

Day one of Sudan vote peaceful - and hopeful

Christina S.N. Lewis | Jan. 9, 2011

Juba, Sudan

Juba Archbishop Paolino Lukudu Loro was smiling after casting his vote late Sunday afternoon towards the end of the first day of a weeklong referendum that will likely lead southern Sudan to split from the North.

Southern Sudanese packed the polls all day Sunday and so far, fears about violence or voter tampering appeared to be unrealized.

"Everybody is just very happy and very peaceful," said Mr. Loro, as he prepared to leave the polling place, the Hai Jelaba Basic School. He gestured towards the crowd of roughly hundred men and women waiting patiently in line. "They don't want any war or any trouble. They want peace. And I think these people have decided to live their own lives as Africans and as peacefully as possible."

In Juba, the capital of the region, the day was marked by a large and vibrant celebration at the polling place located near the burial site of John Garang, considered southern Sudan's founder. Southern Sudan's president Salva Kir voted as soon as the polls opened around 8 a.m., followed by a group of so-called "Lost Boys" former child soldiers pressed into service during Sudan's brutal and lengthy civil war that killed an estimated 2 million people. Refugees and emotionally scarred, many only returned to their country in order to vote.

Southern Sudan is widely Christian and animist. After years of warring with the North, which is largely Arab, its population widely favors secession. Voting will continue for a week. Presuming international observers find no irregularities, formal independence will take place in six months if all goes according to plan.

In a sign of Southern Sudan's close relationship with Catholicism, the second big event of the day was an 11:30 a.m. mass at St. Theresa church, Juba's largest Catholic church. President Salva Kir and U.S. Senator John Kerry sat side-by-side at the very front of the church in two large armchairs. (Both men are extremely tall and lanky.) Actor George Clooney also attended.

Sen. Kerry, whose Catholicism became a political issue when he was once denied communion because he is pro-choice political advocacy, spoke at the lectern on the importance of faith, humility and forgiveness.

"It is faith that has brought the people of southern Sudan to the brink of nationhood," said Kerry. "And it is faith that will carry you through the coming months and into a future that is at the same time bright with promise even as it is filled with challenges."

Clearly intending to encourage continued peace among the Sudanese people, who must not only maintain close economic and political ties with the north even if secession occurs, but must also maintain unity among the different tribal and ethnic groups within its own borders.

"Every organized religion, every single philosophy of life on this planet, all of them, embrace a shared commitment to the golden rule," said Kerry. "Do unto others, as you would have them do unto you. These concepts have never been more vital to your future than they are today."

?So,? he continued. ?If you see beyond the sins of the past and move together with your brothers and sisters in the north you can create a partnership that will leave violence and hatred and war behind and work together to benefit all the peoples of Sudan.?

International experts emphasize that Sudan?s future stability remains in doubt. The country has little infrastructure or developed industry. While it has a wealth of oil, it is landlocked. The refineries are located in the North, which is led by President Omar Al Bashir, an indicted war criminal. Mr. Bashir denies those charges. In recent days he has said his government will accept an independence vote, however, he also said that southern Sudanese living in the North would be treated as foreigners.

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