
Interview: Thomas Jackson

Sudanese have the drive to be economically self-sufficient

In November 1996, Debra Hanania Freeman interviewed Alabama State Delegate Thomas Jackson, who was a member of the Schiller Institute-sponsored fact-finding mission to Sudan.

EIR: From Sept. 13-23, you were part of a fact-finding mission to the Republic of Sudan.

Jackson: Yes, I went with five other members of a delegation, most of us from the South. Four of us are elected officials, and we were assisted by members of the Schiller Institute. It was just great. We went into the Sudan looking for human rights violations, for the abduction of children, and the harboring of slaves. We had a very intense ten-day stay, and we came up with *no* significant evidence of abuse whatsoever.

EIR: When you were there, did you have freedom of movement? If you wanted to talk to someone in a hotel, or on the street, did you have the freedom to do that?

Jackson: Yes, we had complete freedom of movement: We talked to everyone—people just walked up to us. We went to church, and we talked to anybody that wanted to talk. Even at the hotel, the bellmen, and all of the employees, would talk to you about different things, and they shared information with us. And that's what's so significant about this trip. I felt, if the government was trying to hide or cover up something about this, we would have been in a controlled situation.

EIR: I'd like go through some of the different things that Americans are told about Sudan, because, as you know, on the basis of allegations of slavery, of human-rights violations, of discrimination against Christians, the U.S. Congress is preparing to vote on a resolution of sanctions against Sudan; the United Nations is scheduled to vote in middle of November, on the very same thing. [The UN vote was postponed—ed.]

Now, you just mentioned that the delegation went to church. We are told, that this is a fundamentalist Islamic republic, and that Christianity is not tolerated. So, when you say you went "to church," did you go to a Christian church,

or, did you go to a Muslim mosque?

Jackson: We went to a Catholic church; we went to an Episcopal church, All Saints Episcopal church of Sudan; we went to a Pentecostal Church that was right in the capital of Khartoum.

EIR: So, these are not underground congregations?

Jackson: No, these are wide open congregations, and, even some Muslims participate in the services. So, the bishop and the other pastors were very appalled when we asked some of their parishioners about them being persecuted, and children being taken from the streets, and put into centers and, I guess you would say, changed from Christianity into Muslims.

EIR: The so-called human rights groups say that there are forced conversions.

Jackson: Yes, but we could not find that to be true. There are some centers there, and some of them were owned or run by the Christian churches. And there's a center for children that the government operates, where they take orphans off the streets and take care of them, but, they don't try to convert them to Islam.

EIR: Are Christians permitted to hold public office?

Jackson: Oh, sure. There are Christians in the National Assembly. I think the Majority Leader is a Christian. They have it where everybody has an opportunity and everybody is involved. I suppose if you want to, you can call it "affirmative action." But, they make sure that the least of the people has representation, from the local, state, and national level.

EIR: So, they have Muslims and Christians in the National Assembly. Some people say that because this is an Islamic republic, that women are completely kept out of public life, and not permitted to participate.

Jackson: There are women in the National Assembly—and, we had the opportunity to meet with a female governor.

EIR: That's a rarity even here in the United States.

Jackson: Yes. I thought the same thing. You read so much, but when you go and see for yourself, you learn. And this

is what's so amazing about it: *We have to* know, we *have to* go, we have to investigate; we have to *see* and understand what is really happening in Sudan before we can deliver a punishment to them.

We've been there, we've seen it, and there's *no truth in all these allegations*.

EIR: We're told that Sudan is the most dangerous country in the world for Americans to visit. It's one of the ways that they persuade members of Congress to not go on these fact-finding visits. Did you feel that you were in danger?

Jackson: I feel more safe in Sudan than I do on the streets in the United States, right here in Alabama. There's danger involved in the cities of Alabama: Mobile, the port city; Birmingham; Montgomery. I feel more secure in Sudan than I do, really, in this country. . . .

