

“Barack Obama needs to say sorry for this.”
— SQUATTER AT DESTROYED AL SHIFA PLANT

VIEW FROM SUDAN



The ruins of the Al Shifa plant which was demolished by 13 Tomahawk cruise missiles launched from a US Navy destroyer. — KT Photos by Conor Purcell



Mohammed Hassan, a museum clerk, is pragmatic about Barack Obama's chances of helping Sudan.

Past Mars Reaction To Speech

Conor Purcell

KHARTOUM — Relations between Sudan and the US have always been complicated. Eleven years after Sudan won independence from Britain, it broke off diplomatic relations with the country due to its support for Israel during the 1967 war. In the eighties and nineties, the US accused Sudan of hosting terrorists such as Abu Nidal, Carlos the Jackal and Osama bin Laden. Sanctions were imposed in 1997 and 2007, but despite this, US aid has kept flowing with \$2.6 billion sent in 2005-06 alone. This history proves that the Arab ‘street’ is too complex a place to be won over by speeches — no matter how groundbreaking. Barack Obama’s speech got as much play here as it did in the rest of the Middle East, but reactions to his words were divided. Many were skeptical about what he could actually achieve and others were openly derisive that he could effect any change at all. But while the speech might have had a mixed reaction, the symbolism of an American leader reaching out to the Muslim world in a Muslim country was not lost on the press or the public. A hotel employee proudly showed me a picture in a local newspaper of Secretary of State Hillary Clinton wearing a headscarf. “They talked about this in the Mosque,” he said. “They talked about what he meant and about his words on the Holy Quran.”

The cultural history of the region that Obama was so effusive about can be seen in person in the Sudan National Museum, a rather ramshackle building that faces the Nile. The huge main room contains exhibits from Egypt and Sudan, a reminder of a glorious past Obama touched on in his speech.

At the entrance to the museum sits Mohammed Hassan, a sixty-something clerk who hands out receipts for the SDG1 museum entrance fee. He had watched the speech and was skeptical.

“All governments are the same, they say but they don’t do. We will have to wait to see what Obama does,” said Hassan. He knows the realities of power all too well. A government functionary with the Al Madhi administration that preceded the current President, Omar Al Bashir’s rule, he was pushed aside when the new government took over. He has spent the past 11 years sitting behind a desk at the museum’s entrance. “He [Obama] might be African, but he works for America, not for us.”

While the opinions of his speech might differ, there is no doubt Sudan is enthralled by Barack Hussein Obama. Two of the local newspapers devoted their first six pages to the speech. Almost everyone asked had either listened to the speech on the radio or read about it the next day. Everyone agreed Obama was better than his predecessor, but many were worried his words would not be matched by deeds. “He is a politician, is he not?” said Mohammed, a former policeman who was wandering around a stall in Omduram Market in the centre of Khartoum. “Politicians lie don’t they?” he smiled. Mohammed was in his sixties and his cynicism was shaped by decades of internal Sudanese strife, conflicts that seem to have no end. “He is a smart man, but he does not live here. Yesterday Cairo. Tomorrow Israel. The next, I do not know.”

There was one word out of the 5,842 that stood out for many here: Darfur. Most were puzzled by Obama’s comments on the war-torn western province. “What does it mean, our collective?” asked Hassan. Obama’s line: “and when innocents... Darfur are slaughtered, that is a stain on our collective conscience”, was the one sentence that most locals had picked up on. It was too vague for many, who were unsure of whether Obama was chastising Bashir or letting him off the hook.

Down by the shores of the Nile, locals sit under trees smoking shisha.

Mubarak Ali, a student was sitting drinking tea. Originally from Darfur he had come to Khartoum after his university had closed down due to the war. He believes Obama will make a difference. “His name, his heritage is from Africa. His father might be from Kenya, but her father was from our region. I think he will help all people here.

Could he fix Darfur? Mubarak smiled. “Maybe not.” There are some things even Barack Hussein Obama can’t do.

Sudan Still Wary of US

Eleven years after a US missile attack on Khartoum, tensions remain in the capital

Conor Purcell

KHARTOUM — The swimming pool at the Al Salam Rotana Hotel could be any five-star hotel in Africa. Western couples smoke cigarettes and drink Pepsi while waiters in neatly pressed shirts hurry between lounge chairs refilling drinks and emptying ashtrays. Conversations about office politics drift across the water as four Americans noisily play cards and eat club sandwiches. Most are aid workers, in the country with the UN or other NGOs. Every few minutes the Mariah Carey album playing on the pool’s sound system is drowned out by a plane landing at Khartoum International Airport a few kilometres away.

