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On eve of Sudan vote, Cardinal tells Catholics: 'Stay involved'

by Christina S.N. Lewis



Churchgoers at a service in Juba, Sudan Jan. 8. (NCR photo/ Christina S.N. Lewis)

JUBA, SUDAN -- Nearly four million Sudanese began voting today in a referendum that could bring a new country into being. The polls opened around 8 a.m. local time here in south Sudan, roughly the size of France.

Last night, on the eve of the momentous vote, South African Cardinal Wilfrid Fox Napier advised Sudan's church leaders to remain actively engaged in state affairs.

"One of the biggest mistakes we made as a church in South Africa was to withdraw from the process too early," said Napier, 69, in response to a question from *NCR*. "I think what we needed to do was to be there walking with them and constantly guiding them to keep the model principles of justice and right and equity in sight all the time."

Napier, as Archbishop of Durban, helped mediate between the two sides during South Africa's

dismantling of apartheid in the early 1990s.

Southern Sudan has virtually no infrastructure outside the capital, few paved roads, schools or healthcare facilities. The Catholic Church, through its schools, healthcare facilities and particularly its network of radio stations, has been critical to shepherding the country to this day peacefully.

The cardinal spoke during a question and answer session with local reporters shortly after landing at Juba Airport Saturday afternoon on a Kenya Airways flight that also carried former United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan.

Roughly 3.9 million Sudanese (including those living outside the country) have registered to vote on whether the South should secede from the North. The vote came about as part of a 2005 comprehensive peace agreement that ended Africa's longest-running civil war.

Napier was greeted at the airport by the Archbishop of Juba, Paolino Lukudu Loro. The two men hugged enthusiastically.

"It's been a long time," said Napier, grinning.

"You are welcome, welcome, welcome," responded Loro.

Napier will remain in Sudan until Wednesday, and will stay at the Archbishop's residence.

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For an update on the progress of the election in Sudan, see Christina Lewis' latest report: **As Sudan vote begins, fears of violence seem unrealized**

Napier was also greeted by several members of Juba's Catholic community, including local bishops, representatives from several religious orders, employees from Catholic Relief Services and a group of students from the Catholic University of Sudan.

On Sunday, Southern Sudan's polls open for the first day in a week-long voting process. Napier will celebrate Mass at Juba's cathedral. Expected attendees include Southern Sudan's president, Salva Kir, a devout Catholic, and U.S. Senator John Kerry, also Catholic.

Across Southern Sudan, which is mostly Christian, Sudanese of all faiths prayed for a peaceful vote.

In Juba, the capital city, hundreds of men and women crowded into St. Theresa Church during an all-day ecumenical worship service that was repeated in parishes throughout the country, according to local church leaders.

The vibrant service included speeches and prayers by many priests as well as lively music led by a choir.

"Hallelujah, hallelujah," called out one minister, who spoke in both English and Arabic. "Are we happy?"

The minister asked the congregation to pray for four things: law enforcement, including the police, the prisons, and national security; peaceful co-existence between tribal groups; the church's successful

promotion of reconciliation; and for development in southern Sudan of agriculture and infrastructure.

The minister also asked individuals to pray for their own spirits.

The service took place in an Episcopal church, but was attended by Catholics and Christians of other denominations. During the service, the audience engaged in charismatic prayer, raising their hands during the songs and speaking their own prayers. Many cried. Others knelt on the floor and placed their bowed heads on the pews.

A host of prominent leaders and politicians (as well as one Hollywood actor) have been in Juba this week in advance of the vote.

Sudan, the largest country in Africa, is also home to the continent's longest civil war between the Arabic North, led by President Omar Al Bashir, and the largely Christian and Animist south, led by Mr. Kir. South Sudan is the size of France.

Sudan's troubles captured the world's imagination -- particularly of people in the United States -- in the early 2000s, when reports of slavery, forced child soldiers, and religious oppression of Christians shocked the global conscience.

International observers are spreading out across the country to monitor the vote. Reports of scattered violence trickled into the capital today, alarming officials concerned the attacks might scare people into remaining home. Over 60 percent of registered voters are women.

Meanwhile, Sudan's occasional resident celebrity George Clooney flew back into Juba from Abyei, an area on the north-south border claimed by both sides. Many expect it to be a powder keg.

Clooney has been using his celebrity to draw attention to Sudan. On Thursday, the A-list actor was seen hanging out at a restaurant frequented by many Americans taking pictures with aid workers.

Also in town was U.S. Senator John Kerry, who flew in from Khartoum. Kerry hosted two press conferences, one with Kir at the presidential palace, another at the Southern Sudan Referendum Bureau -- where the votes will be tabulated.

Kerry sought to reassure the international community of the U.S. and President Obama's continued commitment to Sudan, saying the president receives a brief on Sudan each day.

During a brief question and answer session, Kerry addressed the tense issue of Sudan's inclusion on the U.S. list of countries that sponsor terrorism.

Kerry said that the U.S. would reconsider the listing if the referendum went peacefully and said that unrest in Darfur, to the west, remained a concern. However, he implied that the review would not be lengthy.

'There is strong argument that it can and should be lifted,' Kerry said.

For Christina Lewis' full interview with Cardinal Napier, see: Cardinal Napier: Sudan's church must 'walk with,' 'guide' politicians. Look for more coverage of the vote in Sudan from Christina S.N. Lewis through the weekend. Lewis is in the country for *NCR* as part of a weeks long reporting trip to Africa. Follow her reports at: Africa: A Reporter's Notebook.

Editor's Note: See the slideshow below for pictures Christina Lewis took in the days leading up to the Sudanese election.

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