

# Sudan's pending secession makes its future uncertain

## Experts fear secession may engulf the region in conflict

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AN upcoming self-determination referendum on January 9th, 2011, will determine whether Southern Sudan will secede from the north as its own nation, and whether Northern Sudan will vote in support.

Experts fear that the referendum could be delayed, or worse, that a possible secession of the south may engulf the country in conflict and destabilise the region.

The referendum is the last step in the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA), signed in 2005 between the major ruling political parties in the country: NCP in the north and CPLM in the south.

The peace pact put an end to a more than 20-year-long civil war between the north and the south that left 2 million people dead. The CPA gave a period of five years for both north and south to see if they can live in peace, and if unity is a suitable option.

Now the south wants to secede, however, and the north has nothing to gain from it, since oil reserves all lie in the south. Less than three months to go before the historical vote, Sudan faces numerous challenges, including unfinished border demarcation, citizen rights, handling resources, and the ongoing war in Darfur. A delay or cancellation of the referendum will also likely be unacceptable.

"I think everybody now sees how important it is for this referendum to take place," said Nico Ploojier, manager of the Horn of Africa Programme at IKV Pax Christi, a peacekeeping organisation based in the Netherlands.

"The referendum is the only

thing that people in Southern Sudan have got out of the negotiations in 2005, so they have been looking forward to this referendum very much, and after a period of peace they see it is the only opportunity," Ploojier said.

Ploojier travels regularly to Sudan and observes the situation of the country. He believes the Sudanese authorities will need to push for having the referendum on time, as the consequences could be very bad if they don't.

"It will be extremely difficult to explain to people if it is decided to postpone it," Ploojier said. "But if this happens, it cannot be with more than one to two weeks. If it is postponed, there is a fear of returning to an open conflict again."

Despite urgency surrounding the situation, the registration process for the referendum has still not begun. The Referendum Commission, consisting of Sudanese residents from both the north and the south, will announce when the registration period will begin.

The registration is not the main concern, however, as a secession requires a majority vote of more than 50 per cent. According to the CPA, it also requires that at least 60 per cent of all eligible voters must cast their votes. Ploojier noted that in the country with a population of more than 40 million, accomplishing this would be a difficult task.

"This is quite an enormous number," he said. "For example, in the Netherlands we have 30 to 40 per cent of the people coming for elections; and now we don't know who will be registered to vote in Sudan, [and] we don't know if 60 per cent of those people will come and vote."

Ploojier added that in the country with a population of more than 40 million, there is a good chance that the votes of many southerners living in the north may be manipulated, or the individual's rights may be denied.

"Southerners in the north are now being threatened that if the south votes for separation, they will be stripped of all citizens' rights. Some people are already saying that Southerners cannot access hospitals," Ploojier said. "Civil society in the north is under a lot of pressure. So we fear about the people in the north."

He added that many Southerners in the north may be forced to return to their homes in the south, although the areas may lack schools or even water. "If their situation becomes unbearable, there is a threat of exodus of people coming to the south, which would create a humanitarian disaster," Ploojier said.

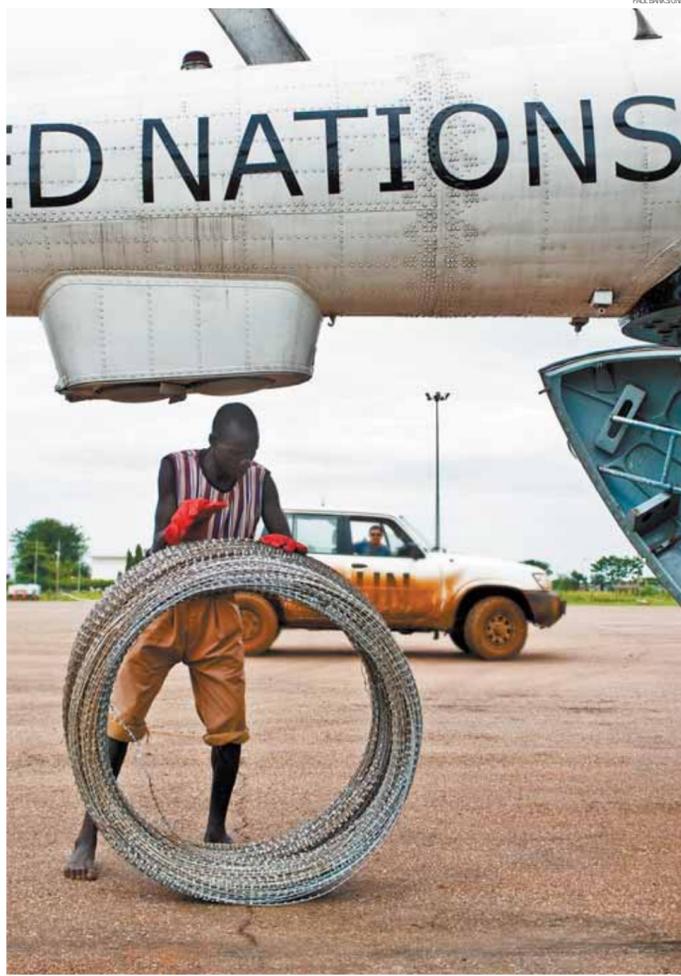
### Will the north take it?

