

Remarks to Associate Parliamentary Group on Sudan. House of Commons, 24 March 2004. Lillian Craig Harris, Ph.D.

Sudan's peace building stage will be more difficult than the present peace making stage. This is because the war has been very long and people on all sides have experienced extreme loss and are deeply wounded psychologically. Crucial to peace building will be learning to process grief, hatred, bitterness and desire for revenge. If a way to begin to do this, to begin to move towards individual and group reconciliation, is not found quickly, the chances for bringing the Sudanese peoples into harmony with one another, national reconciliation, are very much diminished.

The Sudanese are a flexible and forgiving people. But they have accumulated over 20 years of trauma, anguish and bitterness. Moreover, their trust in authority both local and national and many of their traditional ways of peacemaking have been violated and over ridden. Sudan may be able to avoid becoming a Kosovo or a Rwanda where people remain unable to live peacefully together as the result of power struggles involving culture, politics and religion which have exploded into mass killing. Sudan could be different. But this is unlikely to happen naturally. If Sudan is to grow towards national reconciliation based on peace and justice, there will have to be a method and a process, careful planning and long term outside support. But there are opportunities for Sudanese women to take the lead in a personal and national movement towards healing.

In the late 1990s I was involved in what we called "listening to loss" peace dialogue between northern and southern, urban and displaced, Muslim and Christian women in the Khartoum area. This dialogue began when Muslim women came to me asking if I could find some Christian women to talk with them about the need for peace – by which they meant person to person reconciliation as a first step. What was created by their subsequent encounters attracted international attention before -- for reasons which included departure of the facilitator and several of the senior women and interference by men -- it ended.

But before that happened, groups of Sudanese women from widely different cultural, educational, religious, political, and economic circumstances had recognised that the face of the supposed enemy was actually the face of a sister. The method used, story telling, allowed for draining down of emotional pain, a beginning of healing from trauma and a movement towards reestablishment of trust. The common denominator which women of different cultures, regions and religions found was that all had suffered great loss, whether of loved ones, education, home, health or opportunity. After bonding with their sisters they carried the message of peace into the miserable shanty towns which surround Khartoum where they were met by singing, dancing women eager to tell their stories, to let out their pain and begin to find understanding and hope for the future.

This movement towards forgiveness – which does not mean forgetting -- is what reconciliation is about. Peace building is a crucial work for which women – precisely because of their own suffering and relative lack of power as well as their great concern for the next generation – are particularly suited. Sudanese women have told me that when men say, “After the war we can have more children, so don’t weep now,” the women respond “That may be, but we weep because we want these children!” Sudanese women, in other words, are concerned with facing the problems of now which, if left unresolved, make the future much more likely to see a return to conflict.

From my experiences in Sudan in the late 1990s and subsequently, I offer the following characteristics for what could develop into an effective grass roots peace building process in post-conflict Sudan.

*It must be Sudanese led. Of course it would have to be formally organised and there would have to be rules. And there might well be need for outsider facilitation. But for this dialogue to work it must be set up and run by Sudanese. Outsiders would have to avoid the temptation to take over the running of the dialogue even if they propose the method. If they take over, the dialogue will surely fail.

*It must be led by women. Sudanese women of all cultures have an enormous amount of experience and wisdom to devote to reconciliation dialogue. They are also the traditional peacemakers. As they have often told me, “Men want power. Women want peace.” I would trust them to work in that spirit. This does not mean that men cannot eventually be involved in peace dialogue. In fact men very much need to become involved. But my suggestion is for a women-led dialogue which could eventually be expanded to include men – perhaps in a parallel series of meetings depending upon local customs and circumstances. But not before women had set the rules. If “listening to loss” dialogue is controlled by men, it would likely dissolve quite quickly into argument and become polluted by efforts to introduce politics and religion. The elements of emotional catharsis would thus be nullified.

*It must begin at the grassroots and move up. If peace building dialogue is set up by government agencies, political parties or similar groups it will certainly become quickly involved in politics and religion and never reach down to the people who have suffered the most. Of course, neither politics nor religion can be avoided in discussion as they are ingredients in the Sudanese tragedy. But in this dialogue they must not be agenda items or vehicles on which to hang discussion but rather be allowed to rise to the surface as the pain of those who have suffered demands.

*It must be intra-communal. There is a good deal of preliminary work to do before the Sudanese will be ready for a national dialogue of reconciliation. There needs to be reconciliation at the local levels, in villages, among communities and within groups. There must, for example, be Nuer-

Nuer dialogue, Nuer-Dinka dialogue, Nuba-Nuba dialogue and Nile Valley - Darfur dialogue, etc. In other words, national healing must occur as physical wound healing does, from the inside out. Otherwise buried bitterness, anguish and fear will corrupt the process.

*It must take the form of story telling. No Sudanese needs to be convinced on this point as stories are always a preferred method of dealing with conflict. In "listening to loss" dialogue which we used in Khartoum to bond core groups of women our rule was that everyone's story must be listened to with respect and acceptance even if you did not entirely believe it or think it applied to you. It was her story and therefore sacred. You would get your turn to tell your story which would also be listened to with respect and without interruption. This method works amazingly well in release of pent up emotions. Even when there was no interpreter for, say, Shilluk into Arabic or English, still the attentiveness of the listeners, their body posture, their tears, were enough to keep the storyteller going and allow her to know that she was not alone in her suffering. Relief from intolerable psychological pain is often the first step towards emotional healing. And the beginning of personal healing is the beginning of reconciliation with others. If this step is missed, the path to the future becomes even more dangerous.

*It would probably best begin not in Khartoum but in regional centres. This would get the dialogue process away from the centre and a greater likelihood of bureaucratic interference and into the hands of the people. Such places as Malakal, Abyei, Juba, Kadugli, Shendi, Nyala, and Renk are "border" areas which have experienced extensive breaking apart of communities. Being in great despair and pain people in these areas or returning to them are more likely to take reconciliation dialogue seriously as it would seem more necessary to them.

*Small is good when it comes to beginning dialogue. There would have to be forward planning, of course. But when a group of women seriously enters into peace dialogue, the process expands on its own momentum. And there is experience among Sudanese women both in the diaspora and in Sudan for restarting "listening to loss" dialogue when the time is right.

This simple outline leaves unanswered several important questions such as how reconciliation dialogue would be related to the legal process and whether there is going to be a general amnesty or whether instead it will be decided (as in South Africa) to punish some particularly blatant offenders. These and many other questions certainly need to be addressed -- by others.

There is also a need for funding if women led peace building dialogue is to take place. But funds would, I believe, become available if Sudanese women, both within and outside Sudan, set themselves the non-partisan task of creating a peace building project such as I have briefly outlined here.