

Sudanese bishop sees peace despite attacks

Dennis Sadowski | Catholic News Service | Jun. 16, 2011

WASHINGTON -- Despite the threat that fighting along the disputed border between Sudan and the soon-to-be independent Southern Sudan could linger for weeks, a Catholic bishop from the region expressed hope that the two nations will co-exist peacefully.

Bishop Eduardo Hiiboro Kussala of Tombura-Yambio, Southern Sudan, said in an online chat June 15 that the new nation will face serious challenges as it evolves and that a concerted effort is needed to avoid the violence the region faced during 21 years of civil war.

Fighting in Sudan's South Kordofan state continued June 15, nearly a month after erupting after state elections. While sporadic clashes began soon after residents in Southern Sudan voted to secede from Sudan in a January referendum, the violence intensified as troops from the North have sought to control key areas bordering the oil-rich states of Unity and Upper Nile.

Southern Sudan will assume about 75 percent of Sudan's daily oil production when it becomes independent July 9.

The conflict threatens to return the region to war, six years after more than two decades of civil conflict ended with the implementation of the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement that led to the referendum on independence. Both sides have been able to resolve key issues related to separation under the agreement, but disputes over the border flared into violence in recent weeks.

The day of independence will be a day of joy for the people of Southern Sudan, Bishop Kussala said in the chat.

"The biggest obstacle could be the lack of capacity and accountability by the South Sudanese themselves, followed by the international reluctance to stand by this new country and not being able to prevent an external force that can destabilize this new country," he said.

The most recent attacks by the government of Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir were aimed at the ethnic Nuba people around Kadugli, the South Kordofan capital. Attacks in May centered on Abyei, farther to the south, near the undefined border. Abyei is home primarily to members of the Dinka Ngok tribe, supporters of the government of Southern Sudan.

Human rights advocates said the series of attacks amount to ethnic cleansing and are similar to the campaign Sudanese troops carried out against the Nuba in the early 1990s.

The United States warned Sudan June 14 that it would discontinue efforts to normalize relations if it continued to pursue military means to address differences with the South over Abyei and South Kordofan.

Anglican Archbishop Rowan Williams of Canterbury and the Lutheran World Federation condemned the mounting aggression and indiscriminate violence against civilians. In statements released June 14, both urged

government forces to open corridors to allow humanitarian aid to reach people displaced by the fighting.

Archbishop Williams said the new Anglican cathedral in Kadugli had been burned down and that the conflict risked becoming "another Darfur."

Bishop Kussala said the church and the government of the largely Christian and animist south have maintained "a good working relationship."

"The church has a moral voice on behalf of the people and, beyond that, we expect the government to do all they can do to protect people's lives. This has to be spelled strongly in the new constitution to protect the lives of the people and to protect the sacredness of life," he said.

The violence in South Kordofan forced all of the population of Kadugli to flee, said Coadjutor Bishop Michael Didi Adgum Mangoria of El Obeid, the diocese that includes the state. The United Nations placed the number of refugees at 60,000.

The Sudan Ecumenical Forum -- which includes the Catholic Church -- reported that refugees witnessed Sudanese government troops going door-to-door, hunting the opposition.

About 6,000 people camped outside of the U.N. Mission in Sudan compound seeking protection. Others fled to the compound of Caritas Internationalis partner Sudan Aid in El Obeid, said Bishop Mangoria.

Sudan seized Abyei May 21 after accusing troops from the South of attacking one of its convoys. The occupation and violence against the Dinka Ngok led them to abandon the city.

A referendum on whether Abyei would join the North or the South was scheduled for January but never occurred because of disagreements over who could vote. The Sudanese government insisted that the nomadic Misseriya, a northern-aligned tribe that takes its cattle to Abyei during several months of the dry season, be allowed to participate, but that was rejected by the permanent residents of Abyei, largely the Dinka Ngok.

Bishop Kussala was scheduled to testify about the needs of Southern Sudan before the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health, and Human Rights June 16.

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