



CHARLES ONYANGO-OBBO > EAR TO THE GROUND

A letter from the city that drinks most Ugandan coffee

Khartoum: Last June a story in the *Daily Monitor* had a headline that, if it had been published in 2000, the editor would have been committed to Butabika hospital for the mentally ill.

'Sudan gives Uganda 2 years to comply with coffee standards', it said. Before the defeat of Joseph Kony's Lord's Resistance Army, which Kampala believed was backed by Khartoum, and before the independence of South Sudan, it seemed inconceivable that Uganda and Sudan would do any business.

Today Sudan is the leading importer of Ugandan coffee in Africa.

This week, the African Union (AU) and Intergovernmental Authority on Development (Igad) put on a conference on peace and security in the Horn of Africa, and invited a range of experts and a few rabble rousers from the wilderness, like myself, to Khartoum for a lively debate.

The day before we arrived, the US announced the end of its 20-year-long sanctions on Sudan. For these years, you couldn't use an international credit in Sudan and some international organisations carried bags of hard foreign currency to pay their staff and expenses. The end of sanctions, therefore, provided an interesting backdrop against which to look at President Omar al-Bashir Sudan.

I am not a fan of Bashir at all, and this as far away from being a freewheeling democracy as it can be. But I was more curious about the

Sudan story, although I didn't imagine there would be an encounter with Bashir.

When you land in Khartoum, you understand why they drink a lot of Ugandan coffee. Villagers generally don't drink much coffee in Africa. It is city folks who do.

At 20,740 square kilometres, Khartoum is just more than 100 times bigger than Kampala. It is a vast city with a long rich history, which has been fuelled by the dynamics of the River Nile.

This size is a blessing for Ugandan coffee.

When I visit an African city, I do a dawn jog (to be honest, walk) for my "Morning Jogger's Dipstick Index". You can learn a lot.

First, if a city is too dangerous, the hotel people will stop you from going running. If there is no street lighting, I usually turn back, and mark it down. If the sidewalk is too dangerous, I do it only once, and slap another negative.

Khartoum scores highly on safety. However, clearly, it is a city that does not rise early. By 6.30am, the streets are still desolate. In Nairobi, a vast army of workers hoofing it to work take over the sidewalks as early as 4am.

There is a building boom in Khartoum, but clearly the fall of oil prices, and the low supplies from Sudan's shared oil with South Sudan, disrupted by the civil war, has hurt Khartoum. Amidst the boom, many stalled building projects stand out.

But for a country under sanctions, they have

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On Sunday evening, Bashir invited us to one of his presidential palaces for dinner. It is inside a vast military compound. Bashir lives deep inside like a queen in an anthill.

The dinner was in a hall close to the gate. We got off our vans, and went in. There were no checks, our phones weren't taken away, our identities weren't checked.

After some minutes of waiting, Bashir ambled in in white robes, generally serene. We stood, sat down, and ate. The lifting of US sanctions is big news in Sudan. The newspapers are full of congratulatory messages, and Bashir is being hailed for his "leadership."

We expected he would give a triumphant speech and propose to the "victory of the Sudanese people". Bashir sat to our left, surrounded by the likes of former president Thabo Mbeki.

Before long, we were done. There was no speech. He stood up, hugged a few big men and women from around Africa, shook hands around, and was off.

For a man who has had two knee surgeries in recent times, Bashir looked in remarkable good cheer. In addition, with his rivals dispatched or sidelined, this is a man who clearly feels he didn't need to crow about his recent victory.

A few years, no one would have put money on Bashir being in what looks like the sweet spot he is in today. We shall return to examine his fortunes in the future.

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