



# **MUKESH KAPILA** **AGAINST** **A TIDE OF** **EVIL**

**HOW ONE MAN BECAME THE  
WHISTLEBLOWER TO THE FIRST MASS MURDER  
OF THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY**

**'Mukesh Kapila sounded the clarion call and stood firm  
in the face of the ultimate crime: genocide.  
Read his story'**  
**Mia Farrow**

'In this personal and moving plea, Kapila forces us to look directly into the face of genocide: the ashen mounds of twisted bodies, the hollowed eyes of mutilated women, and the insufferable silence of a system that treats some people as more human than others. He spoke truth to power and challenges us do the same to end such monstrous crimes.'

Lieutenant General Hon. Roméo A. Dallaire

'During one of the darkest periods in human history, Mukesh Kapila sounded the clarion call and stood firm in the face of the ultimate crime - genocide. Read his extraordinary story.'

Mia Farrow, actress and humanitarian

'This moving account of determination to fight injustice reads like a thriller. It reveals the chilling details of how the international community tried to silence Mukesh Kapila when he exposed the massacres in Darfur - and the price he paid for his courageous stand.'

David Loyn, BBC international development correspondent

'Exposes how political expediency almost allowed the mass murderers to triumph in Sudan were it not for the unyielding spirit of Mukesh Kapila. It's precisely because "never again" all too frequently happens all over again that his book is essential reading.'

Lord Alton of Liverpool

'Keeps the Sudanese genocide alive in the hearts of the victims.'

Halima Bashir, author of *Tears of the Desert*

'A poignant and moving account of how one man stood against the tide of evil.'

Mende Nazer, author of *Slave*

'An eloquent testament to one man's efforts to blow the whistle and prevent evil from triumphing - a struggle that

still continues across Sudan.'

John Prendergast, co-founder, The Enough Project

# AGAINST A TIDE OF EVIL

How One Man Became the Whistleblower  
to the First Mass Murder of the Twenty-first  
Century

Mukesh Kapila



For the Red Cross and Red Crescent.  
They gave me the original gift of life.  
And they opened up to let me in when all others had cast  
me out.

Mukesh Kapila

And for Roger Hammond  
A brother and a true friend.  
Gone but not forgotten by all those who loved him  
- you know who you are.  
*Semper fidelis.*

Damien Lewis

## **Table of Contents**

Author's Note

List of Abbreviations

Prologue

Chapter One

Chapter Two

Chapter Three

Chapter Four

Chapter Five

Chapter Six

Chapter Seven

Chapter Eight

Chapter Nine

Chapter Ten

Chapter Eleven

Chapter Twelve

Chapter Thirteen

Chapter Fourteen

Chapter Fifteen

Chapter Sixteen

Chapter Seventeen

Chapter Eighteen

Chapter Nineteen

Chapter Twenty

Chapter Twenty-One

Chapter Twenty-Two

Chapter Twenty-Three

Chapter Twenty-Four

Chapter Twenty-Five

Chapter Twenty-Six

Epilogue

## AUTHOR'S NOTE

FOR MANY YEARS, I RESISTED TELLING THIS STORY BECAUSE I could not face the pain of recalling the memories and feelings that would be inevitably stirred up within myself. Only the constant nagging of friends that I had a duty to help others who faced the same dilemmas and despair compelled me to share what I have to say.

This book would never have been written without the inspiration and support of Holocaust survivors E.Z. and R.H., who, despite everything, refused to give up on humanity. My thanks particularly to Bayarmaa Luntan who badgered and badgered me until it was done.

In the process of writing this book, I have had to confront *who I am*. Inevitably this comes from both nature and nurture. Many family members, friends and colleagues have influenced my values and mindset. My maternal grandmother Vidya Wati brought me up never to forget *where I come from*. My early teacher Reverend Brother J.C. Drew at St John's School in India inspired me about *where I must go*. My subsequent mentors in England, Peter Waghorn at Wellington College and Sir Alec Cairncross in Oxford, made me believe that *I could do it*. In later life, Dr David Nabarro trained my mind *to make sense*, and Peter Penfold, former British high commissioner to Sierra Leone, showed me that *courage has a price*. Finally, my boss, the Right Honourable Clare Short, Britain's first secretary of state for international development, taught me that leadership is more about *doing the right things than just doing things right*.