EIR: You, and several other members of the delegation had a unique opportunity, something that no Americans that I know of have done, certainly something no elected officials have done: You traveled into the Nuba Mountains, which is where all of this "slavery" and all of these "human rights violations" have allegedly occurred. Is that indeed the case?

Jackson: We went into the Nuba Mountains. We met with the governor, with ninety-some tribal leaders there—very fascinating experience we had there.

EIR: Tell us a little about how you got in there. It's a rather remote area.

Jackson: I'll tell you, we went over a land route; it was about a 14-hour drive. We didn't know, the time the distance would take us: About four hours, we thought? It took us about 14 hours. We left at 4 o'clock in the morning from Khartoum, and it was late evening, dark, when we had to stop. We didn't even get to the mountains till the next day. But, we were on the road all day and part of the evening: We had to stop because the road was so bad and we couldn't see at night, so we spent the night in a little camp in Kordofan; I don't know exactly where we were, but the people were very nice to us, they put us up, they fed us, and we went on the next morning.

EIR: And, when you finally arrived at your destination the next morning, did they know you were coming?

Jackson: Well, yes; I felt that they did, because they were assembled together, the pastor of the church was there, and we met under a great, large mango tree, and then we went in for breakfast that morning. And, then we went back out under the mango tree, and we just talked about the things that were happening. People were seeing us coming in; after we got there, the word got out that, "Hey there's a delegation here. The Americans are here." And, the tribal leaders began to come in. The word got out and the leaders came in, and

I guess some 95 members met there, and they posed the question to us, concerning the Arab and the Nubian. We were asked if we could tell them apart.

EIR: We're told that there's total discrimination, that the Arab population rules over the Nubian population.

Jackson: Yes, and we were told that, and we were looking for that, and we questioned that. And they asked us a question: They pulled six gentlemen up from the audience, and they asked us to distinguish between the Arab and the Nubian. And, hey! we couldn't make the distinction. And then they pulled six more up and asked the same questions—and, they all look alike. You couldn't say who was who. One of the leaders spoke to us, and said: "Now who's selling whom? You said that you can't determine who was who, and we can't sell our brothers, you know. And who is the slave-master? Someone must have plenty of money if he's going to buy us a person." . . .

EIR: One of the things that you were able to do because of your visit—and I think that this is very important, because once we dispel the "problems" that everyone says Sudan has, and we see that they don't have *these* problems—I think it's worthwhile looking at some of the things they have accomplished, and accomplished *by themselves*. You were able to take a day trip to the agricultural complex, known as the Gezira Scheme?

Jackson: Yes, we went to the Gezira Scheme—and I thought I had left cotton country back home in Alabama, back there in the South, but I saw miles of cotton, corn, peanuts, sugarcane. . . .

They are very ready producers, and they want the opportunity to market their product. They can feed themselves, they know *how*, they have the *know-how*, and the agricultural engineer was telling us about how they had to come in and develop. The soil is so rich—and it's ready for the planting and the harvesting, but they need help.

EIR: So, although Sudan is a poor country, it's not a hungry country; the people not only have enough to eat, but that, in fact, they are beginning to export food now.

Jackson: Yes. What's so amazing is that *everybody* has something to eat: They have their own little garden, or little field; they have a few goats, or a couple of oxen. The minimum wage was around \$10 a week, but everybody's working—it's a poor country, but nobody's starving to death. The people have the initiative to want to be self-sufficient; they're not waiting for someone to come in and feed them, they're feeding themselves.

EIR: Do you think that the United States has anything to gain by imposing sanctions on Sudan?

Jackson: No. I think we're *losing* a lot, because that country

can be developed, and it's rich, and it's wide-open. It's just waiting for Americans to come in and invest. And that's what we need to do: Instead of *punishing* those people, we need to go in and help them raise their living standards, and make them a very prosperous people; I saw it the other day, that there's minerals in Sudan, and the *soil* is rich, and there's got to be something beneath the soil that would be even *more* productive for that nation.

