

Catholic officials: South Sudanese will need patience

Bronwen Dachs Catholic News Service | Jul. 11, 2011

CAPE TOWN, South Africa -- Catholic officials cited the need for patience and a focus on what the people of South Sudan have achieved as the church prepares to walk alongside the world's newest country on its path to peace and development.

In "achieving their right to self-determination," marked with a July 9 independence ceremony in the capital, Juba, the people of South Sudan have "what the better-educated and better-fed people of Libya, Yemen and many other countries are looking for," said Dan Griffin, adviser on Sudan to the U.S. bishops' Catholic Relief Services.

"Their potential and hope give them a tremendous advantage," he told Catholic News Service in a July 10 telephone interview from Juba. He noted that the 8 million citizens of South Sudan "may not have phones, banks or roads but they do have rights and dignity and a government of their consent."

A 2005 peace deal that ended Africa's longest-running conflict led to a January independence vote in which nearly 99 percent of the residents of the South voted to secede from Sudan. At least 2 million people were killed in Sudan's last civil war, fought from 1983 to 2005.

The people of South Sudan "have a very sincere appreciation of what has been achieved" and "while they are mindful of the challenges ahead, they know they are on the right path," Griffin said.

Bishop John H. Ricard, retired bishop of Pensacola-Tallahassee, Fla., said it is crucial that the church "continues to play a strong role" in South Sudan after its independence.

"The church in South Sudan needs to support and challenge the government to ensure a just and equitable society," he said.

Bishop Ricard, who traveled to Juba to represent the U.S. bishops' Committee on International Justice and Peace at the independence celebrations, said South Sudan's independence made official the divide that has always existed.

When it gained independence from Britain in 1956, Sudan was two distinct regions and peoples -- a dry, Arab-dominated North, and a more lush, ethnically African South -- joined into one.

"The people of South Sudan have the vision and will to establish a state and to move forward," Bishop Ricard said, noting that "they will need outside help to achieve this, which we need to provide."

Steve Hilbert, Africa policy adviser to the U.S. bishops' Office of International Justice and Peace, said there is a "sense that people in South Sudan are willing to start from scratch."

"They're saying, 'Yes, we're poor and we have a long way to go but we are now masters of our own destiny,'" after five decades of conflict and oppression, Hilbert said in a July 10 telephone interview from Juba.

As well as building basic infrastructure, such as schools and clinics, in South Sudan, there is much work to be done in developing a "democratic government that practices good governance," Hilbert said.

Vincent Bolt, Sudan country representative for the Catholic Agency for Overseas Development, the official aid agency of the English and Welsh bishops, said that 800,000 people are expected to return from the north to South Sudan and, since October, "350,000 people have already made their way home."

"It's a challenge to reintegrate" the returnees into rural life, he said, noting that many had lived in cities such as Sudan's capital, Khartoum, in the 20 years they were away. They had moved north in search of peace and work.

Until a peace agreement was signed in 2005, southern rebels fought successive wars with the North, leaving millions of people dead and the region in ruins.

There is mistrust between northern and southern leaders, who still need to agree on issues such as the border, citizenship for residents in disputed regions, and the split of revenues from oil reserves, which are largely located in South Sudan.

Griffin and Bolt said church aid organizations will continue their work in Sudan as well as help build the new country.

The church "is a major service provider in the South and North," Bolt said in a July 10 telephone interview from Juba, noting that the rights of minority groups in the North "are of particular concern to the church."

There is a "strong feeling of warmth toward the church" in the region, he said.

"There has been conflict in Sudan for 50 years and in all that time the churches were the only functional institutions here," Bolt said.

The church's religious leaders and strong structures -- "the schools, clinics, weekly Masses" -- held firm and people were able to rely on the church, he said.

Griffin said there is an "enormous role" for the church in South Sudan "in developing civil society and being involved in nation-building."

While the new country is rich in oil, minerals and fertile land, it is one of the world's poorest and least-developed places.

"While the achievement of independence should not be belittled, the event should not distract" the world's attention from the ongoing violence in the region that affects hundreds of thousands of people, Bolt said.

The Nuba Mountains in Sudan's South Kordofan state have seen deadly clashes between northern troops and pro-southern militia in the run-up to southern independence.

In June, Bishop Eduardo Hiiboro Kussala of Tombura-Yambio, South Sudan, told Catholic News Service that the danger of war is great if troops from Sudan continue their attacks in an attempt to control key areas along the unresolved border.

While sporadic conflicts began soon after residents of the South voted overwhelmingly to secede from Sudan, the violence intensified in May as Sudanese government troops sought to control key areas in South Kordofan, which borders oil-rich areas.

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