Throughout my life, I have been fortunate in having many good friends and colleagues who have also delighted in being my harshest critics. They have not been reticent in pointing out my many limitations while somehow staying solid and supportive around me. In thanking them all, I would like to give particular acknowledgement to Nadia El Maaroufi and Isabelle Balot, my special assistants at the United Nations in Sudan, for their steadfast loyalty in most difficult times.

This book is written from my own personal recollections, from documents compiled at the time, and with the help of those colleagues who shared my experiences and were able to assist. Where necessary, I have changed the names of some people, to protect them from reprisals or to enable them to continue to operate in the humanitarian and peace-building fields.

Finally, any errors are purely of my own making, and I will be happy to address them in future editions.

Mukesh Kapila,  
Geneva, 2013

# LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
CNN	Cable News Network
DFID	Department for International Development (UK)
DPA	Department of Political Affairs (UN)
ECOMOG	Economic Commission of West African States Monitoring Group (African peacekeepers in Sierra Leone)
EPLF	Eritrean People's Liberation Front
FCO	Foreign and Commonwealth Office (UK)
FGM	Female Genital Mutilation
GDSI	Greater Darfur Special Initiative
HAC	Humanitarian Aid Commission (Sudan)
ICC	International Criminal Court
ICRC	International Committee of the Red Cross
IDP	Internally Displaced People
IFRC	International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies
IHP	International Humanitarian Partnership
MOD	Ministry of Defence (UK)
MSF	Médecins Sans Frontières
NISS	National Intelligence and Security Services (Sudan)
OCHA	Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UN)
ODA	Overseas Development Administration (UK)
OLS	Operation Lifeline Sudan (UN)
OPOS	Office for Placing Overseas Schoolboys and Schoolgirls in British Schools
PDF	Popular Defence Forces (Sudan)
RPF	Rwandan Patriotic Front
RUF	Revolutionary United Front (Sierra Leone)
SABC	South African Broadcasting Corporation
SLA	Sudan Liberation Army
SLM	Sudan Liberation Movement
SPLA	Sudan People's Liberation Army
SPLM	Sudan People's Liberation Movement
SRF	Sudan Revolutionary Front
UN	United Nations

UNDP United Nations Development Programme  
UNFPA United Nations Population Fund  
UNHCR United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees  
UNICEF United Nations Children's Fund  
UNIDO United Nations Industrial Development Organisation  
UNSC United Nations Security Council  
WFP World Food Programme  
WHO World Health Organisation

## PROLOGUE

MY FATHER'S OLD SWISS FAVRE-LEUBA WATCH LIES ON MY DESK as I write. Before me, the window opens onto the Swiss Alps, majestic and snow capped on the higher peaks. It is winter, and I have just survived what by anyone's reckoning was an attempt on my life.

Early this morning, I had set out from Geneva to drive to a small studio set deep in the mountains. I was joining Damien Lewis, a professional writer, who was spending several days interviewing me to try to get the full story of my year in Sudan into some kind of shape and order.

We worked all morning, and then I suggested we take a break and drive to a beautiful valley nearby. It was a bitter January day, and even though it was bright and sunny it was freezing. We headed out in my battered Renault, and after a short drive I slowed to just above a crawl so that we could admire the scenery. We came to a low point where the road started to climb, and for the first time that day I found the sun shining directly into my eyes.

Instantly, I was blinded, the windscreen blurring into a thousand shards of burning light. Unable to see a thing, I slammed on the brakes and tried to steer for where I figured the roadside had to be. We came to a juddering halt, half hanging off the road. I cut the engine, and for a second Damien and I stared at each other in stunned silence.

'That was a ... close thing,' I remarked, a little shakily. 'Lucky I was driving so slowly. Best we go clear the windscreen.'

'You didn't scrape your screen this morning?' he asked.

I told him that I had but obviously not very well.

We searched around for something with which to scrape off the frost, then got to work. After a few seconds, Damien stopped. He held up his scraper and fixed me with a perplexed look.

‘What on earth is this?’ he asked, indicating a gooey brown mess sticking to the scraper and trailing gluey strings back to the windscreen.

I shook my head. ‘I’ve no idea. Is it frost? It can’t be.’

‘No, it’s not frost.’ I saw him take a sniff. ‘It’s epoxy resin.’ He had a dark expression on his face, a mixture of disbelief and alarm. ‘Mukesh, what is epoxy resin doing on your windscreen?’

I shrugged. I didn’t have a clue what epoxy resin was.

Damien proceeded to point out the spray marks criss-crossing the expanse of glass.

‘Mukesh, someone has sprayed your entire windscreen with epoxy resin.’

