Strolling along the wide corniche beside the Blue Nile in Khartoum, the capital city of the Republic of Sudan, is a pleasant way to take exercise. The pavement is shaded from the sun by leafy trees and there is a light breeze coming off the river. Above the trees and out over the river, kites ride the thermals, tracing lazy circles beneath a cloudless, deep-blue sky.

People throng the streets, pausing to greet friends or sit together on shady benches. The men are dressed in dazzling white hooded cloaks — jellabiyas — and turbans; the women are swathed in brightly coloured lengths of cloth. The atmosphere is easy and relaxed. To the visitor, Khartoum still conjures up a world that is quintessentially of the Nile: a world of deserts and tented encampments, and ancient civilisations and courtesies.

A little distance downstream from here, the Blue Nile will meet the White Nile. From Khartoum, the Nile, now one mighty river, will continue its journey towards Egypt, the Delta, and the Mediterranean Sea. Yet the Nile is not exclusively a river of the desert, or of desert peoples. The Blue Nile, rising amid the snows of the Ethiopian Highlands far to the south-east, and the White Nile, flowing out from Lake Victoria in Uganda to the south-west, pass through a great range of landscapes and cultures. The Nile flows the length of Sudan, through landscapes of dense jungle, vast swamps, grasslands, and desert on its journey northwards.

This diversity of geography and climate is reflected in the diversity of the peoples who live in these different regions. The Nile is a symbol of how such diversity might be reconciled, and how Sudan might one day be at peace with itself. For Sudan, apart from an interim period of peace (1972–1983), has been enmeshed in a chronic but catastrophic civil war between the government, based in the north, and anti-government forces, mainly in the...
south, since 1955, the year before Sudanese independence from Anglo-Egyptian rule. Currently, there seems little prospect of a lasting peace settlement.

The focus of this book is not, however, exclusively upon the war, but on the people whom it affects, and the lives of those who live on the fringes of a society that has been fractured not only by war, but by years of drought and harsh social and economic policies.

**A forgotten country**

Very few people visit Sudan, and those who do — apart from diplomats and a few business people — generally work for the UN or an international charity and are concerned with the logistics of humanitarian relief and development. So most of what is written about Sudan is buried in specialist journals or academic conference papers.

Sudan made international headlines in 1984/85, when thousands of people starved in a drought and famine that devastated the Horn of Africa. But since then, Sudan and the Sudanese people seem fated to remain largely forgotten by the rest of the world, or perceived in terms of imperial history. For many British people, Sudan is still essentially a distant, desert country dimly recalled from their school-days: General Gordon died at the siege of Khartoum in 1885 ... Sir Herbert Kitchener defeated the Dervish army at the battle of Omdurman in 1898 ... But why were they there? And what links, if any, do they have with modern Sudan?

This short book tries to fill some of the gaps. But it cannot hope to cover every aspect of the largest country in Africa. Instead it tries to give an overview of the country's history, geography, and political and social economy, seen from the perspective of ordinary Sudanese people. For if anyone is qualified to talk about Sudan, it is the people who live there: the tea seller in a Khartoum market, the school teacher in Bahr el Ghazal, the doctor in the bush clinic, the widow displaced by war, the chief of a tribe of nomads: the people who live or work on the social and economic margins of society, who are trying to find a voice for themselves and their communities, in a country that has been splintered by war for decades. What all of these people long for most is peace and stability, for without a lasting peace nothing else can be permanently achieved.
Sudan is often presented in history books as two distinct entities: the north, prosperous and predominantly Muslim, and the south, neglected, exploited, and mainly Christian. Indeed, in the nineteenth century Sudan was, for a time, administered as two separate countries. Dividing the country into two halves is a convenient device still used by many writers on Sudan; it will occasionally be used in this book.

The reality is, of course, more complex than this neat separation implies, for Sudan is above all else a country of great variety and contrasts. If modern Sudan is to be understood properly, we must acknowledge its geographic, cultural, and historic diversity, and the variety of experience that this has generated. For this diversity has not only helped to mould the country and its peoples: it has also contributed to the problems that currently trouble it as a nation.

