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Sudanese bishop: South marching toward independence

by Dennis Sadowski by Catholic News Service

WASHINGTON -- A bishop in northern Sudan said he believed the people of Southern Sudan were "marching toward the goal of what they expected, to be free in dignity and respect of rights," as a referendum on independence passed the halfway mark.

Auxiliary Bishop Daniel Adwok Kur of Khartoum wrote Jan. 12 from the town of Kosti in northern Sudan that the polls remained calm. At least two observers from the South reported that voting there was also going well.

Most observers expected the people of Southern Sudan to vote to separate from the rest of the country. Southern Sudanese in the country's North as well as those who fled to other countries, including the United States, were allowed to vote beginning Jan. 9.

However, Adwok said many people from Southern Sudan living in the North voted against independence, fearing they would face reprisal from the Islamic government in Khartoum if the South seceded. In many locales in the North, the bishop said, all or almost all registered voters had been to the polls by Jan. 12.

Southern Sudan is largely Christian and animist and also is rich in oil reserves, but remains largely undeveloped. The region makes up about 25 percent of the entire country of Sudan.

International news agencies reported Jan. 12 that more than 60 percent of registered voters had cast ballots during the first three days of the weeklong voting period.

Preliminary results of the vote are expected in February.

Adwok also expressed concern about clashes between southern police, youths and refugees and northern Arab nomads along the still-uncertain border between North and South. At least 46 people have died in

five days, Reuters reported Jan. 12.

In the South, Sister Margaret Scott, a member of the Sisters of Our Lady of the Missions from New Zealand, told Catholic News Service in an e-mail Jan. 11 that the atmosphere in the village of Riimenze was positive.

"At our place 75 percent of the registered voters have already voted, so we see the people are eager to have their voices heard," she wrote. "At the polling stations there are orderly queues and many people voting. All is good so far."

John Ashworth, acting director of the Denis Hurley Peace Institute in South Africa and an adviser to the Sudan Ecumenical Forum, which includes the Catholic Church, said voting in Juba also was smooth and peaceful.

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"It is calm, peaceful and well-organized," he wrote in an e-mail Jan. 11. "People are very happy and enthusiastic, but still calm."

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