological aspects of slavery and colonialism. *Bulletin of the Hong Kong Psychological Society*, 15, 37-42; Kopytoff, I. (1982). Slavery. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 11, 207-

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