The largest country in Africa

The Republic of Sudan covers an area of about 2.5 million square kilometres (nearly one million square miles), approximately ten times the size of the United Kingdom. The geography and climate can be roughly divided into three broad bands: arid...
deserts in the north; savannah grasslands in the central regions; and equatorial woodlands and swamp in the south, where annual rainfall can exceed 57 inches (1,465 mm).

Sudan borders the Red Sea to the east. To the north is Egypt; to the north-west, Chad and Libya; to the west, the Central African Republic; to the south, Zaire, Uganda, and Kenya; and, to the east, Eritrea and Ethiopia.

Sudan’s current population of some 27 million people consists of 19 major ethnic groups that can be further divided into 597 smaller sub-groupings, speaking over 100 different languages. About 60 per cent of the population are Muslims; about 15 per cent are Christians; the remaining 25 per cent adhere to older religions. Most Sudanese, about two-thirds, are pastoralists or farmers, earning a bare subsistence in a harsh environment. Approximately two million people still follow a nomadic or semi-nomadic lifestyle, herding livestock.
A bird’s eye view

The north and central regions

The central and northern regions of Sudan, particularly the lands along the river valley of the Nile, have been targets of invasion — and crossroads for trade and cultural contacts — for centuries. Egyptian, Greek, Roman, and Arabic cultures have all had a strong influence on these regions and their peoples. Through such contacts, successive urban civilisations have emerged throughout recorded history.

Apart from the fertile valley of the Nile, the northern region is remote and sparsely populated, with deserts stretching to the north and east for hundreds of miles into Libya and Egypt. Many groups live along the riverine valley, including the Nubians.

Economically, Sudan is dominated by the central region and the Three Cities that make up the capital city: Khartoum, Khartoum North, and Omdurman; most of the country’s utilities, infrastructure, and communications systems are sited here. Khartoum is also the seat of government. In this region are based the middle-class professionals and business people who, it is estimated, make up one-tenth of Sudan’s population. Between the Blue and White Niles, crops such as cotton and wheat are grown in the Gezira region, in the world’s largest irrigated agricultural scheme under single management.

In this region live peoples such as the Nubans, Baggara in Kordofan, and the Fur and Messalit in Darfur. Farming smallholdings provides the livelihood for most people: growing millet, raising goats, and...
A map of Sudan showing places and features mentioned in this book
collecting wild foods. About a quarter of the population are nomadic, herding camels and cattle. The western regions of Sudan range from unpopulated desert in the north, through poor sandy soils, to rich savannah lands on the borders with the southern regions.

**The south**

Beyond the vast swamps of the Sudd in the Nile Basin lie immense areas of savannah and forests. The population of the south largely consists of several distinctive Western Nilotic groups, such as the Dinka, Nuer, Anuak, and Shilluk. The Dinka are the largest single ethnic-minority group in Sudan. Cattle herding is the mainstay of their economy, together with semi-subsistence agriculture.

In a country where underdevelopment is the norm, the south remains perhaps the most underdeveloped area not only of Sudan but, arguably, of Africa as a whole. Years of neglect have meant an almost complete lack of investment and basic infrastructure — roads, schools, hospitals, local government, and industry. Since 1983, most of the meagre infrastructure that did exist in the south has been destroyed by war and, since 1991, by inter-factional conflict among various ethnic groups and rebel forces.
Northern Darfur

Na'am River, Bahr el Ghazal
Early history

Beginnings

So far, archaeologists in Sudan have not found any trace of our earliest forebears, such as the Australopithecenes or other early hominids found at Olduvai George in Kenya and in Ethiopia. Perhaps such evidence still waits to be uncovered in some remote region.

Our earliest evidence for human occupation dates from Palaeolithic times, the Old Stone Age. Before 30,000 BC, hunter gatherers, moving from the south and west, began to establish themselves over wide areas of the north, west, and central regions of Sudan. Their culture flourished for many thousands of years, leaving rich deposits of stone tools scattered across the deserts.

From 10,000 BC, in the Mesolithic (Middle Stone Age) period, people began to settle along river valleys, particularly by the Nile. Slowly, over several millennia, hunting and gathering gave way to agriculture and animal husbandry, and the large-scale production of pottery — all characteristics of the Neolithic (New Stone Age) period. Complex social structures began to develop, as we know from discoveries of funerary goods, jewellery, and imported luxury items.

