

# Global Christian leaders hail Southern Sudan's independence and assure continued support

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Nairobi, Kenya, July 8 (ENInews)--Christian leaders from around the world have pledged support for Southern Sudan, while hailing the region set to become an independent state on 9 July.

"We affirm our continued humanitarian support through various community-based initiatives in Southern Sudan, and look forward to stronger cooperation with your government in this area," said the Rev. Martin Junge, general secretary of the Lutheran World Federation, in a 6 July letter to the country's new president, General Salva Kiir Mayardit.

The government is urging citizens to light candles and pray in churches or public squares on the eve of independence. At midnight in Sudan, bells will ring and drums sound across the new country to mark the transition from Southern Sudan to the Republic of South Sudan.

Churches have been leading prayers this week in the region where more than 99 percent of the population voted to secede from the north, ending a two-decade civil war. Humanitarian agencies estimate more than two million people died in the struggle, fought mainly in the south.

"We are honoured to share in the joy of the much awaited birth of a new nation...whose journey for self-determination has been marked by a long and painful experience of civil war, but also a strong desire for reconciliation and peace building," said Junge.

In a letter to Kiir, Rev. Olav Fykse Tveit, general secretary of the World Council of Churches said the "continuing role of the ecumenical movement

was to accompany the people of an independent South Sudan in solidarity as they took up the many challenges and tasks of nation-building."

"The new nation will be confronted with the daunting problems of reconciliation between enemies in conflicts, healing of people traumatized by war, reconstructing a battered infrastructure, restoring its economy, ensuring respect for human rights and the rule of law and improving the people's standard of living," said Tveit in the letter, which will be read at the inaugural ceremony by his predecessor, Rev. Samuel Kobia, who now serves as special ecumenical envoy to Sudan for the All Africa Conference of Churches.

Setri Nyomi, the general secretary of the World Communion of Reformed Churches sent a congratulatory message to Kiir on 7 July. "The road to this day has been difficult and many have sacrificed. We have been praying for you and the peoples of Southern Sudan," he said. "It is our prayer that under your leadership, Southern Sudan will have a good beginning that sets the path towards peace, reconciliation, justice, security, good governance and the welfare of all."

Church leaders in Sudan are upbeat, but still express concern, since humanitarian agencies warn that several unresolved disputes, especially in the border states of Abyei and Kordofan, could spark another bloody conflict. Over 17,000 people have been displaced due to violence in the two states.

Roman Catholic Bishop Rudolf Deng of the diocese of Wau said he never thought he would see this day. "I thought our people were too weak and were not mature enough to cross ranks and make the necessary sacrifice, but they have shown it," he said. Deng said independence was not going to be easy, because the north would continue pestering the new state. "One great source of insurance, I can say, is the length of suffering of the people. A lot of people have been matured by the suffering. It has purified us."

Sudan's President Hassan Omar al-Bashir has blessed the region and confirmed he will attend the independence ceremonies. The development was praised by church officials, who say his presence will calm the international community, which feared interference from the north.