

Sudan church leaders stunned by death of John Garang: Key figure in peace deal dies in helicopter crash

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Church and political leaders are urging Sudanese to stay on the peace path after the death in a helicopter crash of John Garang de Mabior, the guerrilla leader who steered the Sudan People's Liberation Movement into a government of national unity with the dominant Arab-Islamic government of Sudan after 21 years of civil war.

"Our people are now confused, but we hope those who have remained will steer the country to peace," said Anthony Bangoye, the general secretary of the Sudan Catholic Bishop Regional Conference.

Garang was brought up a Christian and earned a doctorate in agricultural economics at Iowa State University. A former colonel in the Sudan People's Armed Forces, he was sent to crush a mutiny in 1983. Instead he began a rebel movement against the dominant Islamic north, initiating a conflict separate from that currently taking place in Darfur, western Sudan.

"The death of Dr. Garang may have serious implications for Sudan at this time of transition. Dr Garang was very instrumental in the peace process in Sudan," said Mvume Dandala, general secretary of the Nairobi-based All Africa Conference of Churches. "We appeal to the people of Sudan to be calm."

"John Garang's unfortunate and tragic death makes an already precarious peace agreement that much more vulnerable," said Lutheran World Relief president Kathryn Welford in Baltimore. "Now, more than ever, the international community needs to maintain both its political pressure on all sides to honor their commitments, and its support for the vital humanitarian and reconstruction efforts the region will need if lasting peace can truly be achieved."

The Lutheran agency designates nearly \$5 million in programming for Sudan and Sudanese refugees in neighboring countries, making this its single largest investment in one country.

Garang, who was 60, was on an official visit to Uganda on July 29 and 30. The helicopter he was in crashed while he was returning home. Riots broke out August 1 in Khartoum streets after the government officially announced his death.

Three weeks before his death, Garang took office as the first vice president of the Republic of Sudan; he was also the president of South Sudan, geographically Africa's largest country, where most of the population are Christians or adherents of traditional Africa beliefs.

Sudanese Christians had celebrated Garang's elevation as the cementing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement, in which churches played a pivotal role. It was signed in Nairobi on January 9, officially ending Africa's longest running civil war. – *Ecumenical News International*