Around 3000 BC, a deterioration of the climate of the Sahara, some historians believe, may have caused another influx of people, migrating from the west towards the Nile. These new migrants are thought by many to have been ancestors of the Nubians, a people who were to play a significant role in the future of Sudan.

Sudan and Egypt

Egypt, lying to the north of Sudan, and connected to it by the Nile, played a central role in the country’s history. By 2300 BC, Egypt had begun to extend its empire southwards into Sudan, following the course of the Nile. Gradually, the Pharaohs of the Middle Kingdom established several military posts along the river.

During the turmoil that marked the end of the Middle Kingdom, Egypt withdrew from Sudan. But from 1580 BC onwards,
Sudan was recolonised, the Egyptians now extending their territory to the fourth cataract of the Nile. This was no longer a military occupation, but colonisation: Sudan was an Egyptian province, known as Nubia and ruled by a governor known as 'the Pharaoh’s Son'. Exports to Egypt included cattle, ivory, gum arabic, timber, and slaves; Nubia became the primary supplier of gold to the Pharaohs. It also provided a safe route overland to the spicelands of Punt (modern Somalia).

**The Kingdoms of Kush**

The power of Egypt was overthrown in 725 BC by Kashata, the first of the Kushite kings. Some historians suggest that Kashata and his subjects were not only the distant ancestors of the Nubians of the present day, but that subsequent Pharaohs were also Nubian. ‘Tutankhamen’, for example, is a concatenation of Nubian words. Kashata established the Napata kingdom, which stretched from Aswan in Upper Egypt to the Blue Nile. His son, Piankhy, completed his father’s ambitions, conquering all of Egypt and bringing it under Sudanese rule.

The Assyrian invasion of Egypt meant that contact with Egypt was severed, and Napata declined, to be replaced by the Kingdom of Meroe, perhaps the most well-known name in Sudan’s earliest history.

**Meroe**

The Kingdom of Meroe, which lasted from 350 BC to 350 AD, flourished alongside Roman and Hellenistic Egypt. It was through Egypt, particularly through the port of Alexandria, that contact was maintained with the Mediterranean.

The ruins of Meroe, particularly the temple to the god Amon, the royal palaces, the swimming pool, and, perhaps most strikingly of all, the pyramids at Bagrawiya are evidence of a sophisticated civilisation closely in touch with Mediterranean trade and produce, though hardly touched by its art and culture.

With the fall of Meroe to King Azana of the Ethiopian Empire of Aksum, the picture becomes obscure until the rise of the three kingdoms of al-Marris, Onubatia, and al-Maqara.

**Christianity and the coming of Islam**

Christianity spread from the north, brought first by believers escaping Roman persecution, and then, after Constantine’s conversion, by traders, travellers, and missionaries. By the sixth century AD, the Emperor Justinian was sending regular missionaries to Sudan. The three kingdoms converted to the Coptic Church of Constantinople and merged into two: Nubia and Alawa.

In the seventh century AD, the newly formed Egyptian Islamic state invaded Nubia and the north-east of Sudan. The Egyptian forces met strong opposition, and treaties were signed that governed the relationships between Nubia and Egypt for six centuries. There is evidence that Nubian knights fought on the side of the Christian invaders in the Crusades.

However, Muslim culture and trade strongly influenced Nubia, gradually gaining ascendancy there and in southern Kordofan. Islam did not penetrate into the
south, however, probably impeded by the strong presence of the Dinka and Shilluk peoples.

In the fifteenth century, the Christian kingdom of Alawa in the north was taken over by Muslims. But their control of Sudan was short-lived. They lost it in 1504 to the Funj, black Africans who probably came from the east of the country by the Blue Nile. They established 'The Black Sultanate', which was to last until 1821, when it fell to Turco-Egyptian invaders.

