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Food for Thought on Food as a Weapon in the Sudan

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Abstract. This article analyzes conceptual Issues surrounding a United States Government policy authorizing food assistance to armed opposition groups in southern Sudan.

United States (US) President Bill Clinton has recently signed a foreign assistance bill authorizing food assistance to armed opposition groups in southern Sudan that are fighting the Sudanese government. There are several rationales for such authorization. First, the US Government (USG) seeks to weaken and ultimately foster change in the National Islamic Front-led government that allegedly has supported international terrorism. Second, the USG is similarly against Sudanese governmental leaders for the latters' domestic terrorism, atrocities, and sowing of economic disaster and personal anguish. Third, the USG may be especially sensitive to the Sudanese governmental leaders perpetrating evil against a southern population that includes many Christians.

Certainly, there are meaningful critiques of the USG authorization of food assistance for the Sudanese armed opposition. First, overt support for the opposition could increase the support and the cohesion of that support for the Sudanese Government of many other Sudanese who are at best that Government's lukewarm fans. Second, USG overt support for the armed opposition could increase international support for the Sudanese Government on the part of those who reify sovereignty, fear precedents of international intervention in their own civil disputes, or identify with images of an Arab entity against a non-Arab one, an Islamic entity against a non-Islamic one. Third, armed opposition groups in Sudan also have been the perpetrators of terrorism and other atrocities. Fourth, events in the Sudan do not bear on the strategic interests of the USG and, therefore, assistance of any kind should not be forthcoming. Fifth, providing to one side--especially one that is running into difficulty--will only lengthen military conflict and increase the cumulative number of deaths and other casualties. However, a sixth critique--that food cannot be used as a weapon without violating the most basic of human rights and thus should not be used as a weapon--is bogus.

The plain fact is that food is always a weapon--explicitly or implicitly--for it bears on the means to carry on the fighting and at times the reason for fighting. If a government or non-governmental organization provides food assistance to one side, one side gets the weapon. If both sides get the assistance, both sides get the weapon. If neither side gets the assistance, neither side gets the weapon. In this last case, food is still being employed as a weapon in the guise of economic sanction.

As can be seen, there is no way out of using food as a weapon. Ignorance of a conflict on the part of a potential donor or knowledge of the conflict by a political entity unable to become a donor merely underline the weapon quality of food. Deciding to provide other assistance such as money, personnel, or materiel merely free up assets that then can be used to secure food as necessary.

Thus, food assistance to the Sudanese armed opposition as an intervention of the USG can be critiqued on strategic and moral grounds. However, the critique that food--or medicine or other humanitarian support--should not be used as a weapon is but a shaking of a fist at Nature or--better yet--a baying at the moon. (See Elliott, D. (1997). Case study: the great Hanshin earthquake and the ethics of

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