‘What is epoxy resin exactly?’ I asked.

‘Like liquid fibreglass. You use it to repair boats, that kind of thing. Incredibly sticky and impossible to get off. Dries hard like plastic.’ He paused. ‘The question is, why has someone sprayed your windscreen with the stuff?’

‘Maybe an accident?’ I ventured. ‘Or vandalism?’

‘Mukesh, no one accidentally sprayed your car. And if I wanted to vandalise it, I’d smash the windows with a brick, kick in the lights or get a can of spray paint. No one uses epoxy resin to vandalise a car.’

‘So, what’s going on?’ I asked.

In answer, he stepped around to inspect the passenger window. ‘They’ve sprayed this one, too.’ He walked around the back. ‘And the rear. Mukesh, someone has sprayed every window of your car with epoxy resin.’ He glanced at the wing mirrors. ‘My god, they’ve even thought to do the mirrors!’

He joined me at the front. 'So, Mukesh, what does this mean?'

'I don't know,' I replied. I really didn't have a clue what it might mean. It was so bizarre.

'OK, let's recap. It's a cold winter's day. There was a heavy frost this morning. You tried to clear your windscreen?'

'Yes. With the wipers and the screen wash, but I couldn't seem to get it clear. I just thought it was a bad frost and the heater would deal with it.'

'So, you drove out of Geneva heading west? The sun rises in the east. It just so happens that you didn't drive in the direction of the rising sun. If you had, you'd have been on the motorway when the sun hit your windscreen and you'd have been blinded. So tell me, if you had gone east and not west what would have happened?'

'Well, I guess I'd very likely have crashed.'

'You would. At speed on the motorway. As it is, the sun hit your windscreen at midday, here, where we were doing maybe 20 miles an hour and admiring the beautiful scenery.' He gestured at the drop into the valley below. 'And you just managed to stop before we went over that. How would you characterise events so far?'

'Well, I'd have to say we have been rather lucky.'

'We have. So back to my original question: why has someone sprayed your car with epoxy resin?'

'I suppose it has to be a warning ...'

'At best a warning, at worst an attempt to kill either you or the both of us. Now, why would anyone want to kill you, as we have to presume you are the target here? And let's not forget all the death threats you've received over recent years.'

'Well ... Sudan?'

'Yes. Sudan. Sudan, and more specifically I would imagine Darfur ...'

Using some de-icing fluid, we managed to clear a hole just about large enough for me to see through. Once back at the

studio, he made me report what had happened to the diplomatic police in Geneva - as my work gave me diplomatic status - and other relevant authorities.

An investigation followed, during which a Sudanese individual who had been acting oddly around me was thoroughly scrutinised. I have always made it clear that I have no argument with the Sudanese people. Quite the reverse: I hold them dear to my heart, and I have never been closed to working with Sudanese nationals in my humanitarian work.

Overnight almost, the individual under investigation slipped away from Geneva. Either she had returned to - or been recalled to - the Sudan. Those investigating the incident had no prior experience of epoxy resin being used in this way, but they recognised that in those wintry conditions, and with a low, winter sun, it constituted a potentially effective means to kill, injure or at the very least to warn. I was told to take certain extra precautions, and that was about all that could be done.

It was approaching ten years since I had held my post as the head of the United Nations in Sudan, and indeed the death threats had not come to an end. They were not so relentless these days, but just when I thought they had ceased I'd get the ring on my mobile phone and hear the sinister voice.

'Dr Kapila, we have not forgotten. We will never forget, and one day we will finish you ...'

No matter how often I changed my number, the calls would keep coming. I figured it wasn't so hard to keep track of someone, especially if the stakes were high enough to warrant the investment in time and effort to do so.

And that perhaps is the point: some ten years after the genocide in Darfur began, the stakes remain incredibly high. They do so because this was genocide without end. In a sense, this was the world's most successful genocide, because the perpetrators achieved all they wanted: they

exterminated hundreds of thousands of people; they spread absolute terror, and in so doing destroyed the victims' sense of identity to such a degree that they remain too fearful to return to their lands; and they wreaked physical destruction over their means of livelihood, so as to make such a return doubly impossible.

And so, a decade after the horror began, Darfur remains purged of its original peoples, some three million of whom are living as refugees or internally displaced people (IDPs). Moreover, the genocide was a success in the eyes of its architects – those at the helm of Sudan's governing regime – because not one amongst them has yet been brought to justice.

