

Challenges faced by South Sudan more than anecdotal as referendum looms

By Frederike Bubenzer

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During a four day consultation hosted by the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation with community leaders representing three ethnic groups from the Southern Sudanese state of Upper Nile, participants were asked to identify their major developmental challenges. An elder and paramount chief, William Deng Abol who had walked for two days to attend the meeting, stood up and explained 'God had two sons and promised his old cow to Dinka and its calf to Nuer. But Dinka went to God's cattle pen at night, imitating the voice of Nuer, thereby managing to get the calf. When God realized what happened he was very angry and urged Nuer to raid Dinka for cattle as revenge'.

This frequently told age-old anecdote is indicative of the many challenges South Sudan faces today. Months away from a long-awaited referendum, in January 2011, to decide whether or not to secede from the Arabic North, it outlines some of the challenging tasks a potentially new government of Southern Sudan will face. The anecdote tells of the breakdown of trust between ethnic groups, of the ancient cattle raids, of the clash between old and new cultures and traditions. But most importantly Abol's anecdote refers to the vast and nation-wide low-scale conflict which receives virtually no international attention, but that continues to cost thousands of lives annually. Cattle raids are part of many Sudanese cultures. Sparked by disputes over grazing land and water, the raids are increasingly violent due to continued arms possession. Sudan's disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) programme – so vital to the country's post-war reconstruction – has largely failed. According to the Small Arms Survey, a Geneva-based NGO, gun possession has become a rite of passage in areas of Southern Sudan. Coupled with the major socio-economic crises ravaging the South, prospects for peaceful coexistence, nation building and reconciliation in the South are looking dire.

The January referendum will enable the people of South Sudan to decide on whether to stay unified with the North or secede and form an independent state. Referred to frequently as the 'final walk to freedom', the referendum presents the chance finally to be free from Arabic rule and systemic oppression. Signed in 2005 with the assistance of (and some will argue under extreme pressure from) the international community, the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) brought to an end Sudan's second brutal civil war which began in 1983.

At a recent public meeting held in September 2010, in Cape Town, Francis Deng, the Special Adviser to the UN Secretary General on the Prevention of Genocide and Sudanese Minister of State for Foreign Affairs referred to the CPA as the peace agreement of all peace agreements. Deng went further to say that if the CPA does not bring lasting peace to Sudan, no agreement can. Less than 100 days before the referendum, fears abound that the government of the North will intentionally delay the referendum thereby sparking a revolt in the South. Given the fact that Sudan's vast and mostly untapped oil reserves are located in the South, this would come as no surprise. Serious delays have marred the setting up of the South Sudan Referendum Commission. Voter registration for a population estimated between 8.3 and 11 million has officially been postponed to November 2010. Key CPA provisions agreed by the guarantors of the agreement have not been finalised-these pertain mainly to border demarcation and the sharing of oil wealth but also to the future of the armed

forces and demobilisation, disarmament and demobilisation (DDR) processes. Salva Kiir, president of South Sudan and chairman of the Sudan People Liberation Movement (SPLM) has already warned that the South might conduct its own referendum should the North attempt to hinder the process. Southerners are anxious yet resolute – in their hearts and minds they have already seceded. The referendum is merely a formality, albeit one that promises to be turbulent.

Adviser to President Omar al Bashir, Mustafa Omar Ismail recently called on Sudanese youth to prepare for war to defend the country against cessation from the North. This was echoed by other senior officials in the ruling National Congress Party who have publically stated the referendum's outcome will not be recognised.

Despite this increasingly hostile rhetoric, political will to prepare for a smooth transition and improve living conditions is in critically short supply in South Sudan. As the threat of hostilities lingers, the incentive to spend the South's limited budget on reconstruction and development rather than weaponry is minimal. And yet the need could not be more urgent: 90% of the population of Southern Sudan live on less than one dollar a day. Chronic hunger stands at 33%: in early 2010 Akobo, a town in South Sudan was named the 'hungriest place on earth' by the United Nations. The country still suffers one of the worlds' highest infant mortality rates. 92% of women in Southern Sudan cannot read or write. Tellingly, these statistics originate from a summary sheet issued by the office the UN Resident and Humanitarian Coordinator for the Sudan entitled 'Scary Statistics-Southern Sudan'.

All this presents a gloomy picture for the future of Africa's largest country. In the international media, the ongoing conflict in Darfur and the indictment of President Bashir on charges of war crimes, crimes against humanity and genocide by the International Criminal Court, continue to overshadow the challenges mentioned here. Community leaders in Upper Nile State explain that reconciliation and healing are far-off ideals when every-day life is a struggle. Though they will vote for cessation, they have little confidence that the leadership of an independent South will be able to provide the large-scale reconstruction programmes that are desperately needed. After citing the Dinka-Nuer anecdote, William Deng Abol again stands up and adds 'our children are hungry and uneducated, our cattle are sick and our crops are failing. We have no clean drinking water; the hospitals and schools are understaffed and under resourced. We don't trust our neighbours. It is hard to build peace under these circumstances. How are we meant to reconcile like this?'

Friederike Bubenzer is the Senior Project leader of the Great Horn desk at the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation in Cape Town, South Africa. www.ijr.org.za