The name 'Sudan' derives from *Bilad-as-Sudan*, 'the Country of the Blacks', a term used by Arab traders in the Middle Ages to describe an area of land stretching roughly from the Red Sea south of the Sahara to the Atlantic Ocean.
The nation state defined

Turco-Egyptian rule, 1821-1881

Under Turco-Egyptian occupation, the creation of a modern nation state, albeit with deep divisions, began. The country’s boundaries were demarcated, more or less as they are today; the equatorial regions of the south were incorporated; and Khartoum was established as the capital city and central authority of the country. The Khedive of Egypt appointed the British army officer, Charles Gordon, to the post of Governor-General of Sudan.

The south of Sudan was now open for the first time to the sustained influence of the north, and trading networks were established. Initially traders sought ivory, but trade in slaves was more lucrative. Slave-trading became the principal raison d’être for the foreign administration (although Gordon fought doggedly against it).

The Mahdiya

In 1881, a messianic religious leader known as the Mahdi (Muhammed Ahmad el Mahdi, ‘the Rightly Guided One’) led the northern tribes in a successful uprising against Turco-Egyptian rule. General Gordon was killed in 1885, when Khartoum was taken by besieging Mahdist forces.

In 1896, to prevent French expansion in the Nile basin, Sudan was invaded by an Anglo-Egyptian army under Sir Herbert Kitchener. In spite of fierce opposition, the Mahdist state was crushed at the battle of Omdurman in 1898.

Anglo-Egyptian rule, 1898-1955

The Anglo-Egyptian Agreement of 1899 established a ‘condominium’ administration, based in Khartoum. The cultural, social, and economic divisions that already
existed within Sudan were deepened by a policy of rapid modernisation in central and eastern Sudan, where industry, commerce, and infrastructure were developed.

The Arabic language and Islam provided cohesion for the social and political aspirations in the north, giving a further focus for national unity along the Nile Valley. Economic development was concentrated mainly on irrigation and agricultural schemes in these areas, to the detriment of those areas deemed ‘African’, which were viewed as less productive or less accessible. In 1922, ‘closed areas’ were established in the south, in an attempt to control the internal slave trade.

Restrictions on work and travel were used in some provinces to control the spread of Muslim influence. By 1930, the south and the north had become more or less totally isolated from each other.

The road to independence

By 1946, the British administration, to prevent Egypt from reasserting its claim to control Sudan, was taking steps to prepare the country for independence. The policy of separate development of north and south was reversed in 1947. But southern Sudanese people lagged far behind many of their northern compatriots in educational attainment, economic development, and any real involvement in the administration of the country, which was largely in the hands of a northern elite.

In 1954, the newly elected Sudanese parliament debated the future of Sudan. Southern representatives argued for the establishment of federated states, to ensure equality of power after independence; but their case was persistently ignored, and they became convinced that they were being used merely to get the British out of Sudan. Their fears were not unfounded, as subsequent events were to prove.

On 1 January 1956, Sudan achieved independence from Anglo-Egyptian rule. However, the legitimacy of the new government to rule Sudan had already been called into question by certain elements within the Sudanese army. In the preceding August, suspicious of the aims of the government-elect, several garrisons of the Equatoria Corps had mutinied in southern Sudan, and captured several towns in the province.

Omen of war: a child’s drawing on the wall of a ruined school in Akot
The incurable poison

The army mutiny in the south was put down, and many of those involved fled abroad and formed opposition groups in exile. In Khartoum, successive parliamentary governments proved unstable and powerless to unite the country. In 1958, to halt the drift towards federalism, General Abboud seized power. He abolished parliament and political parties, established military rule, and accelerated the trend towards Arabisation of the structures of civil power. Many former politicians and intellectuals took to the bush or went into exile.

By 1963, the Sudan African National Union (SANU), based in neighbouring Uganda, had become the official party of the rebel forces; an armed wing, Anya Nya — The Incurable Poison — was formed. Fighting intensified, and, following a revolution in 1964, General Abboud relinquished power, having failed to find solutions to Sudan’s growing economic problems or to the civil war.

A parliamentary government was elected, but armed conflict continued. In this period the splits that were to weaken successive rebel movements began to appear, as personal ambitions exploited ethnic and tribal differences in the

Four generations of conflict
scramble for power. However, by 1970 the Southern Sudan Liberation Movement (SSLM) had been formed, uniting most of the factions, including the Anya Nya.

