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Acclaim, joy, caution and worry greet birth of South Sudan

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A man dances during South Sudan's Independence Day ceremony in the capital, Juba, July 9. (Reuters/Goran Tomasevic)

The global community has greeted the world?s newest nation with acclaim, joy, caution -- and not a few worries.

The Republic of South Sudan formally came into being July 9, amid celebrations throughout the world and as words of hope and encouragement poured in from global leaders, including U.S. President Barack Obama.

?Today is a reminder that after the darkness of war, the light of a new dawn is possible,? Obama said in a statement that marked formalized diplomatic relations between South Sudan and the United States.

The mood in the capital of Juba was joyous -- as midnight struck, crowds joined in dancing and singing, and long-standing ethnic rivalries and tensions seemed to disappear, said an eyewitness, who observed that when the new national flag was at last raised and unfurled, ?the euphoria in the air defied all description.?

Church services in the predominantly animist and Christian nation, where there are as many as 2 million Catholics, also took on special poignancy as southerners celebrated independence from the predominantly Islamic north.

The cause of southern Sudan had long been championed globally by Christian churches of all stripes, and humanitarian efforts in southern Sudan have long taken pride of place among such Roman Catholic agencies and humanitarian alliances as Catholic Relief Services and Caritas International.

Yet behind the joy is a tragic history and sober realities: a decades-long war between northern Sudan and the south cost 3 million lives. And in recent weeks, the joy of South Sudan?s imminent independence from Sudan -- following a referendum earlier this year -- was overshadowed by Sudanese military provocations in border areas, such as South Kordofan state, which remains part of northern Sudan but has a long history of support for southern independence.

In his inaugural address, South Sudan President Salva Kiir Mayardit declared that ?a happy day like this should

not dwell on bad memories.? But it was impossible not to recognize, he said, ?that for many generations, this land has seen untold suffering and death. We have been bombed, maimed, enslaved and treated worse than a refugee in our own country. We may forgive but we will not forget.?

Yet Kiir said ?the people of South Sudan do not harbor any bitterness towards our erstwhile compatriots? -- and as if to prove it, Sudanese President Omar Hassan al-Bashir attended the independence ceremonies in Juba.

?Our people by their attitude and actions will demonstrate to our Sudanese brothers and sisters and to all our neighbors that we are indeed their partners in peace -- committed to the principles of good neighborliness,? Kiir said.

Yet suspicion of the northern Sudanese government remains high. Commenting on ongoing political realities, South Sudan commentator Chol Kelei wrote that the Sudanese government ?should never be trusted and those who think that South Sudan independence is a gift from [Bashir?s government] are completely wrong.?

?[The government] did not give us independence; it is hard-fought accomplishment through the blood of millions of people of South Sudan, Blue Nile and Nuba Mountains,? a reference to locales where the war between north and south was bitterly waged.

Kelei added that a strategy of ?power control is heavily entangled with continuation of war in Abyei, Darfur, South Kordofan, and Blue Nile states? -- regions of Sudan that border the south.

An international aid worker who works for an agency with church ties and is based in Juba told *NCR* July 14 that clearly ?the trouble brewing along the border with the old ?north? Sudan [will continue], clouding hopes for peace and stability for this brand new nation.?

?Friends fortunate enough to have escaped have lost their homes and all their belongings and some, their loved ones,? said the worker, who did not want to be identified because of continued political tensions.

?Corroborated reports of aerial bombings and violent crimes against the ethnic black Nuba civilian population has aid workers and U.N. agencies in a quandary on how to respond to the tens of thousands displaced and injured,? the aid worker said. ?The Bashir government has blocked humanitarian access and a political agreement ending the hostilities looks very bleak.?

While the immediate prognosis for peace along the border areas remains gloomy, South Sudan is, even just momentarily, savoring a moment of pride and hope. Even with huge challenges such as widespread poverty, illiteracy and ethnic tensions, the new nation, the aid worker said, ?is a land where faith in a power greater than humankind dominates.?

?This augurs well for the future where religious institutions like the churches can continue to play a strong role as moral duty bearers and watchdog of the government and a one-party state. Although there are high expectations, there is also a high level of tolerance, hope and goodwill.?

[Chris Herlinger, a writer for the humanitarian agency Church World Service, is a New York-based freelance journalist who reports frequently on humanitarian issues for *NCR*. He is the coauthor of the book, *Where Mercy Fails: Darfur?s Struggle to Survive*, published by Seabury Books.]

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