

South Sudan peace unclear as talks leave out clergy, other key stakeholders

by [Fredrick Nzwili](#) in the [March 4, 2015](#) issue

While the parties in conflict in South Sudan signed a recent peace agreement, it did not include key stakeholders—faith groups among them—making long-term hopes for peace uncertain.

An estimated 50,000 people have died, and 2 million have been displaced in the latest phase of fighting, according to the International Crisis Group, a think tank that aims to prevent and resolve such conflicts.

“South Sudan’s conflict is not getting much attention due to shifting interests towards Islamic extremism,” said Fred Nyabera of Kenya, a social scientist who is director of the Interfaith Initiative to End Child Poverty at the global faith-based organization Arigatou International. “But leaving South Sudan alone at this time when the people are trying to define their identity and country, under very fragile circumstances, is to postpone a big problem,” Nyabera added.

On February 2, South Sudan president Salva Kiir and his former deputy—now rebel—Riek Machar signed a peace agreement in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, that proposes a coalition government. A power struggle between the two sparked the fighting in December 2013.

Within months, the violence took on an ethnic dimension, with government troops largely from Kiir’s Dinka tribe and the rebels from Machar’s Nuer tribe engaging in deadly clashes.

Since then, the parties have signed and broken six peace agreements.

But the peace negotiations leading to the pacts have concentrated on Kiir and Machar, leaving out religious groups, nongovernmental aid organizations, and community leaders.

“As long as the prospects of peace are seen as [the] preserve of the two, then the prospects of peace will remain bleak,” Nyabera said.

Sixty percent of South Sudan residents are Christian, 33 percent follow traditional African religions, and 6 percent are Muslim, according to the Pew Research Center.

South Sudan became an independent state in July 2011 after voting to secede from Sudan in a referendum. But independence has not brought stability to the region, ICG said in its January 29 report.

According to the South Sudan Catholic bishops, the war is about power, not about the people.

“The aspirations of individuals and factions have led to a cycle of revenge killing,” said Roman Catholic archbishop Paulino Lukudu Loro of Juba in a statement on January 30. “We say to all who are involved in any way: if you continue fighting, you will finish yourselves and you will finish the nation. The nation needs to be salvaged from this sin.” —Religion News Service

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