**The years of uneasy peace**

In 1969 Colonel Mohamed Jaa’far Nimeiri came to power in Khartoum after a military coup; his presidency was to last until 1985.

The civil war was brought to an end in 1972, when Nimeiri and the rebels signed a peace agreement in Addis Ababa which gave limited autonomy to the south. The Addis Ababa Accord, followed by the Regional Self-Government Act, made the provinces of Bahr el Ghazal, Upper Nile, and Equatoria into a self-governing unit, with an elected regional assembly and a High Executive Council (HEC). Anya Nya forces were incorporated into the army.

But between 1980 and 1983, the government breached the Addis Ababa Accord by dissolving the HEC and the regional assemblies, and dividing the south into three regions. Disputes continued over the use of resources and the unbalanced approach to economic development.

**The current civil war**

In 1983, the Sudan People’s Liberation Army and Movement (SPLA/M) was formed under the leadership of a Dinka, Dr John Garang, who sought support from the Mengistu regime in Ethiopia. Gradually the SPLA took control of large areas of the south.

In 1985 Nimeiri was deposed in a popular uprising led by a powerful trade union movement and radical syndicates of the professional classes. This movement was taken over by a coalition of conservative forces which reinstated the established Sudanese political elite. The general election of April 1986 led to three years of civilian rule under Sadiq el Mahdi, until he was deposed in June 1989 by Brigadier (now General) el-Bashir, backed by the National Islamic Front. On seizing power, the new government banned political parties and systematically destroyed the organised opposition, particularly those elements which had been instrumental in the overthrow of Nimeiri.

By 1993, government forces had retaken some of the towns and garrisons previously held by the SPLA, and were attacking and destabilising the rural areas held by the rebels. This military success was helped by increasing divisions among the rebel movement.

Differences among the SPLA’s commanders came to a head in August 1991, leading to a split into two factions. Fighting between the two dominant groups — SPLA Mainstream, led by Dr Garang, and SPLA United, led by Dr Riek Mashar — has been responsible for the deaths of many civilians and gross abuses of human rights.

Although further fragmentation of both SPLA factions has occurred, Mainstream has emerged as the dominant military opposition to the government. It currently controls much of Western Equatoria and parts of Eastern Equatoria, Lakes, Jonglei, and Upper Nile. The original aim of the SPLA was to establish a secular, unitary State, with diminished powers for central government. More recently, Mainstream has adopted the principle of self-determination for southern Sudan, arguing that southerners should have the opportunity to vote in a referendum on a range of options, including a federal relationship with the north, and complete autonomy.

In September 1994, SPLA United renamed itself the Southern Sudan Independence Movement (SSIM). Based in Upper Nile, and reported to be fragmenting still further, it seems to have lost much of its former power.

**Living in the shadow of war**

No one knows exactly how many people have died in the current civil war in Sudan. The US Committee for Refugees estimated in 1992 that 1.3 million southerners alone had died as a direct or indirect result of the war since it began in 1983. A further two million were thought to have been
displaced from their homes; 90 per cent were estimated to be women and children. Displaced Sudanese now live mainly in urban areas in the north, but also in parts of the south held by the SPLA and in areas not directly affected by the fighting. Many others, several hundred thousand, are refugees in neighbouring countries such as Uganda and Kenya.

The UN estimated in 1996 that of the estimated five million people living in the south, two million were in need of emergency food aid. The economy of the whole of Sudan, but particularly in the South, is in a state of collapse, and national resources are being squandered on conflict rather than development.

Josephine's story
'I come from Agangrial in Bahr el Ghazal [Buheirat State], where I was a traditional birth attendant in my village. Because of the fighting, a lot of us left our homes and started walking towards the border with Ethiopia [a distance of some 900 km]. It took weeks to get there, and, once in Ethiopia, we were put into a refugee camp. It was not good there, but we got fed and we survived, although there was violence in the camp, and many women were hurt — raped and beaten. I learned from foreign workers there about Western medicine and midwifery, and this helped me to be a better birth attendant.

