

Prayer and patience bearing fruit in Sudan independence vote



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Residents of Southern Sudan, which is expected to become Africa's newest country, are expressing gratitude for the peace that has prevailed during a referendum on independence from the north. The country's Catholic bishops have been a leading voice for peace during the vote, which ends Jan. 15.

Sudan has not had many moments of peace as a unified country. During its 55 years of independence, the nation's ethnically and religiously-divided north and south have fought two civil wars in which 2.5 million people died. As the semi-autonomous southern region prepared during 2010 for a vote on the question of full secession, international observers feared that a third war could erupt.

But as the week-long referendum draws to a close, having reached the required 60 percent level of voter participation, residents of Southern Sudan say that their prayers for peace have been answered.

A few isolated incidents of violence occurred between Jan. 7 and 9, between southerners and nomadic tribes with northern sympathies in the oil-producing region of Abyei. But these clashes have not significantly impacted a “very peaceful” atmosphere, according to Fr. Callistus Joseph, project director at Solidarity with Southern Sudan.

“Just seven weeks ago, no one thought this was possible,” he wrote on Jan. 11, in a report from the Southern administrative capital of Juba. “Many thought that there would be another war. Many said the southerners were not prepared for this.”

“Others said that the Khartoum government ... would not let this happen.” That administration rules over Sudan's largely Arab and Muslim north, and stands to lose control of oil revenue and other natural resources if the south votes for independence, as it is expected to do overwhelmingly.

Yet in Juba, Fr. Joseph reported that thousands of people were already standing in line to vote as the referendum began on Jan. 9. By Jan. 12, more than 60 percent of the 3.8 million registered voters had successfully cast their ballots, despite overwhelming logistical challenges for organizers and citizens in the largely undeveloped southern region.

Fr. Joseph, a Claretian missionary from Sri Lanka, credited the Catholic bishops of Sudan and other Church ministries with helping to ward off hostility during the proceedings. The bishops collaborated

with several Church ministries to encourage constant prayer while educating voters on the importance of patience and restraint.

In the south, where most residents are either Christians or adherents of traditional native religions, the Catholic Church is a widely admired and trusted institution.

“We know that the '101 Days of Prayer' campaign initiated by Solidarity with Southern Sudan, which was endorsed by the Sudan Catholic Bishops' Conference and sponsored by Catholic Relief Services, has contributed to this peaceful atmosphere,” he noted.

Fr. Joseph, though not a native, deeply identified with the Southern Sudanese in their feeling of joyful anticipation. “For many of us, it is overwhelming, this feeling of joy – the feeling of being part of a privileged moment.”

Although the Catholic bishops of Sudan did not take a position as to how southerners should vote, they strongly emphasized that the Khartoum government should accept the will of the Southern Sudanese people. The independence referendum was a key provision in the 2005 treaty that ended the country's second civil war.

Stephen Hilbert, an adviser on African affairs at the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, told CNA that the Khartoum government –despite its eagerness to prevent the south from breaking away– had failed to adopt policies that would have made continued unity an appealing prospect.

He explained that after the referendum's conclusion on Saturday, Jan. 15, the next step would be for international monitoring groups –which sent an estimated 1,200 observers to compliment almost 18,000 observers from within Sudan– to register their impressions of the vote and its legitimacy.

Although the Khartoum government has challenged aspects of the registration process for failing to meet certain strict deadlines, Hilbert said that he expected the results to be largely beyond dispute– since supporters of southern independence had no need to rig the vote in their favor, nor any desire to compromise a singular chance at self-determination.

While southern Sudanese residents will most likely be celebrating their coming independence next week, Hilbert noted that some of the most contentious questions between Sudan's north and south will remain to be settled even after a successful vote for independence. These include questions about borders, debt, water rights, and the status of ethnic and religious “southerners” living in the north.

An independent Southern Sudan would not have fully separate status until July of 2011. Hilbert said that if the vote is certified as legitimate in February, the southern government will “have to manage expectations” –which are likely to run unrealistically high– in the months to come.

“The level of excitement in Juba is just amazing,” Hilbert said. “They see the light at the end of the tunnel, and it's freedom.”

But this freedom will only last, Hilbert said, if citizens have realism and restraint. “When compromise is necessary,” he noted, “the government will have to go to its people and say: 'We must compromise ...

we have to live together with the Northerners.”

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