



Department of Justice, Peace and Human Development Office of International Justice and Peace

Background on South Sudan February 2018

“Of particular concern is the painful news coming from suffering South Sudan, where a fratricidal conflict is compounded by a severe food crisis, which...condemns to death by starvation millions of people, including many children... May the Lord sustain these our brothers and all those working to help them.”

--Statement from Pope Francis, 2017

BACKGROUND

After four tragic years of civil war and seven failed peace agreements, the conflict in South Sudan continues. Fighting has taken the lives of tens of thousands, imposed near starvation conditions on about 5 million people and forced some four million from their homes. The armed conflict broke out because of a longstanding ethnic feud within the ruling South Sudan People’s Liberation Movement (SPLM) party and the SPLA military over access to power and resources. The government faction and the military, led by President Salva Kiir, and the opposition party (SPLM-IO) and militia, led by former Vice President Riek Machar, agreed to an end to the fighting in August 2015 and reformulated the government, but this too collapsed in July 2016. Since then, Riek Machar’s forces have been largely routed and dispersed into the periphery of the country. In addition, the two factions have splintered into numerous militia groups and new armed groups have arisen, some of whom conduct attacks outside of any central control and with total impunity.

Payton Knopf of the United States Institute of Peace explains that the fighting has devolved from a war between government Dinka and Nuer factions to include more local or regional issues. Resistance has begun against President Kiir’s regime in Juba by the population of the surrounding Greater Equatorial region in the south. A long-standing battle over land between the Dinka and the Shilluk in the Upper Nile has erupted. Nuer clans are at war in Unity State. The Dinka are striving to establish primacy in the northwest of the country, and diversionary “crises of convenience” in Lakes and Jonglei have been exploited by President Kiir and his allies to defeat opposition to the government.

The regional 8-country Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), supported by donor nations including the United States, brokered a High-Level Revitalization Process in 2017 to restart peace talks. Negotiations continue to search for a formula to stop the fighting, to set up a transitional government and then prepare elections to be held in 2018-19. Already, the United States and the European Union have imposed sanctions on government and military leaders accused of crimes or blocking an end to the fighting. In February 2018, the United States imposed a unilateral arms embargo on South Sudan and urged other involved countries to do the same. After years of failed negotiations, IGAD members and the Africa Union are also threatening their own sanctions.

The civil war has crippled the country’s society and economy. Seventy percent of school-age children have no access to education. Almost half the population lives in hunger. In 2017, the official currency exchange rate was 3 Sudanese Pounds to 1 U.S. Dollar, but on the black market it is now almost 20 to 1. Today the exchange rate is over 130 pounds to the dollar. Oil represents 99% of exports and over 90% of government revenues. The fall in the international price of oil and the reduction in oil exports due to the civil war means that the government is now running a large deficit. Because donors are not willing to lend the government money, the deficit is covered by printing money. This has created an annual inflation rate of over 100% that negatively affects those living in cities and deepens poverty.

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The UN also says that it needs over \$1 billion to cover emergency needs for 2018. Since 2011, the United States has committed over \$11 billion in assistance to South Sudan. In 2017, the United States planned to provide \$812 million, of which about half was for emergency assistance.

Catholic Relief Services (CRS) has mobilized millions of dollars of assistance from USAID, the World Food Program and other donors for humanitarian relief, recovery activities and peacebuilding. CRS and its partners are providing emergency food, shelter and household goods, seeds, and tools to the victims of the fighting. CRS is also providing water and sanitation facilities in many schools in Jonglei state.

Despite the crisis and the negative impact it has had on the Catholic Church, the Church in South Sudan has been an outspoken witness for dialogue and peace. The Catholic Archbishop of Juba, Paulino Lukudu Loro, is the ‘elder statesman’ of the faith leaders in the country; he is often the spokesman for the faith communities. The Church conducts its public advocacy work in its capacity as a member of the South Sudan Council of Churches (SSCC). The Church and the SSCC have been courageous in their condemnation of the violence caused by the government and opposition leaders. With financing from CRS and USAID the SSCC is implementing a three-part Action Plan for Peace. The Church is in regular contact with top level government leaders, IGAD leaders in Uganda, Ethiopia and Kenya to urge them to stop the senseless violence. At the middle level of society, the Church convenes religious, ethnic and administrative leaders to resolve local issues of conflict. At the grassroots of society, the Church organizes reconciliation sessions between people who have suffered from the violent conflict. They also hope to restart an international advocacy initiative with their respective faith communities in donor nations in Europe and in the United States to increase international engagement for peace. A visit to Washington, DC is planned for April 2018.

USCCB Policy

USCCB and CRS have actively supported the Church and people of South Sudan. Bishop Cantú, then Chairman of the International Committee, made a solidarity visit to South Sudan in July 2015 and again in 2017. In July 2017, Bishop Cantú wrote a letter to Secretary of State Rex Tillerson to urge him to work with the international community and IGAD to pressure the government of South Sudan to encourage them to participate fully in the High-Level Peace Revitalization talks. Staff have met with State Department and National Security Council officials and leaders in Congress to urge them to support the revitalized peace talks.

The Church in South Sudan, USCCB and CRS continue to urge the U.S. Government to:

- Work with the International Community and the regional countries to support the revitalization of the peace agreement;
- Urge IGAD countries to increase their pressure on the South Sudan Government to end the violence, install an interim government, and prepare for free and fair elections as soon as possible;
- Continue to provide robust funding for humanitarian, recovery and peacebuilding programs;
- Support the United Nations Peacekeeping and conflict monitoring efforts to end the sporadic fighting; and
- Continue funding efforts to promote dialogue and reconciliation by CRS, the Catholic Church and the SSCC.

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