'In 1991 [the fall of Mengistu], we had to leave Ethiopia and we started walking back to Sudan. It was a long journey and there was a lot of unhappiness and people died. People starved — just died; lots of children were sick and died. Other people were killed in the fighting or raped and attacked. Wild animals also took some people. I remember that there was a lion that attacked people and took them off screaming.

'Eventually, I arrived in Kapoeta [in Eastern Equatoria] and I felt safe, and began practising as a birth attendant, but the fighting happened again. So I left and walked back to Agangrial, my home [a distance of 600 km].'}
What is the war about?

It is too simple to present the civil war as a conflict between ideologies of north and south. But it is true that Arabic culture, religion, and language have been the dominant force behind the unification of the north and central regions of Sudan — a process which has exposed and intensified the latent divisions of the country.

During the Condominium, the British employed sectarian policies, including virtual partition of the country, for divisive political ends. In preparation for Independence, the colonial power promoted conservative political parties, which were allied to Britain rather than to Egypt. All governments since Independence, whether elected or not, have professed their intentions of ‘Arabising’ Sudan to varying degrees, and, in some instances, of creating an Islamic State. In 1983 President Nimeiri imposed Shar’ia (Islamic law) throughout Sudan. In 1989, General el-Bashir declared the civil war a jihad, or holy war. But many observers would argue that religion, although it cannot be ignored as one cause of the conflict, has been skilfully exploited by those in power, seeking to legitimise the war and unite Muslim opinion behind their actions. Nimeiri, for example, probably acted less from religious conviction than from a need to strengthen his political position.

In fact there has traditionally been a considerable degree of mutual tolerance among Muslims and non-Muslims, and a respect for each other’s religion and culture. Tolerance and diversity are fundamental to the culture and values of Sudanese Islam. Muslim society still retains many of its more liberal traditions.

The war between the government and the rebel groups in the south is centrally concerned to define the identity of the Sudanese state, and to establish control over the natural resources of the south. Because of its minerals, its oil reserves, hardwoods, and vast tracts of unexploited lands, control of the south is a key objective for all parties in the current war.

While the government holds the majority of towns in the south, the mainly Dinka SPLA Mainstream controls much of the surrounding countryside. Within the Nuba Mountains is a pocket of the Nuba people, intact under the control of the SPLA (which also holds another remote area of the Ingessena Hills). In Upper Nile State, factions of the mainly Nuer South Sudanese Independence Movement (SSIM) compete with each other for dominance, and the SPLA is attempting to use force to impose unity on them all.

The conflict has caused — mostly in the south, but not entirely so — the near-collapse of traditional economies and mass displacements of people. Drought turned into famine in many of these areas during the 1980s and early 1990s, not least because the conflict has undermined the traditional ways in which different groups of people interact with each other, and their traditional methods of coping with drought, such as gathering wild foods and catching fish.

All sides in the war are guilty of violating the basic human rights of the civilian population. Since 1983, defenceless communities have endured the burning of villages, summary executions, rape, scorched-earth campaigns, indiscriminate bombing, forced displacement of people from their homes, and the military conscription of young boys. The costs of the war — in terms of wasted lives, environmental damage, and lack of economic and social development — are catastrophic.
The bread-basket of the Arab world?

The first large-scale irrigated farming schemes in Sudan were established by the British in El Gezira in the 1920s, to produce cheap cotton for the mills of Lancashire. Covering some 800,000 hectares of land between the Blue and White Niles, the Gezira remains the largest irrigated agricultural scheme in the world. In 1944, mechanised farming began on the fertile lands of eastern Sudan.

After Independence, economic development continued to focus on El Gezira, Kassala, and Khartoum, to the detriment of other areas of the country. Several big schemes were started, including one backed by the Arab Fund for Economic and Social Development (FESD). The FESD plan envisaged Sudanese resources of water, land, and labour combining with Western technical expertise to produce wheat, sugar, animal feed, and meat for export to the Arab world, notably the Gulf.

These projects were over-ambitious and ill-managed. Capital-intensive schemes like this made Sudan even more dependent on imports of oil and machinery, and foreign technology and expertise. Sudan's economy, like that of many other countries on a similar economic path, was crippled by the oil crises of the 1970s; its foreign debt rose dramatically. Fresh inputs of money in the 1970s from Arab investors failed to turn these big schemes into viable enterprises.

