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Sudan's precarious vote on independence

Jerry Filteau | Dec. 23, 2010

Catholic schoolchildren in southern Sudan participate in a procession through the streets of Juba Nov. 20 to pray for a peaceful January referendum on secession. (CNS/Paul Jeffrey)

After decades of civil war, the people of southern Sudan face a referendum Jan. 9 on whether to remain united with the north as one country or secede and form their own separate nation.

An overwhelming vote in favor of independence is expected, but whichever way the vote goes, ?Sudan will never be the same again, because the people have exercised their free and democratic choice,? the nation?s Catholic bishops said in a statement Nov. 14 during their plenary meeting in Rumbek in southern Sudan.

Despite six years of relative autonomy for the south -- and a truce in the 20-year north-south civil war while preparing for the referendum -- tensions have been mounting as the referendum date approaches.

?We are acutely aware of the uncertainty, fear and even despair that burden the people of Sudan,? the bishops said. ?The buildup of troops on both sides of the north-south border is not conducive to peace. However, these tensions need not and should not lead to war.?

The threat of war is far from abstract. ?No one knows what?s going to happen next in Sudan, not even the Sudanese,? said Dan Griffin, Sudan advisor for Catholic Relief Services for the past seven years.

?This [referendum] is urgent because it?s a fundamental transformation that will happen on the African continent, for good or for bad,? he said.

That is why Catholic Relief Services has devoted some $4 million over the past 18 months to peace-building efforts: what Griffin described as ?the largest country-specific nonemergency intervention in the agency?s history -- with the idea of doing emergency prevention rather than emergency response.?

Reports on the decades of north-south conflict in Sudan often refer to the political hegemony of the predominantly Arab and Islamic north, including the civil imposition of Shariah, or Islamic religious law, on the predominantly Christian and animist peoples of the south.

John Ashworth, a longtime advisor to the Sudanese Catholic bishops and to other Christian churches there, said in an e-mail, ?I have never liked this characterization, as it makes it seem that it is mainly a religious war, rather than emphasizing the more complex dynamics of identity and power? underlying the conflicts in Sudan.

In a lengthy status report this September for IKV Pax Christi, an interfaith coalition in the Netherlands, Ashworth wrote, ?Sudan is a multicultural, multiethnic, multireligious, multilingual country. However in practice, at least since independence in 1956, one identity, Arab-Islam, has dominated, imposing itself on others and making them feel like second-class citizens in their own country.?

In addition, he said, Sudan?s highly centralized governance has created a dynamic ?where peripheral areas and their people feel marginalized at every level -- power, wealth, resources, development, etc.?

It is widely expected that a vast majority of southern Sudanese will vote for independence. With a simple majority of 50 percent plus one needed to decide the referendum, that is not the crucial question.

A 60 percent voter turnout is required to validate the referendum. International observers have expressed serious concerns about whether the ruling National Congress Party will try to subvert the referendum by tactics designed to prevent tens of thousands of south Sudanese from casting their votes, although Ashworth said the attention critics have brought to those issues ?seems to have had a positive effect on the registration process.?

The virtually unprecedented peaceful secession referendum will be the culmination of six years of preparation that began Jan. 9, 2005, when the National Congress Party reluctantly signed a Comprehensive Peace Agreement with the Sudan People?s Liberation Movement to end a civil war that had raged for more than 20 years and caused an estimated 2 million deaths.

The Sudan Catholic Bishops? Conference and the Sudan Council of Churches have been key players in efforts to prepare for a peaceful transition to independence for a territory about the size of Texas, roughly a quarter of Africa?s largest nation.

The multimillion-dollar effort of Catholic Relief Services to educate people on the referendum and prepare them to make the transition peacefully is without precedent. Much of it involves an extensive information and education campaign by radio, since the vast majority of southern Sudanese is illiterate and has no access to television.

Gerard F. Powers, director of Catholic Peacebuilding Studies at the University of Notre Dame?s Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies, called the proactive Catholic Relief Services program ?remarkable.?

?Never before? has a Catholic organization put such resources into a program of conflict resolution and reconciliation to anticipate and prevent civil war and a new humanitarian crisis, he said.

Notre Dame hosted a forum in October for Sudanese bishops Daniel Marco Kur Adwok, auxiliary and vicar general of the Khartoum archdiocese, and Paride Taban, bishop emeritus of Torit, when the two were visiting the United States and the United Nations to urge international support and monitoring of the January referendum.

Adwok, in a letter at the time to all Americans and especially Americans of Sudanese origin, said the issues surrounding the referendum are still numerous and complex.

?Issues of border demarcation, transboundary rights, international treaties and conventions, foreign debt and shared natural resource management, including oil production and water usage, remain unresolved,? he said.

?Hunger and insecurity in the Darfur region and the southern states threaten the conditions for peace and the conduct of the referendum on secession guaranteed through the CPA [Comprehensive Peace Agreement].?

Among concerns that could lead to renewed violence following the referendum, said Stephen Hilbert, Africa expert for the U.S. Catholic bishops? Office of International Justice and Peace, are how it will impact the ongoing conflict in Darfur and how the north, in the wake of a secession vote, will treat the hundreds of thousands of southern Sudanese who live in the north.

?There is a fear,? he said, ?that if the south goes for independence, Darfuris will conclude that the only way to go is the way the south did? -- heightening conflict in that region and confronting the Sudanese government with another possible loss of territory.

He said Sudan?s Catholic bishops have carefully avoided telling their people how to vote in the referendum, but in their statements they have made it clear that the central government has not taken steps needed to make unity attractive.

In his letter to Americans, Adwok said that several issues ?hold the potential for Sudan?s return to violence if they are not resolved.?

?First, the border states of Southern Kordofan and the Blue Nile ... will remain potential flash points until the legitimate aspirations of the people of those two states are met,? he said. ?These two areas lie partly north of the 1956 boundary and were not granted the right of self-determination as called for by the church?s ?Let My People Choose,? but were instead granted a ?popular consultation? about their form of government without the options for an exercise of ?self-determination? like in the south or autonomous rule for themselves.?

?Let My People Choose? was a landmark 2002 statement of the Sudan Council of Churches outlining ?the right of the people of southern Sudan to self-determination? and to freedom from what the document called ?internal colonialism? in a formally independent nation.

The Comprehensive Peace Agreement of 2005 provided for separate referenda by the southern states as a group and the border area of Abyei to determine in January 2011 whether they wished to secede from Sudan or not.

For two border states, Southern Kordofan and Blue Nile, it only allowed a ?popular consultation? to indicate to the legislatures of those states and to the presidency what the citizens want. Many of those states? citizens were part of or supported the southern Sudan People?s Liberation Movement, and many observers believe that if those states also had an opportunity for a referendum, they would become part of the secessionist south.

In their statement this November the Sudanese bishops said, ?The popular consultations for Southern Kordofan and Blue Nile do not give the people the chance to exercise their right of self-determination. Decisions will be made by the state legislatures and the presidency, and doubts have been expressed as to whether this will truly fulfill the aspirations of the people of these areas.

?This too can lead to tension and ultimately conflict, which could draw in the rest of the country,? the bishops added.

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