This is not to say that the events portrayed in this book – when I broke all the accepted rules and blew the whistle over Darfur – failed to have an impact. Quite the reverse. My actions provoked a firestorm of international press coverage that turned the tide in Darfur. Just days after I flew out of Khartoum for the final time, the United Nations and powerful world governments were forced to act over Darfur.

And I presume it is *all of that* which the Khartoum regime's security services refuse to forget, and that is why on a winter's day in the Swiss mountains they sent me such a powerful warning. But, for whatever reason, it is not in my nature to be silenced. It was not in my nature back then, in the spring of 2004, when I blew the whistle over the horrors sweeping Darfur, and that remains the case now, a decade later as I pen these pages.

After my car was sprayed with epoxy resin, Damien asked me if I really did want to continue with this book. My answer was an emphatic 'yes'. Silence was not an option in 2004 and it is not so now.

For those of us who wish to ensure that 'never again' truly becomes a reality, silence can never be an option, even if speaking out may kill us.



# ONE

Each back must bear its own burden.

*My ancestor, the Sage Kapila (c.  
500 BC)*

THE ALARM SOUNDED AT 2 A.M. THE HOUSE WAS DARK AND silent as I readied myself for departure, trying not to waken my wife, Helen. After two decades spent jetting into the world's trouble spots, I'd got into the habit of travelling light and leaving silently in the night hours. I'd packed just the one suitcase for my journey to my new posting, in Sudan.

I poked my head around the doors to my daughters' rooms and said my silent goodbyes. Our girls each have an English first name, reflecting their British nationality, and an Indian second name, reflecting their Indian heritage.

The eldest is Rachel *Prakash*, which means 'light' in my native language, Hindi. Rachel is the sensible, pragmatic one. She viewed my going away to Sudan through her prism of practicality: *this is just something that Dad has to do*. The second is Lois *Vidya*, which means 'knowledge'. Lois is the most instinctive of my girls, and she was hugely supportive of my going off to Sudan, even though I'd be away for months on end. She was proud that her daddy was going off 'to save the world', which was how my daughters rationalised my missions to the ends of the earth.

Our third daughter is little Ruth. Ruth's Hindi name is *Maya* - meaning 'illusion' - for she was something of a late addition to the Kapila clan. Ruth was treated as the baby of the family, though she was probably the wisest of all,

knowing instinctively that I was off 'doing good' somewhere far away.

In my life, I'd spent many years working for the UK government's Department for International Development (DFID), so the girls had grown up with 'saving the world' as a constant in the family. I'd often come home late from DFID's London office to find the kids in their dressing gowns eating Marmite soldiers in front of the TV. I'd cuddle up with them, and one of the girls would ask me how much of the world I had saved today. Or I might remark that I'd had a busy day, and my wife would say, 'Well, we've had to take the dog to the vet while you've been saving the world.' It was done with a mixture of pride, teasing and a little exasperation. *Dad always has time to save the world but not to take the dog to the vet.* It was a standing joke between us.

I'd been absent for so much of the time while the girls were growing up, and kids change so fast. I knew I'd miss them dearly while away in Sudan, but at the same time I couldn't wait to get started. I was hugely excited by my coming mission, which I sensed was going to be the most important of my life.

For two decades, I had borne witness to some of man's worst inhumanity to man - in Rwanda, the Balkans, Sierra Leone, Afghanistan and elsewhere. I'd taken aid, medical care, education and hope into some of the darkest corners of the world, only to see how the mass murderers invariably had triumphed. If ever I were in a position to stop it, I'd promised myself that evil would never triumph on my watch.

I was heading to Sudan to take up my highest-ever posting in the humanitarian field. At the age of 48, I'd been appointed the United Nations' resident coordinator for Sudan - in essence, the chief of all UN operations. For decades, Sudan had been wracked by a civil war, which at its simplest pitted a largely black African Christian and

animist south against a hard-line 'Arabic' Muslim north. War had displaced millions of people, and feeding and safeguarding them had become the UN's single biggest operation.

If ever there was an opportunity to ensure that evil wouldn't triumph on my watch, then Sudan surely was it. Even more exciting was the imminent prospect of peace coming to the country. Under the Naivasha Accords, negotiations over a peace deal were under way, and a signing of that agreement was thought to be imminent. The prospect of ushering in such a historic peace deal during my two-year tenure as UN chief was one of the main reasons that I'd taken the posting.

