

Sudanese churches step up peace efforts ahead of independence

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Nairobi, Kenya,
May 16 (ENInews)--As independence for South Sudan approaches on 9 July, churches there are coordinating efforts to bring lasting peace to a region exhausted by a long civil war.

"The church has recommitted herself to re-engage in mediating ... for a peaceful resolution of the conflicts," the Rev. Ramadan Chan, general secretary of the Sudan Council of Churches, told ENInews on 16 May from Khartoum. The council represents Roman Catholic, Protestant and Orthodox churches.

Despite a 2005 peace agreement, renegade militia groups led by dissent military figures continue to fight with the South Sudan army. The United Nations has reported that there are seven militia groups operating in the region where the accord ended a 21-year civil war in which an estimated two million people died and four million were displaced.

On 9 January 2011, the population of South Sudan voted for independence. The United Nations now estimates 800 people have so far died there this year.

Chan said the council will send a delegation, including heads of churches and church leaders, to conflict zones. The leaders will initiate dialogue between the government and the militia groups so that conflicts can be peacefully resolved, Chan said. "The mediating team of seven... is being set up (this week)," he said. "They will begin (peace work) in Malakal, (the capital town of Upper Nile State) because it is closer to where all the conflicts are. It is in the middle between Unity and Jonglei States where the other conflicts are being staged," Chan said.

At the end of the council 18th General Assembly held in Juba from 9-11 May, church leaders urged the armed groups to come to the negotiating table. "The way of peace is always the best," said the group's statement, received by ENInews on 16 May, which also urged the South Sudan government to protect the civilian population.

Still, the council which unites churches in both north and south Sudan, resolved to remain united, retain its name and headquarters in Khartoum for a transitional period of two years after independence. "With the prospects of two nations emerging from the old Sudan, we affirm our unity as the Church of Jesus Christ, both in the North and in the South. Being one body of Christ, we are one people and we are indivisible," leaders said.

The council is also seeking guarantees for freedom of movement, freedom of worship, freedom of expression, freedom of work and freedom of residence in the two states after the independence.

At the same time, Roman Catholic Bishop Caesar Mazzolari of the Rumbek Diocese has unveiled a ten-step guide titled, "Ten Steps for Unity in South Sudan," to prepare the people for peace and unity ahead of independence. The steps are to be applied for the ten weeks from 1 May to 9 July and, Mazzolari said, are to help citizens understand what being a good citizen and a faithful Christian entails in the new nation.