If Southern Sudan secedes, the north may not tolerate it, as Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir will do anything possible to remain in power, according to Jacob Akol, editor of Gurtong Trust - Peace and Media Project, based in Southern Sudan.

Al-Bashir was charged with genocide and crimes against humanity in 2008 by the International Criminal Court for the genocide in Darfur.

"If Bashir thinks that having an independent South Sudan will hasten his arrest, he will find an excuse to dishonour the CPA and return to war; particularly if he thinks the international community, the United States in particular, will not fully support South Sudanese in their quest for freedom," Akol said.

He added, "On the other hand, if he thinks that the international community will be more considerate if he honours the CPA fully, then he will go for the referendum and accept whatever the outcome.



SUPPLIES: A man unloads United Nations Missions (UNMIS) equipment in Sudan

Currently it is overwhelmingly for secession for south Sudan."

According to Akol, the Sudanese government is aware it has lost the south, "but is determined to make

freedom for the south [more] painful by continuing to demand the lion's share of the south's resources, including oil, annex border territory with oil, and other mineral resources".

It also aims to continue destabilisation efforts in the south through militiamen "interested in money, as well as sponsor the Lord Resistance Army, a Uganda terrorist organisation", Akol said.

Similar to Ploojier's statement, Akol said that a long delay in the referendum may provoke riots in the south for demands of a Unilateral Declaration of Independence (UDI) - something the government of Southern Sudan may be powerless to control.

Contrary to the general stance in the south, secession is not the desired outcome for the north for many reasons.

"People, who are in power now will have the legacy of a country broken into multiple parts under their rule; most of the oil is in Southern Sudan as well," Ploojier said.

He added, "A possible secession undermines the position of the people in power in the north, because we still have the problem in Darfur, so once the south becomes an independent country, there is a big chance that other regions in Northern Sudan would also want to go for independence."

According to Ploojier, if another war breaks out, it will affect all countries surrounding Sudan, including Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, and Uganda, and will destabilise the whole region.

"We will have to see [if] there is a system which will make sure the separation is a peaceful one," he said. "The question now is if the north will take a possible secession of the south peacefully or not. There is a risk of returning to conflict."

The role of the United Nations The United Nations is one of the guarantors on the CPA. The referendum is primarily lead by the Sudanese, however, and is managed through the independent Southern Sudan Referendum Commission (SSRC). The United Nations Mission in Sudan (UNMIS) plays only a supportive role.

"UNMIS will be coordinating international support, providing technical support in the drafting of the concept of operations, procurement, and distribution of materials for

voter registration, and for the vote itself," explains Ashraf Eissa, spokesperson of UNMIS in Sudan.

The United Nations Police (UNPOL) will train a large number of national security officers so that authorities can ensure the referendum is held in a secure and safe environment. UNMIS will provide transportation and deliver approximately 120 tonnes of voter registration materials to remote areas across the country, using the mission's air-assets.

While the UNMIS cannot monitor the polling process because it is an implementation partner for the CPA, the UN will still see to it that the referendum goes smoothly.

"In response to a request from the parties to the CPA, the UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon has appointed a high-level panel to monitor the referenda," Eissa said. "This panel is independent of UNMIS, although we do support it logistically. The panel members report to the secretary-general directly."

Eissa noted recent operations of UNMIS during the tensions and clashes in the Abyei area where the referendum is deadlocked. During the forthcoming referendum, Abyei has to decide whether to remain in the north or join the Barh el Ghazal of Southern Sudan.

"In support of UNMIS political and diplomatic efforts in the Abyei region, we have undertaken military measures in order to create a more secure environment," Eissa said.

In August, the Abyei Civil Society reported that residents of Abyei felt intimidated and complained that northern security forces were surrounding them.

Earlier the same month, Reuters reported that 75,000 people from the pro-northern nomadic Missiriya tribe began to settle in the north of Abyei, to apparently influence referendum results or derail the referendum in 2011.

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