EIR: Do you think they would welcome that kind of cooperation with the United States?

Jackson: Oh, yes, with open arms would they welcome that, and that was the message—one of the messages that they wanted us to tell the U.S. Congress, was to come in and invest in their country, and stop reading everything that—stop believing everything that they read from the British press: Come in. See what they are doing, and help them to make things better, for themselves and for their part of the world.

EIR: Mr. Jackson, I think that you have successfully dispelled an awful lot of the myths that have been spread about this country; and, it sounds, from what you're saying, that you would encourage a Congressional delegation to go in there and take a look.

Jackson: Yes, I would. I would encourage any number of Congressional members to go in, and, even cabinet department heads to go in and look at Sudan. I didn't know a whole lot about Sudan and the Sudanese people, until I got involved with this trip. I had no idea how independent these people are, how successful they can be. They're very intelligent people; most of them that we met speak three or more languages: They all spoke English fluently, and Arabic is the national language, and they all spoke their tribal language. And they use that interchange for their own messages within their own tribe, but they speak to each other in Arabic. And, they spoke to us in English.

It is very fascinating, and what you heard about these people, *is not true*. It is not *true*. It is *not* true. I am dumbfounded, that someone would go write that type of information about what they *don't know to hurt a country*, to punish a people as significant, and as progressive as the people of Sudan.

EIR: . . . Sudan is a nation with many, many attributes, and it's also a nation with problems. In your view, are those just the problems of a young country struggling to develop, or is there something inherent in the system that's a problem?

Jackson: I think it's a young nation—and within the nation, they had elections back in April, and it's a new form of government. I mean, you're talking about *democracy*, they have a form of democracy that we need to look at.

EIR: In their elections, they did elect a President, right?

Jackson: Yes, they elected a President. . . . Forty-one people ran for President, and they didn't have to raise \$200,000 or \$300,000 to qualify: They just ran, and they put their name on the ballot. And, that's the way it works. That's democracy. . . . Anybody can put their name on the ballot to run, in free elections. They had a *free* election: It was free—it didn't cost the candidates *anything*.

EIR: In order to be able to get out into the bush and give everybody the opportunity to vote, the Sudanese don't have *one* election day, but they ran their elections for more than a week.

Jackson: Over a week, because it takes that long to get the information out to all the people, the people are so far. Once you leave Khartoum, there's no cities on the Interstate or anything like that—there's no Interstate. The travel, the highways, the infrastructure, is really terrible; but, we managed to get out there: Bumpy and over a few hundred miles of rugged terrain, and there wasn't a highway once—it was washed out in several places. But, the people seemed to be quite happy out there; they hadn't been to the city, so they don't know what the city life is all about. Some have electricity even out there.

But, as we talk about this democracy: A government *of* the people, *by* the people, and *for* the people, they've shown us how to do it, to get out that vote. Here, I saw this young, developing nation, trying to be independent; and they're having sanctions placed on them: It's stifling their growth and their productivity. But, even through all of that, they are still able to overcome, they are still able to survive, they're still able to feed their people. They're still giving medical care for their people. And, that's what's so amazing: That you can't just stop them, because they're determined to be successful.

EIR: I think that's the problem that the British had with them a hundred years ago.

Jackson: Yes, I believe that's why the British still feel so aggravated—

EIR: They do seem to hold a grudge—

Jackson: And just because the Sudanese ran 'em out. . . .

Let me say something in closing. From the darkest to the lightest of the people, they say, "We are all Sudanese, we are Africans." And, they accepted me, and they accepted our delegation with open arms, and made me feel like a real person, a real, genuine human being. And, I felt that way, and then I got back home, and I started feeling this, the prejudiced-ness. You know how it is. I can't go here and there. I didn't find anything like that in Sudan! But, I really enjoyed this trip and I thank the Schiller Institute for giving me an opportunity to go out and see a Third World nation.