In the 1970s, work started in the south on the exploitation of resources, especially oil (first discovered in 1979), minerals, water, and land. A number of development projects were set up. However, the extent to which southerners themselves would benefit was doubtful.

The debt crisis deepens

The Sudanese government, getting deeper and deeper into debt, turned to the International Monetary Fund for help. The IMF prescribed a programme of economic structural adjustment and an emphasis on cotton production rather than wheat. However, as cotton production revived after the drought of 1978, Sudan suffered a second round of oil price rises.

By 1982, oil accounted for 27 per cent of all Sudan's imports; this, combined with escalating interest rates, undermined an already weak economy, and the crisis was compounded by the start of the civil war in 1983.

As a condition of further loans, the IMF demanded reforms which successive Sudanese governments were reluctant to implement, such as the removal of subsidies on basic foodstuffs and the privatisation of utilities and State-owned industries. In 1990, Sudan's membership of the IMF was suspended. However, a
programme aimed at liberalising the economy was finally introduced in 1991. According to some Northern economists, in many cases the main beneficiaries of the privatisation are people closely associated with the government.

By 1995, in spite of continuing condemnation of Sudan by many human-rights organisations and Western governments — most notably the USA — it seemed that the IMF might consider lifting its suspension and reach a deal with the Sudanese government on its proposed economic reform programme.

As a condition of reinstatement to full membership of the IMF, Sudan would have to keep up satisfactory debt repayments for two years. Only then would it be able to negotiate new loans. The government would have to persist with its adjustment policies and thus assure international banks of the country’s ability to manage its own economy. It would have to remove government subsidies on almost all consumer goods, privatise still more publicly owned industries and utilities, and increase its tax revenue. How can such a schedule be implemented without causing further hardships to the majority of Sudanese? This question has not, so far, been publicly addressed by either the government or the IMF.

The Jonglei Canal

For many people in the south, the Jonglei Canal project on the flood plains of the Sudd symbolises government attitudes to economic development in the south and to the people who live there.

The 360-km canal, backed by Western technology and investment, was intended to straighten the course of the White Nile, where the river spreads into a swamp that is nearly the size of England. The canal was intended to drain part of the swamp, so that the water wasted by evaporation and seepage would be saved for agriculture downstream in northern Sudan and Egypt. In theory, several million hectares of new land would come under cultivation. It would also completely change the lives of the people of the Sudd. It could damage the ecosystem and micro-climate of the region, and increase the process of desertification over a vast area. Southerners accused the government of planning to steal their resources, and, under repeated attack by the SPLA, the digging of the canal came to a halt in 1984 — like many similar projects.
The economic policies pursued in Sudan over several decades have delivered prosperity only to a few — and that prosperity has been gained at enormous costs to the country, its peoples, and its environment.

The blame for these policies, however, lies not exclusively with the various Sudanese governments which implemented them, but also with the development organisations and governments which, directly or indirectly, helped to plan and fund them, and hoped to reap their financial benefits. As in many modernisation programmes around the world, the planners paid little attention to the social and environmental impact of their schemes. Ordinary people, particularly those living in rural marginal areas, were regarded as a source of cheap and disposable labour: as a factor in the equation for economic growth, and little else. Environmental concerns were similarly ignored, in a country where much of the land is marginal, the ecosystem is delicately balanced, and drought is an ever-present threat.

The cost of biased development policies

The economic policy of Sudan has actively directed investment into some areas, to the detriment of others. So local economies have declined, and more and more people have left their homes to seek work elsewhere. This internal migration to find employment began during the Condominium period. An estimated 500,000 people still seek seasonal work, moving from one irrigated agricultural scheme to another. Many others move permanently, but with little prospect of making a reasonable livelihood and finding security.
This drift away from rural communities weakens their economic life still further, making them even more vulnerable to the dangers of drought. Even if migrants are lucky enough to find work, they are paid such low wages that they can’t send much money back to their families in the home village. Those who cannot find jobs in agriculture tend to drift to urban areas, where they disappear into the ever-expanding shanty towns on the edges of towns and cities.