I grabbed my suitcase from where I'd placed it the night before on the landing and lugged it downstairs. Typically, Megan, our beloved mongrel of a dog, was curled up on the living room sofa together with Tuppy - short for Tuppence - our ginger cat. We were hopelessly soft on the two of them, and many an evening was spent with the five of us crammed into the armchairs, while Megan and Tuppy stretched out luxuriously on the sofa.

It was ten years since the girls had first brought a tiny black puppy home, and over time Megan had grown to become my dog. She'd got into the habit of curling up under the desk in my study, and I loved having her there. Our little cottage - a former farm labourer's house in the Cambridgeshire fens - could be damp and chilly in winter, and I'd warm my feet on her tummy. Megan used to wait by the door prior to my coming home from one assignment or another. She had this incredible sixth sense and she always knew.

I glanced around the living room and thought about how much I would miss home. It was late March, and the garden was bursting with spring flowers. Our house lies beside a country lane with a stream running past. In summer, we'd have afternoon tea with a blanket spread on the lawn or

stroll along the meandering riverbank. But this summer I would miss all of that, headed as I was into the heat and dust of Sudan.

I heard a soft toot from outside, which meant my regular taxi driver was there. Before unlatching the door, I checked in the outer pocket of my suitcase for my few personal effects. I pulled out the family photos, plus the one of Megan. I felt the lump of coal from the mine that my father had managed in Bihar state in India. That unremarkable rock had travelled with me when I first came to England from India, and I had carried it with me ever since, like a powerful talisman. If a penniless Indian boy could win the confidence of an English philanthropist and be educated at one of Britain's best schools, as I had, anything had to be possible in the world.

Lastly, I slipped my hand into my case and ran it over the two bits of reading material that I was taking with me. They were hardly a light-hearted or cheery choice. The reports on the UN's failure to stop the genocide in Rwanda and then Srebrenica (in Bosnia) made for a dark, sobering read. They explored the root causes of the UN's failings in 1994 and 1995 in an effort to prevent such spectacular failures being repeated. In a way, they were unfinished chapters for me, as in both places I had been very close to the darkness, with blood still running down the walls, and I felt the failures personally.

Late the previous evening, I'd thrust those reports into my luggage almost as an afterthought. For a moment, I went to remove them. Why was I taking them to Sudan? After all, I was going there to preside over the signing of a historic peace deal. But something with an almost spiritual forcefulness stayed my hand. As I gently closed the door to our cottage, I had no idea how important those two dry documents would become to me. They would become my touchstones and my bible as I wrestled with a choice of

actions that could cost countless thousands – and perhaps millions – of lives.

‘Good morning, sir, and where might you be off to today?’ my cabbie remarked, as he lifted my suitcase into his boot.

No matter how unreasonable the hour, Harry, my regular taxi-driver, always seemed to be in good humour. I explained that I was catching a short shuttle to Frankfurt, from where I’d join a Lufthansa flight to North Africa, destination Sudan. At 6 p.m. local time, I would touch down at Khartoum airport, and a new chapter in my life would begin.

A few hours after Harry wished me good luck on my mission, I was settling into my seat for the long-haul flight to Khartoum. Being on a United Nations posting of some significance, I had been booked to fly business class. I was supposed to arrive well rested and ready to hit the ground running, and I was both excited and daunted by what might lie ahead of me.

Sudan was at this time Africa’s largest country, being over six times the size of France. I was flying into Africa’s longest-running civil war, one that had spawned more refugees and displaced people than perhaps any other. The only way to distribute aid across such a vast and undeveloped area was by air, and the UN operated the largest air force in Africa to do so. In a few hours’ time, I would take charge of that massive operation, together with its thousands of workers.

Effectively, I would be running a mini state within a state, and my nearest boss would be thousands of miles distant in UN headquarters in New York. I would wield enormous authority over operations in the country, and yet I was acutely aware of how little experience I had working within the UN system. I had been brought in largely because my background promised to make me the most acceptable peacemaker to all sides in the civil war. From the outset, I

was the UN outsider, and in time that would prove both my greatest weakness and my greatest strength.

I was a wild card for such a senior posting, for I wasn't steeped in the UN's procedures and I hadn't spent years learning how the game is played. Just a few months back, I'd been serving as DFID's head of conflict and humanitarian affairs, in charge of aid, conflict and disaster work for the British government. Over the years, I'd learned that most wars can only be brought to an end if one side is victorious or both sides run out of the energy to fight. A crisis has to be ripe for solving. Wars wax and wane, and you have to intervene at the right moment in the conflict cycle, or you might simply freeze it and in the long run make matters worse.

