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Letters from South Sudan

Chris Herlinger | Apr. 2, 2014 NCR Today
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Juba, South Sudan

Writer Chris Herlinger is currently in South Sudan reporting for *NCR*. Here is his first letter regarding the experiences and fears of the people he has met. As he continues his work there, look for more blog posts, stories and photos from him about the realities people are facing.

First impressions aren?t always accurate. But in my first days here I have been struck by the extent of trauma people have experienced ? and real worries that the violence that has rocked South Sudan since mid-December may not be over.

The capital of Juba is calm, but it is only ?outwardly? so, one of the Catholic sisters I have been interviewing told me. And the calm hides anger and grievances that could, with the right kindling, flare up again.

Fear and worry are palpable.

Last Sunday, I attended a Mass at a displacement camp run by the U.N., and after the service, several young men expressed real concern about what may be ahead. They and their families ? Juba residents ? had been displaced in the recent violence and are not going back to their neighborhoods because they are afraid for their lives.

?It is hard for us because the fighting is still going on, and we could still be killed,? said John Khalid Mamun, 32.

The violence stems from multiple layers of political and ethnic tension and grievance. Hundreds of thousands have fled their homes and communities, undermining hope for the future of a country barely three years old.

On Tuesday, Bishop Emeritus Paride Taban, a leading peace advocate and one of several prominent Sudanese clerics trying to stabilize the situation here, told me and other religion journalists that he remains hopeful about the situation in the long-term.

But, for now, he said, all sides must be committed to keeping the country unified and not splitting apart. Of divisions and separations he said: ?Let us avoid that.?

?Let us stop shedding the blood of our brothers.?

The bishop?s sartorial choice was illuminating: a multi-colored African style shirt featuring a map

of South Sudan.

This is the ninth installment of Letters from South Sudan [1]. We will continue share letters with *NCR* readers, giving a fuller picture of the complexities of political violence and hopes for peace.

Editor's Note: The *National Catholic Reporter* is embarking on a groundbreaking project to give greater voice to sisters around the world. To learn more about this project or sign up for email alerts visit, http://ncronline.org/sisters [2].

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