

South Sudan Council of Churches head holds on to hope, unity amid crisis

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Isaiah Majok Dau, head of the South Sudan Council of Churches. Photo by Peter Kenny/WCC.

As a peace deal signed a year ago falters and the world's newest nation faces famine, Isaiah Majok Dau, head of the South Sudan Council of Churches, continues to find sources of hope.

Dau, who is also presiding bishop of the Sudan Pentecostal Church, recently visited the World Council of Churches in Geneva, Switzerland, and spoke to an ecumenical network focusing on South Sudan.

"We are experiencing levels of violence we have never seen before," he said. "I talk as a church person [and] as a person who is involved in the situation every day, listening and hearing from both sides and the ordinary person in the street."

South Sudan became independent in July 2011 after decades of war against Sudanese government forces, with churches playing a key role in brokering the process.

“I also talk to you as a child of war: anyone who is in their sixties in South Sudan is a child of war,” he said. “Some of us were born just after the first war broke out in 1955. We have lived in the war, have married in the war, we have children and grandchildren in war.”

Nigussu Legesse, WCC program executive for advocacy in Africa, noted the latest emergency in South Sudan: since February a famine has left hundreds of thousands of people facing starvation or at risk.

“South Sudan is on a brink of collapse: economically, socially, militarily, and in other ways,” Legesse said. “Three years [of] conflict have eroded livelihoods and disrupted farming.”

Dau said that the conflicts that began in 2013 within South Sudan “are even more devastating because they come after we had a level of hope.”

Yet he emphasized that churches continue to play a conciliatory role.

“This is not just pie in the sky,” Dau said. “We have been in darker places before, and we came out of it because we pulled together.”

The South Sudan Council of Churches includes Anglican, Catholic, Pentecostal, and Presbyterian churches, as well as other Protestant traditions. Legesse finds it inspiring that the council always refers to itself as “the church.”

Yet there is also “a huge responsibility on us to remain together,” Dau said. “Unity is beautiful, but it is not always easy. Why is it easier to be divided rather than united?”