Sudan felt like it had arrived at the perfect moment to bring peace, with both sides having fought themselves to a standstill. Those who had recruited me persuaded me that I had the track record and background to help bring about an end to the war of all wars. My lack of prior history with the UN meant that I was seen as being neutral within the system, so not allied to any one UN agency. I had long ago taken up British nationality and so I was seen as being on side: I was part of the Western power bloc that wielded so much influence at the UN. But I was also of Indian origin and non-white, so I could be presented to the Sudanese as a fellow face from the developing world. And I was neither Arab nor African, which should make me acceptable to both sides of the conflict. In short, I was the perfect photo-fit for the job in hand.

My flight touched down in Khartoum on a sweltering late afternoon. The last time I'd been here was on a DFID aid mission four or five years previously. Each time, the city skyline seemed to change noticeably, as the country's recently discovered oil wealth fuelled a construction boom. The aircraft lurched to a stop and the engines powered

down. It was 1 April – April Fool’s Day – and as I went to leave the plane I had barely heard of a remote western region of Sudan called ‘Darfur’.

In retrospect, my arrival was as bizarre and surreal as my departure was to be. I stepped out of the air-conditioned cool of the aircraft and the heat hit me like a furnace. Having been brought up in India, I’m a hothouse plant by nature, but as I walked the short distance to the terminal building it felt unbearably hot, not to mention dusty. It struck me as odd that there was no one to meet me, but I figured they’d be waiting for me once I’d cleared customs.

I joined the queue for passport control, but shortly I heard a voice calling my name. ‘Dr Kapila! Dr Kapila! Where are you, Dr Kapila?’

I turned to see a man dressed in a pristine white dish-dash (a full-length Arab robe) and turban. From my Indian appearance, he must have concluded that I was the elusive Dr Kapila, for he came hurrying over.

‘Dr Kapila? Sir? You are Dr Kapila? But what are you doing here?’ he demanded. ‘Everyone is waiting for you in VIP hall!’

I felt like asking him where was the sign saying: ‘Dr Kapila, VIP, this way’. I settled for: ‘But how would I know to go to the VIP area?’

He brushed aside my question, and I allowed him to take me by the arm and march me back out onto the runway. Parked as close to the Lufthansa plane as possible was a sparkling white Toyota Land Cruiser. He took me to it, opened the rear passenger door and shoved me inside.

He shook his head in frustration. ‘Dr Kapila ... But this is your official car. How did you not notice the official car?’

I shrugged. There was something hugely comical about all of this. The car certainly hadn’t been there when I arrived. Perhaps I had been too quick, so frustrating their plans to whisk me away from the aircraft’s steps. Or maybe they were all running on ‘Sudan time’, which was something I’d

experienced during my previous visits. All meetings – even scheduled public events – generally started a good half-hour late, and no one seemed to pay much heed to accurate timekeeping.

I settled into the air-conditioned hum of the vehicle, and 30 seconds later it pulled up a short distance away at the terminal's 'VIP entrance'. The door to the vehicle swung open, and as I entered the building everyone rose to their feet. The VIP lounge was cooled to a fridge-like chilliness, and, amongst those that had risen to greet me, the Sudanese government officials were obvious in their crisp white robes. I figured the tired-looking white guys in their crumpled suits had to be my new UN co-workers.

The Sudanese government head of protocol ushered me to a low table surrounded by overstuffed sofas. My passport was whisked off to be processed, and I sipped my tea and nibbled on a date or two. The Sudanese officials lined up to greet me formally, followed by the *khawajas*, as white men are called in Arabic, the language of north Sudan. The polite chitchat went to and fro. *How was your flight? Did you manage to get some rest? What was the weather like in the UK? It is not too hot for you here in Khartoum?*

My suitcase duly arrived and, my meet-and-greet over, I was hurried outside. Another white Toyota Land Cruiser was waiting, this one distinguished by having a blue UN flag flying from the right-hand side of the bonnet. Feeling as if I was in some kind of John le Carré novel, I was driven away from the airport in a convoy led by a Sudanese police vehicle complete with flashing light and wailing siren.

As I'd exited the terminal building, I'd managed to get just a sniff of the smell of Africa – the dusty, spicy, hot scent – that I knew so well. It brought back conflicting memories – of the incredible generosity of people who seemingly had nothing, and of the unspeakable brutality of tribe pitted against tribe. I'd caught just a hint of that, together with the noisy cacophony of life going on all around me, before I was



locked into the air-conditioned hum of the Land Cruiser. I was starting to sense that this was the cocoon of privilege with which I was expected to surround myself now, and that it would take some effort to break free from its suffocating constraints.

