

**Written Statement for the Record
of
Catholic Relief Services (CRS) and
The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB)
for
the U.S. House Committee on Foreign Affairs,
Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health, Global Human Rights and International
Organizations
February 26, 2014**

Two and half years after the birth of South Sudan, violence has erupted as a result of a political dispute that has devolved into fighting between the nation's largest ethnic groups – Dinka and Nuer. There is a fear that if the fighting does not end soon, South Sudan will descend into civil war. Tragically, the effects of civil war could spread into the wider region should peace efforts fail and humanitarian needs remain unmet.

The USCCB has worked with and supported the Catholic Church in South Sudan for many years. Working with Catholic Relief Services (CRS), the USCCB has made many solidarity visits to Juba and Khartoum. CRS and USCCB have hosted numerous South Sudan Church delegations in the United States and helped facilitate meetings with Congressional and Administration leaders.

CRS, founded by the U.S. bishops in 1943 as the official relief and development agency of the Catholic community in our nation, has been working in South Sudan since 1983. CRS works closely with the Catholic Church and Caritas/South Sudan to assist those in need. Unfortunately, the lack of security and limited humanitarian access have greatly limited our response, and existing programs in the insecure states of South Sudan have been halted. While CRS negotiates modifications of these programs, CRS is providing shelter, hygiene, and assistance in the form of blankets, soap and other necessities to 4,000 vulnerable internally displaced (IDP) households in Awerial, an area that is more secure. CRS continues to assess the situation in Jonglei and Malakal, and plans to extend assistance to vulnerable populations once access opens up and security is in place. CRS is currently preparing and positioning supplies which will allow us to reach up to 12,000 IDP households, with the capacity to increase numbers as new areas are assessed.

As of February 17, approximately 716,100 people are reported as displaced in South Sudan, and 156,800 people have fled to neighboring countries¹. In the past week, the number of people estimated to have left the country to Ethiopia or Uganda has risen by 27,000. The actual death toll is unconfirmed, but suggested to be around 10,000.² The Sudan Catholic Bishops' Conference has called this period in their history, "a time of crisis, perhaps one of the gravest situations we have ever faced." (#3) This is a telling statement coming from a Church and a people who survived 40 years of civil war.

¹ OCHA – South Sudan Crisis – Situation Report #20 (17 Feb 2014) - http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/South%20Sudan%20crisis_situation%20report%2020_as%20of%2017%20February.pdf

² New Estimate Sharply Raises Death Toll in South Sudan. New York Times. 9 February 2014.

The humanitarian situation in many areas is extremely grave. NGOs such as CRS and international organizations have difficulty accessing the worst hit locations due to insecurity in the towns and on the roads. Access for humanitarian aid, especially in the opposition controlled areas is a significant challenge. There are serious concerns for food security in 2014 and going into 2015. If people in conflict affected areas are not able to sow crops before the end of the planting season (April) the situation will become dire. The UN reports that this could place over 3 million people at severe risk of acute food insecurity³.

The bishops call for major change in the way the country should be run: “South Sudan must never be the same again. There is no longer ‘business as usual’. Now is the time for our nation to rise from the ashes, but not to take up where the old one left off. Now is the time for a new nation.” (#5)

CRS and the USCCB make the following recommendations to the U.S. Government:

- 1. Affirm U.S. Government commitment to South Sudan.** The U.S. Government must show strong leadership in South Sudan, as it traditionally has, through its full presence in addition to robust funding. Currently, the United States is sending mixed messages through its wavering physical presence in the country. We recommend that the U.S. Government re-establish its diplomatic presence in Juba to help better coordinate implementing partners and to promote effective communication between U.S. policymakers and key local, national and international actors in the conflict.
- 2. Provide adequate humanitarian assistance.** As violence continues, the need for humanitarian assistance is growing, yet humanitarian access is uneven. With over 3 million persons at risk of hunger, we call for the U.S. Government to provide adequate and immediate resources directly to NGOs that are on the ground and operating, with a recognition that development activities, such as agriculture and livelihoods, are also essential to stave off an impending food crisis. Funding should not just be reprogrammed, but additive, so that humanitarian relief can take place alongside essential livelihood activities.

We also call for the U.S. Government to provide the necessary resources and attention to urgently attend to the pockets of displaced people stranded in areas surrounded by other ethnic groups, putting them in great danger.

Addressing humanitarian needs should not wait for any political process to advance. The lives of those in dire need should not take a backseat to any other priority.

- 3. Prioritize reconciliation.** If the country is to have any chance for a stable peace, priority must be given to reconciliation processes. CRS is providing major support for the Church-led Committee for National Healing, Peace and Reconciliation and plans to support the Catholic Secretariat to engage more in higher level advocacy and dissemination of critical messages to help restore societal relationships.

³ South Sudan Crisis Response Plan – January to June 2014 (03 Feb 2014) - http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/South%20Sudan%20Crisis%20Response%20Plan_January%20to%20June%202014%20%281%29.pdf

The Bishops of South Sudan said: “Our history is an open wound that desperately needs healing... Negative narratives fester and poison our social relations. We retell them in our villages to our children. Let us end these vicious cycles by creating space where we can speak and work towards peaceful coexistence and reconciliation.” (#9.d.)

We urge the USG to work with the Government of South Sudan, the international community and other donors to strengthen reconciliation efforts through institutions such as the National Justice and Peace Commission and the Committee on National Healing, Peace and Reconciliation. These processes are essential to heal wounds that have been reopened.

- 4. Pressure all sides to ensure that the leaders from the Church and civil society take part in the IGAD talks in Ethiopia.** It is important to include civil society and religious leaders formally in the peace process. Currently, Church and civil society leaders are being excluded from the IGAD talks in Ethiopia, and those at the table are the political leaders who have instigated the crisis. The bishops of South Sudan “are critical of the exclusion of the Churches and other civic forces from the peace talks in Addis Ababa...despite the leading role the Churches had played in advocacy and working for peace.” (#11.)

In addition, the U.S. Government, alongside the international community, should work with South Sudanese government leaders to prioritize and facilitate negotiations and dialogue to resolve internal political disputes. South Sudan must avoid reverting back to a default military style of leadership that cannot “be allowed to destabilize the nation” (#9) for personal gain, as the Bishops said.

- 5. Call for much needed military reform.** Many of the military entities engaged in the current strife are less organized forces and more collections of units with loyalties to individuals and their ethnic groups. All armed groups not part of the SPLA must go through a DDR program.
- 6. Support investments in infrastructure, and promote the role of civil society.** South Sudan will continue to need investments as a nascent government. The U.S. Government should continue to recognize the importance of strengthening civil society, and leadership despite the current turmoil, and where possible, continue to fund development programs that had been working to build the capacity of these institutions.