

Slave Redemption in Sudan

Sudan is Africa's largest nation. Located immediately south of Egypt, it encompasses nearly 1 million square miles and is home to 36 million people. It is also home to poverty, disease, civil war—and the emergence of modern-day slavery. The slave trade, in turn, has given rise to a humanitarian movement whose adherents seek to alleviate Sudan's misery by buying freedom for its slaves. Well-intentioned though they are, these humanitarian efforts may be making things worse.

Slavery is a centuries-old practice in Sudan, one that colonial British rulers finally managed to halt during World War I. The Sudanese gained independence in 1956, but despite ensuing periods of civil war, the slave trade initially remained a piece of history. This changed in 1989, when the National Islamic Front (NIF) took control of the government. The NIF quickly began arming the Muslim Baggara tribe in the northern part of the country to fight against the rebellious Christian tribes of the south. The Baggara had previously made a regular practice of enslaving members of the southern Dinka tribe, and once armed by the NIF, the Baggara resumed the slave raids the British had suppressed. This activity was further aided by the government, which supplied horses to the Baggara and permitted slave markets to open in the cities controlled by the NIF. Perhaps as many as twenty thousand Dinkas, mostly women and children, were enslaved and taken north, selling for as little as \$15 each. The slaves were branded with the names of their owners and put to work as cooks, maids, field hands, and concubines.

Within a few years, word of the revived slave trade began filtering out of Sudan. In response, a variety of humanitarian groups from other nations began buying slaves in large batches and setting them free.

The process is called "slave redemption," and its purpose—ideally—is to reduce the number of people who are enslaved.

Raising money for slave redemption soon became big business, spreading rapidly among public schools and evangelical churches in the United States. A middle school in Oregon, for example, raised \$2,500 to be used for slave redemption. Even more impressive was an elementary school class in Colorado: After the children's efforts caught the media's eye, the class raised more than \$50,000 for slave redemption.

The largest of the humanitarian groups involved in slave redemption is Christian Solidarity International (CSI). This group says it has freed tens of thousands of slaves since 1995, most at prices of about \$50 each. Other groups have purchased the freedom of several thousand additional slaves, sometimes at prices of up to \$100 each.

Per capita income in Sudan is about \$500 per year, which makes slave prices of \$50 to \$100 apiece quite attractive to the Baggara slave raiders. This is particularly true when the redeemers are buying in the south, where the targeted Dinkas live, and prices in the north, the traditional market for slaves, are as low as \$15 apiece. In fact, says one individual who used to be active in slave redemption, "We've made slave redemption more profitable than narcotics." What are the consequences of such profitability?

There have been two sets of responses. First, on the **demand** side, the higher prices for slaves make it more costly for owners in the north to hold slaves. So rather than own slaves, some of them have offered their slaves to the redeemers. This, of course, is exactly the effect the slave redemption movement has desired. But there is also a **supply** response: When the market value of slaves rises due to an increase in demand (the demand of the slave redeemers), we expect an increase in the quantity supplied. That is, we expect the raiders who produce slaves by capturing them to engage in more of that activity. This is exactly what has happened in Sudan.

Slave redemption began in earnest in the mid-1990s, and according to local authorities, the number of slave raids grew sharply in response. Moreover, the size of a typical raiding party rose from roughly four hundred attackers to more than twenty-five hundred. What accounts for the increase? Slaves used to be traded in relatively small batches, but the redeemers prefer to buy in large lots—hundreds or more at a time. Collecting and assembling the number of slaves required to satisfy the redemption buyers thus requires considerably more manpower. Hence

the slave trade has been transformed from a cottage industry into a large-scale business enterprise. Overall, it is estimated that the number of slaves captured in raids each year is greater now than at the inception of slave redemption.

Initially, it is likely that the impact of slave redemption was chiefly on the demand side; that is, the first slaves redeemed were almost surely “freed from slavery” in the sense that we would normally use that terminology. But once the stock of slave holdings in the north had adjusted downward in response to the newly elevated equilibrium price, there was only one place for the slave traders to get the slaves demanded by the redemption buyers. This was from the raiders who were now taking slaves for one purpose only—sale to the redeemers. Thus once the stock of slaves in the north had adjusted to its lower equilibrium level, *all* of the slaves subsequently “freed” by the redeemers were in fact individuals who never would have been enslaved had the redeemers not first made a market for them. In addition, because large numbers of new slaves now spend some time in captivity awaiting redemption, it is even possible that the total number of people in slavery at any point in time is actually *higher* because of the well-intentioned efforts of the slave redeemers.

As unpleasant as such reasoning is, it agrees with the opinions of people who observe the slave trade at first hand. As a local humanitarian worker says, “Giving money to the slave traders only encourages the trade. It is wrong and must stop. Where does the money go? It goes to the raiders to buy more guns, raid more villages. . . . It is a vicious circle.” In a similar vein, the chief of one village that has been targeted by the slave raiders says, “Redemption is not the solution. It means you are encouraging the raiders.”

In addition to encouraging the capture of new slaves, redemption also reduces any incentive for owners to set free their less productive slaves. Before slave redemption, about 10 percent of all slaves, chiefly older women and young children, were allowed to escape or even told to go home because the costs of feeding, clothing, and housing them exceeded their value to their owners. Now slaves who would have been freed on their own are instead held in captivity until a trader can be found to haul them south for sale to the redeemers.

The final effect of redemption has been to create a trade in fictitious slaves—individuals who are paid to pose as slaves for the purposes of

redemption and who are then given a cut of the redemption price after they are “freed.” Although redemption groups obviously try to avoid participating in such deals, observers familiar with the trade consider them a regular part of the redemption business.

Is there another way to combat slavery in Sudan? On the demand side, the U.S. government has long refused to negotiate with terrorists or pay ransom to kidnappers, because it believes that such tactics encourage terrorism and kidnapping. It recognizes that paying a ransom increases the profits of kidnapping, thus enticing more individuals into the trade.

On the supply side, the British were originally successful in ending the slave trade in Sudan and elsewhere in their empire by dispatching soldiers to kill or disarm slave raiders and by sending warships to close off maritime slave-trading routes. Sudan, of course, is an independent sovereign nation today; both the United Nations and the British electorate would likely oppose unilateral military action by the British government against Sudanese slave raiders. Yet even the people who used to be subject to British colonial rule have mixed feelings. When asked to compare the colonial British policies to the redeemers’ policies of today, a schoolmaster in the affected area remarked, “If the colonial government were standing for election, I would vote for them.” So too might the victims of the slave trade in Sudan.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Is there anything in the historical British experience with the slave trade that suggests how the international community of today could reduce slavery in Sudan?
2. It appears that the actions of the slave redeemers have raised the **equilibrium price** of slaves. What does this imply about the number of slaves held by private owners in northern Sudan—as long as the **demand curve** for slaves is downward-sloping? What do the higher profitability and volume of slave trading today imply about the number of slaves held in inventory in the south for trading purposes, compared to the number that used to be held there?