My Sudanese protocol friend had squeezed into the vehicle alongside me, but after five minutes we had exhausted any topics of polite chitchat. We sat in silence as we were whisked through the streets, the 'mee-maw' of the police siren beating out the rhythm of our passing. I gazed out at the myriad faces turning to stare. I couldn't help but think of a cold beer, but I was hardly likely to ask my protocol friend where I could find one. Khartoum was ruled by Islamic - *sharia* - law, and alcohol was banned. Even the one good hotel that foreigners tended to stay in, the Hilton, had a no-alcohol rule.

The Khartoum Hilton sits on the banks of the mighty Nile. It was going to be my home until I was officially accepted by the Sudanese president, at which point I might find myself somewhere more permanent to live. My room was on the ground floor, with a veranda opening onto the hotel's lush tropical gardens. Everything was spotlessly clean, but the place had a faded, slightly sagging 1970s feel to it. When I lifted one of the paintings of Arabian horse scenes, I could see an oblong patch where the wallpaper hadn't been so bled of its colour by the beating sun. Everywhere else it had faded to the hue of old newspaper, and somehow the room had a similar kind of smell to it.

I headed for the restaurant and grabbed some pitta bread and hummus, plus a non-alcoholic lager. An hour later I was back in my room, wondering what to do with myself. I knew I should try to sleep, for a driver was scheduled to arrive at 7.30 the following morning to take me to the UN office. But it was only eight in the evening UK time, and I wasn't feeling tired. I switched on the TV and surfed the news channels for a while.

I drifted off to sleep experiencing a mixture of emotions. A part of me felt an odd sense of displacement in time and space. Another part of me was gripped by a deep anxiety: *what exactly does a UN resident coordinator do?* I now knew that I got driven around in a car flying the UN flag, but other than that I had very little idea. Mostly I was trying to hold onto my sense of mission – that now was the chance to get this war sorted once and for all.

Yet there was also a part of me – maybe 10 per cent of my consciousness – that was clouded by this sense that it might not be so easy to achieve what I wanted here. My arrival had been wrapped in layers of privilege and protocol, and I sensed it might not be the best context in which to grasp the moment and achieve the extraordinary.

I'd been brought in as the outsider to help usher in peace, and to lift our sights beyond the war. If I was going to have to break the mould to get the job done, so be it. From my earliest years I'd been something of a non-conformist and a rule-breaker, and I guess it was hard-wired into my soul.

But the first rule breaking would come far sooner than even I expected.

## TWO

Effects pre-exist, potentially in their causes.

*The Sage Kapila*

THE WORKING DAY STARTS EARLY IN KHARTOUM IN ORDER TO beat the heat. I was up for a 6.30 a.m. breakfast, dressed in what I figured would be the right kind of attire for my position – a sandy-brown suit. Recently, I'd visited New York to be briefed on what was expected of me in my new position, and I'd taken the opportunity to get two identical suits tailor made in a light and cool linen.

At 7.30 sharp, a Land Cruiser flying the UN flag pulled up at the hotel steps: no running on Sudanese time for the UN, it seemed. A tall, dignified-looking man dressed in Western-style slacks and shirt got out. He looked to be in his mid-50s, and he had the bearing of a person of experience and some standing.

'Good morning, sir,' he greeted me. 'I am Omer, your driver. I will be driving you. Please,' he held open the rear door, 'take your seat.'

I did as I was told, and Omer set off west along the Nile Road, passing the presidential palace and the main government buildings. He didn't try to engage me in polite, meaningless chat, and I sensed that he and I were going to get on just fine. He pulled up at a run-down-looking building, whereupon uniformed guards swung the gates open and the car whisked me inside. We halted in a ramshackle-looking car park that was already half-full of Land Cruisers.

I went to open my door, but before I could do so Omer was there. I knew better than to object to any of this,

regardless of how uncomfortable it made me feel. This was Omer's job, and to reject such treatment would be a real slight on my part. Being the driver of the UN chief in Sudan would be a prestigious position, and well paid by Sudanese standards. Omer clearly took pride in doing everything just right, and I would have to be careful not to disrespect that.