**The years of the half-gourd**

Many people in Sudan will tell you that over the last thirty years or so the climate has gradually become drier. No one is sure whether this is part of another long-term climatic change in Sudan, and in Africa as a whole. Certainly drought is not a new phenomenon in Sudan.

In the Islamic year 1306 (1886), just as the Mahdi’s successor was consolidating his new state, ‘the Six-Year Drought’ began. The drought between 1910 and 1917 was dubbed ‘the time of the half-gourd’, denoting the meagre ration of grain given to large parts of the population. The rains also failed between 1940 and 1945, and again between 1970 and 1973. The latter drought was dubbed simply *I'iza'una*: ‘Rescue Us’. The drought of 1984/85 was the worst this century, affecting ten million people. The drought of 1990/91 was almost equally intense. Periods of prolonged, uninterrupted drought give people no chance to recover, and they become increasingly unable to cope.

But Sudan has also experienced many years of good, if erratic, rains in the last fifty years or so. All over the north and in parts of Equatoria, for example, the grain harvest in 1994, helped on by good rains, was a bumper one. In parts of the north, however, such plentiful rains had followed three years of poor rains. The patterns of rainfall remain extremely unpredictable.

**Adapting to uncertainty**

Across large areas of Sudan, ecosystems are extremely fragile. Over hundreds of years, the people who live there have evolved...
lifestyles and strategies that help them to cope with lean times. These strategies seek to minimise the risks involved, rather than to maximise the returns.

In the north, nomadic tribes such as the Kababish Arabs are a good example of how people adapt to the constraints of a harsh environment. Their livelihood is invested in large herds of camels, sheep, and goats, which move seasonally from one area to another so as not to over-graze the land. Some Kababish, because they live in a low-lying area that is seasonally flooded, cultivate food, using different areas from year to year, according to where the rainfall has been heaviest. Again, the objective is to work in sympathy with the environment, not to damage or destroy it.

The relationship between nomads and farmers used to be a vital part of this symbiosis: the farmers providing grain to the nomads, the nomads providing meat and draught animals to the farmers. Prices, although fluctuating with the size of the harvest and the level of rainfall, remained under the control of both groups, and tended to remain stable. But the delicate balance between environment and people has been deteriorating over the decades.

**Cash crops: the vicious circle**

Traditional methods of cultivation that helped to conserve and regenerate marginal land have gradually been replaced by the intensive farming of cash crops, which involves the clearance of large areas of marginal land in development areas — land which is then farmed beyond its natural capacity.

Instead of rotating crops and leaving areas of marginal land to lie fallow and to regenerate itself, intensive farming destroys the fragile structure of the soil and hastens its erosion. Much of this agriculture is rain-fed, dependent on rainfall for irrigation of the crops. As crop yields go down, more marginal land is cleared to maintain profits, and this land too is depleted of its frail resources.

Modern farming requires machines and imported resources such as oil and fertilisers, and these too increase production costs. As populations expand, people find that they have less and less good land for their own subsistence needs, and have to clear poorer land if they are to grow crops for their own consumption.

**Water: too little, too much**

Seasonal wells dictate how long a nomadic or semi-nomadic group stays in one place before moving on to new pastures. In this way, marginal land is not over-grazed or intensively cultivated, but is allowed to regenerate itself. Limited supplies of water also help to control the size of animal herds.

In the 1960s, hundreds of boreholes were drilled by the government in a 'Freedom from Thirst' campaign, funded by Western donors. Nomadic and semi-nomadic groups tended to settle by these boreholes; trees were cut down for firewood, herds increased on the plentiful supply of water, and the land was intensively cultivated over longer and longer periods of time. The increased herds, concentrated in one place, led to over-grazing. Intensive cultivation led to increased soil erosion.

'Freedom from Thirst' was a well-intentioned campaign, but over the years it slowly destroyed much of the natural environment and the people whose livelihoods depended on it. But it was only when a prolonged drought occurred that the full effects of the policy were felt. As the price of livestock fell, grain prices rose, and more animals had to be sold to maintain the community. Livestock were sold off faster than the herds could reproduce, and their owners found themselves bankrupt. With their animal capital gone, and their livelihood and nomadic way of life destroyed, many had no choice but to migrate to the towns.