

South Sudan faith leaders pray for peace agreement

The latest treaty is the second attempt for South Sudan to find peace after it became independent from Sudan in 2011.

by [Doreen Ajiambo](#) in the [November 21, 2018](#) issue

During a recent Sunday service in Juba, South Sudan, Jok Chol led his Pentecostal congregation in praying for a sustainable peace after President Salva Kiir and rebel leader Riek Machar signed the latest peace agreement in neighboring Sudan.

“I want to rebuke the spirits of confusion in our leaders,” Chol prayed, amid amens from hundreds of worshipers. “We thank God and pray that he touches the hearts of our leaders so that they can embrace the new peace agreement.”

During his sermon, Chol urged his congregants to have faith and hope and to continue to pray for a lasting peace. He said they should refuse to be divided by political leaders along ethnic lines.

“We are all children of God,” said Chol, 55. “We should treat each other with the love of Jesus Christ. Please don’t do anything wrong because your leader has told you.”

Chol and his congregants are among thousands of South Sudanese gathering in churches and mosques across major cities and refugee camps to pray for their country, which has been embroiled in civil war since 2013.

After a power struggle between Kiir and Machar, conflict spread along ethnic lines, killing tens of thousands of people and displacing millions of others internally and outside the border. The economy has collapsed as a result of the ongoing war. Half of the remaining population of 12 million face food shortages.

The latest treaty, signed in September, is the second attempt for this young nation to find peace after South Sudan became officially independent from Sudan in 2011.

A previous peace deal in 2016 tried to bring warring sides together so they could find a permanent solution. But fighting broke out in the capital city of Juba a few months later, after Machar returned from exile to become Kiir's vice president as outlined in the peace agreement.

Under the new power-sharing arrangement Machar will once again be Kiir's vice president.

"I have hope in the new peace agreement," said Emmanuel Murye, bishop of the Episcopal Church in South Sudan. "We have been praying for peace to return to the country, and we are happy that our leaders are committed to bring peace."

Murye has been holding evangelistic meetings in refugee camps in Uganda, where more than 1 million South Sudanese have taken refuge. He said people in the camps have been praying for leaders to embrace the new deal.

"People want to come back home," he said. "They are tired of staying in the camp. Life in the camp is not easy because there is no food to eat and children are not going to school. They have been praying for peace, and they believe this is an answered prayer."

Others doubt the new peace deal. Fighting broke out in the country two days after the warring sides signed the latest agreement, killing 18 civilians. Kiir and Machar supporters blamed each other for the attacks.

The war for South Sudanese independence was often framed in religious terms—pitting Christians and followers of traditional religions against the Muslim leaders of Sudan. According to a recent report by Pew Research Center, Christians make up about 60 percent of the population of South Sudan, followed by 33 percent who are followers of African traditional religions. Six percent are Muslim.

Achol Garang, a catechist at the Bidi Bidi refugee camp in northern Uganda, said political leaders in South Sudan used religion as a tool to fight for independence from Sudan.

"They called themselves Christian liberators when they were fighting and promised to take us to the promised land of self-government," said Garang, 45, a mother of five who fled South Sudan in 2015. "They lied to God and that's the reason we are suffering now. We should just continue to pray for forgiveness of sins. We will get

the answer one day.”

The South Sudanese government has accused church leaders of promoting violence and ethnic divisions.

John Ashworth, who has advised church leaders in South Sudan, refuted that claim, telling Inter Press Service in Juba, “While individual clergy may have their own political sympathies, and while pastors on the ground continue to empathize with their local flock, the churches as bodies have remained united in calling for an end to the killing, a peaceful resolution through dialogue, peace and reconciliation—in some cases at great personal risk.” —Religion News Service

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