I glanced around the cluster of low-rise offices with the UN and Sudanese flags hanging limp in the still air. The first thing that struck me was how dingy everything looked. There was an air of dejection and neglect, and I vowed to do a tour of the entire place to see what might be done. Sudanese government policy was to try to minimise UN presence in the country, because international aid workers had a tendency to witness goings on that the regime would prefer to keep hidden. As a foil to that, we needed to take extra pride in our place of work or we'd rapidly degrade our morale.

I was received by a UN staffer and taken up the stairs to my office. We paused in the antechamber so I could be introduced to Mona, my secretary. Mona was a short, plump, motherly-looking Arab lady who appeared to be in her mid-40s. There was something of Queen Victoria about her, but a more warm and welcoming version. She smiled at me shyly, and I sensed that I would get to know and love Mona dearly during my time here.

The first thing I noticed as I walked into my office was the official portrait of Kofi Annan, the UN secretary-general, which dominated one wall. In UN terms, Kofi Annan was the equivalent of the head of state: nothing significant could happen in UN affairs without his blessing. In front of his portrait sat a massive teak desk with a set of deep leather armchairs opposite. The desk was polished to a mirror-like brightness and was completely devoid of clutter. It was the blank canvas upon which I was to stamp my identity.

On one side of the Kofi Annan portrait was a bookcase filled with all sorts of UN documents. I pulled out my few

work things from my bag, including the Rwanda and Srebrenica reports. Feeling a little self-conscious, I added those to the bookshelf, then sat behind my desk and wondered what on earth I should do next.

Thankfully, Mona came to my rescue. Starting off a little nervously, she briefed me on what exactly was expected of me over the coming days. Until the Sudanese president had formally accepted my credentials, I wasn't allowed to go anywhere but the UN office or the Hilton. Everywhere else was off-limits. I asked Mona how long she figured it would take to get my credentials accepted. Mona didn't want to hazard a guess. All she could tell me was what had happened to my predecessor, Mike Sackett, an Australian. Mike had survived a hundred days before getting thrown out of the country, by which time he hadn't yet managed to present his credentials. Apparently, when Mike Sackett had decided to evacuate UN staff from a town in the south of the country for security reasons, the Sudanese government had used that as the excuse to get rid of him. It was hardly very encouraging.

After Mona's little talk, my next visitor was Shafi, a manager from the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), one of the many UN agencies working in Sudan. We didn't exactly get off to the best of starts. After some polite chat, he informed me that my Mercedes was 'almost ready'. It was a top-of-the-range saloon, he told me proudly, being delivered direct from the showroom.

'But what's wrong with the Toyota?' I queried. 'I mean, why do I need a Mercedes? It's hardly as if I'll be driving around in both at the same time.'

The attempt at humour fell quite flat. 'There is nothing wrong with the Toyota, of course,' he replied, stonily. 'But maybe something more in keeping with your status would be suitable, don't you think, Dr Kapila?'

'It may boost my status,' I smiled, 'but not in a way that I'd want. It doesn't look good if the UN resident coordinator

arrives and right away orders a brand-new Mercedes. I'm sure the money could be better spent elsewhere.'

Shafi pointed out that every UN chief before me had got a brand-new Mercedes. The car came with the position. I dug my heels in. I didn't need it or want it, I explained. I finally managed to get him to understand that I wasn't having it, and to cancel the order, so saving the car's \$25,000 price tag – a discounted price for diplomats, without taxes.

That done, I told Mona that I'd like to do a walkabout. If I was to be imprisoned here until my credentials were accepted, I might as well start trying to get the place sorted out. Going walkabout was also an excuse to meet all the UN staff, from the highest to the lowest. Under Mona's guidance, I proceeded to poke my nose into every nook and cranny, and to say a personal 'hello' to everyone, cleaners and guards included.

It was the kitchen and dining area that shocked me the most. It resembled nothing quite so much as the proverbial black hole of Calcutta. There were dark and dingy dining rooms with a clutter of ancient tables and chairs. One side was cordoned off to form a makeshift kitchen, equipped with an ancient iron range and some open fires. This was where the UN staff were supposed to eat, in spite of the fact that doing so looked like an invitation to food poisoning.

In my experience, the kitchen and dining area is where the heart of an organisation beats strongest. It's the place where people gather socially and build an *esprit de corps*, and I decided there and then to use the \$25,000 Mercedes money to renovate the place.

My next move was to call a meeting of the entire staff of UNDP. Along with OCHA, the UN's Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, UNDP was the main agency under my direct control. The other big UN agencies in Sudan were the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the World Food Programme (WFP), which focused on providing food aid to the millions of displaced people in the country.