

In Southern Sudan, ecumenical movement turns to nation-building

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Geneva, February 21 (ENInews)--Having successfully brokered a historic and peaceful referendum in southern Sudan -- on 9 July the Republic of South Sudan will be born -- ecumenical organizations in Africa and around the world are focusing on the equally challenging task of helping to build the new nation.

During an 18 February briefing at the Ecumenical Centre here, three African religious leaders praised ecumenical bodies -- particularly the World Council of Churches (WCC) -- for helping create "the miracle" of southern Sudanese independence.

They warned, however, that "the journey is still long" and continuing efforts by the ecumenical community will be needed for some time into the future.

"At the end of the day, we thank God for bringing all this war to an end," the Rev. James Lagos Alexander of the Khartoum-based Africa Inland Church, told the packed hearing on Sudan during the WCC Central Committee meeting here.

"The referendum proved that the southern Sudanese are capable, please continue to accompany them," he said.

In the 9 January referendum, nearly 99 percent of voters in southern Sudan -- which is predominantly Christian and animist -- chose to secede from the Islamic State of Sudan based in the northern capital of Khartoum.

The referendum ends nearly 60 years of intractable conflict in the country -- which gained its independence from the British and Egyptian governments in 1956 -- including two civil wars that consumed more than three decades (1963-1972 and 1983-2005). During those years more than 2 million Sudanese died and 4 million were displaced.

The referendum was mandated by the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement between the north and south that churches were instrumental in brokering.

The effort was spearheaded by the Sudan Ecumenical Forum (SEF) -- created in 1995 in the midst of the second civil war -- the All Africa Council of Churches (AACC), the Sudan Council of Churches, and most recently by an SEF diplomatic team led by the Special Ecumenical Envoy, Samuel Kobia, former general secretary of the WCC.

The churches and ecumenical community will have a critical role to play for the foreseeable future, said Bishop Robert Aboagye-Mensah, a Ghanaian Methodist and vice-president of the All Africa Council of Churches.

"It is important to understand the important role of the church in making these changes possible," he said. "If the church had not accompanied the Sudanese, the CPA would not have been possible and the referendum would not have happened. Now, as this new nation is built, the message of the Sudanese to the church is 'Please don't abandon us!'"

Kobia outlined eight key post-referendum issues that must be resolved.

They include a follow-up referendum in the oil-rich border state of Abyei and further border demarcations, an oil revenue-sharing agreement, water management, disposition of indebtedness, citizenship agreements, and international and security arrangements.

Having been so active in facilitating the peace process, the churches "must enter a process of discernment about how to accompany the people in solidarity on nation-building," Kobia said.

That the referendum came off peacefully and as scheduled is widely attributed to African religious leaders and ecumenical organizations in the region and throughout Africa.

"By 2009, it was clear to Sudan churches that preparations [for the vote] were not going well," Kobia said, "so we appealed to the international ecumenical community to rescue the CPA."

The SEF team moved quickly in four directions, Kobia said: making sure that all parties to the CPA remained committed to holding the referendum as scheduled, creating a peaceful atmosphere for the voting throughout southern Sudan, promoting unity of purpose for the voting, and mounting a voter education effort.

"This was the first time voting for most Sudanese," Kobia said, "so churches dispatched 350 observers. I don't think any election anywhere has been so closely observed."

The universal conclusion that the balloting process was very valid, Kobia said, means "there was no one to dispute the results. The first to acknowledge this was Omar al-Bashir," he added, referring to the Sudanese president who stubbornly resisted the referendum.

Kobia also worries about Christians in the north, where stricter Sharia law is inevitable. "Khartoum wants no rights for Christians in the north," he said. "Many Christian churches and schools are now empty, but we still have a vibrant Christian community in the north, so we are talking with the AACC and the Middle East Council of Churches to see how we can best support our brothers and sisters in the north."