Leave the air-conditioned confines of the Rotana and the reality of Khartoum hits you. Dust balls swirl up into massive clouds and the six-lane highways are bordered by pictures of Omar Al Bashir, one of the world’s most wanted men — according to the International Criminal Court at least.

Slogans under his picture greet visitors as they leave the airport. “Sudan will not be the victim of foreign plots” declares one.

The placards dot the city. Sometimes Bashir is in full military garb, sometimes in national dress, but he is always there, unsmiling, omnipresent.

Locals say these signs were not there before March this year, when the ICC issued a warrant for Bashir’s arrest. While there is no great sense of duty towards their leader, many Sudanese are angry about the West interfering in internal issues.

The warrant had a huge effect on the country’s economy. Construction proj-

ects were halted, investors pulled out, some whispered that the country could become another Somalia. As it was, Bashir left the country for a conference in Qatar — something many Sudanese respected him for. When he returned he was more popular than ever.

Many were relieved. “We can breathe a bit now”, said one Lebanese-American expatriate. Yet more potential problems loom on the horizon with elections scheduled for February of next year. “I have my bag half packed every day,” the Lebanese-American said, “but next February, I will pack it fully.”

These are internal Sudanese issues, yet there is a feeling, or a hope at least, that Obama’s policy of reaching out to the Muslim world will include letting Bashir off the hook.

Drive 20 minutes north from the Rotana and you will come across another reason why many Sudanese are skeptical about the West. In the early evening of August 20 1998, 13 Tomahawk cruise missiles launched from a US Navy Destroyer in the Indian Ocean decimated the Al Shifa pharmaceutical plant.

The Clinton Administration — a Democrat one, too, some here have noted — claimed the plant was being used to manufacture chemical weapons, something the Sudanese still deny.

The bombings occurred days after terrorist attacks on American embassies in Kenya and Tanzania. Many Sudanese felt the Americans needed a scapegoat. Al Shifa was it.

Eleven years on and the site is still preserved, a monument to Sudan’s harsh treatment by the West.

A woman and her eight-month-old daughter live at the entrance to the ruins, their hut (made of corrugated iron, wire and reed) is the only structure that has been erected since the attacks. Across the road is a Volkswagen showroom. Parts of the Tomahawk missile engines are still scattered around the site, as are melted medicine bottles and creaking hunks of metal.

The woman, who did not want to be photographed or named, had not seen or heard Barack Obama’s speech, but was clear about how the American President could win back her trust. “He needs to say sorry for this”, she said, waving her arm at the devastation around her.

She shared the hut, which had one single bed and no door, with her child and her husband who was at the Mosque. They earned some money by letting curious visitors and the occa-

AL SHIFA PLANT

◆ CONSISTED of four buildings and employed 300 people.

◆ THIRTEEN Tomahawk cruise missiles were launched by a US destroyer in the Indian Ocean on August 20, 1998

◆ TEN PEOPLE were injured and one person was killed in the attack that flattened the plant

◆ THE US claimed the plant was being used to manufacture the VX nerve agent and that the owners had ties to Al Qaeda

◆ THE ATTACKS occurred days after terrorist attacks on US embassies in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania and Nairobi, Kenya

◆ HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH criticised the bombing of the plant declaring it was a principle source of Sudan’s anti-malaria drugs and veterinary products

sional journalist in. It was unclear why she and her husband had been chosen for the job, but she claimed she had been there for four years.

In one of the buildings that was not completely flattened someone has scrawled ‘down USA’ on a white wall.

Outside the compound four men gather around. Through a translator they explain that even though they hate Bush, they hate Bill Clinton even more. They are quick to point out they don’t hate Americans. “We know they do not control what happens.” All the men were unemployed, but seemed remarkably cheerful, a trait almost all the Sudanese seem to share.

The city itself, home to more than 2 million people could not be described as beautiful. The streets are half formed, rubbish is everywhere and the traffic is chaotic. Even the city’s showpiece, the Nile, is vast, murky and uninviting.

Geopolitically however Sudan has huge significance. It is the largest country in Africa and the US is aware that the country could slide into anarchy if Bashir is deposed.

The locals seem aware of this fact and hope that it will help their reentry into the international community. Clambering through the rubble of the Al Shifa plant, one gets the feeling that the trust needs to be won on both sides. conor@khaleejtimes.com



The remains of a Tomahawk missile engine.



Bottles of medicine scatter the Al Shifa site.



The banks of the Nile provide a respite from Khartoum’s heat.

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