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Crisis grips a fragile new South Sudan

by Chris Herlinger

Editor's note: The following is Part 2 of a two-part series on decade-long humanitarian efforts in Sudan, a country plagued by war and other crises. Part 1: Activists strive to bring attention back to Darfur crisis

It all began with such high hopes.

At its creation, the Republic of South Sudan was welcomed with open and enthusiastic arms by an international community that had acted as midwife to its painful birth. Here was a country that had fought for years for its independence from Sudan. The cost exacted was considerable. In both war and in repression, famine and hunger, as many as 2 million people died over a 22-year period.

But in the two-years-plus since its July 2011 independence, South Sudan has found itself embroiled in internal political battles that have destabilized the young nation, weakening its already fragile social and humanitarian fabric.

Numbers alone tell a story that this is no ordinary crisis. Though problems had been escalating throughout 2013, the all-out conflict that began in December resulted in thousands of deaths and more than 800,000 persons fleeing their homes, according to the United Nations.

Adding to the problem: Nearly 145,000 have fled to neighboring countries, including Ethiopia, making this a serious regional crisis.

"It's been a huge, huge event," Jehanne Henry, a senior researcher with New York-based Human Rights Watch, the prominent human rights watchdog and advocacy group, told *NCR*. "It has shaken South Sudan's nationhood to the core. It's set back an already fragile country."

The truce signed in late January by the government of South Sudan and the opposition Sudan People's

Liberation Movement, known as the SPLM, cooled the situation somewhat. But longtime observers of southern Sudanese politics are skeptical as to whether the truce can hold. As of February, negotiations continue.

Skepticism is based on worries that the key players in the immediate conflict -- President Salva Kiir and his former vice president, Riek Machar, whom Kiir has accused of trying to overthrow him by a coup -- are playing old-style political power games.

Such political one-upmanship is reminiscent, they say, of the sort of politics the authoritarian Khartoum government played in South Sudan and in other poor, marginalized parts of Sudan in order to maintain power and cast Sudan as an "Arab" and not "African" nation. (That project became all the more urgent, the argument goes, during the civil war in southern Sudan because the region is not predominantly Muslim, but an area of predominant animist and Christian religious practice.)

They come out of the same deliberate system of exclusion," Niemat Ahmadi, president and founder of the Washington, D.C.-based Darfur Women Action Group, said of South Sudan's leaders. "When you come out of a system like that, you use the same tactics to maintain power. The same music is still being played."

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Religious leaders both within and outside South Sudan are calling for cooler heads to prevail. Pope Francis is publicly supporting continued peace efforts in the struggling country, as are South Sudan's and Sudan's Roman Catholic bishops.

"We stand at a decisive moment in the history of South Sudan," the bishops said in a pastoral exhortation issued after the cease-fire was announced Jan. 23, Vatican Radio reported.

"Fundamental choices must be made about how we deal with our past and present history, about how we govern ourselves as a nation, about how state institutions serve the poor," the prelates said.

Echoing those concerns was the executive committee of the World Council of Churches, which, in a Feb. 12 statement, condemned the recent violence, noting, "It is particularly saddening for such a young nation which is finally liberated from decades of conflicts to be caught up in a costly fratricidal war, in which a large number of innocent people who have lost their lives. ... The magnitude of the suffering and the plight of the people as a result of the political crisis and violence are destabilizing this fragile and new nation."

The World Council of Churches called for ongoing negotiations that are "inclusive of all parties and stakeholders representing all peoples of South Sudan, including churches."

In an interview with Vatican Radio, Bishop Eduardo Hiiboro Kussala of South Sudan's Tombura-Yambio diocese noted that the church and representatives of other religious and civil groups have been excluded from peace talks.

In a pointed criticism of the South Sudanese leadership, the bishop said that, in the present crisis, "the people who are taking part in the negotiations are the very people who are involved in the conflict. Many of them are armed men and they are those in leadership. And the silent majority does not have any part of it. So we are saying the church and civil society needs to be consulted hence to see which direction our

country needs to take."

"We have been close to our people," Kussala added, "and so the church has consistently focused on justice and peace, on observing the rule of law, and campaigning for stability in the country."

The South Sudan crisis has also caught the attention of U.S.-based activists, both Sudanese and non-Sudanese, who have spent a decade involved with advocacy work centered on the western Sudan region of Darfur. They all agree that the turn of events in the south have been dismaying. The creation of South Sudan was, they say, seen as a beacon of sorts for Sudanese "living on the peripheries," in areas often in conflict with the government in Khartoum, whom its critics say rules Sudan with an authoritarian cast.

"I expected tension, but not at this level," said Ahmadi. "We had hoped South Sudan would be an example for others. If South Sudan became a successful country, it could be an example for other marginalized Sudanese who wanted change."

Ahmed H. Adam, a visiting Darfur scholar at Columbia University in New York and a co-chair of its Two Sudans Project, said he and other Sudanese are "disappointed but remain hopeful the people of South Sudan will be able to fix the problem."

"A failed South Sudan is not an option," said Adam, a former spokesman for the Justice and Equality Movement, known as JEM, one of the armed opposition groups that have been engaged in now-stalled peace negotiations with the Sudanese government over the Darfur crisis.

"Having said that, there is a shared sense of values by Sudanese," Adam said in a recent interview on the Columbia campus. "I'm still optimistic [about South Sudan] because there are emerging movements and initiatives of civil society across various ethnic groups. I'm still hopeful."

Adam's observation is a recognition that the conflict in South Sudan is often framed as an ethnic conflict, given that Kiir, a Dinka, and Machar, a Nuer, are from different ethnic groups.

Some observers downplay the ethnic nature of the conflict, saying some ethnic element is present, but is being exploited for politics. The situation is nuanced, they say. "This is not tribal, it's about a power grab," Ahmadi said.

Henry, the Human Rights Watch analyst, said she believes ethnicity is part of the tale unfolding in South Sudan. But it has to be seen, she said, in the context of a history where peoples in Sudan have often been targeted for their ethnicities due to politics.

"A Nuer man who has [tribal] markings on his face may not feel comfortable on the street right now," she said. "Ethnicity is a proxy for a lot of other things, but it is being used as a way to target people right now."

Given that, what is needed, Henry and others say, is a new, broad-based politics that, as the Catholic bishops have suggested, is not so geared to the political elites.

"[The elites] have neglected people, so you have left people on the ground vulnerable to politics," said Ahmadi.

To New York Darfur activist Sharon Silber, the role of a genocidal history in South Sudan -- which pitted the north against southern Sudanese for decades -- cannot, and should not be, underestimated.

The leaders in Khartoum, she said, "are masters of creating chaos."

"I think the south is still suffering the effects of a conflict," Silber said, "that successfully led to their independence but was still a genocidal conflict."

[Chris Herlinger is a New York-based freelance journalist and a frequent contributor to *NCR* on humanitarian and international issues. He has reported on Darfur for *NCR* and is the co-author of the book *Where Mercy Fails: Darfur's Struggle to Survive*. He is also the senior writer for the humanitarian agency Church World Service.]

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