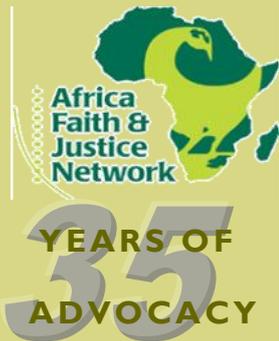


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Brief Profile of the Civil War in South Sudan

Introduction

After independence from Britain on January 1, 1956, the southern Sudan region mostly black remained united with the North of the Sudan which is Arab and Muslim. The religious presence was mixed with two large majorities, Animist and Christian and a minority 7-8% of Muslims –The gradual imposition of the Sharia law by the North resulted in two long wars – one of the longest in the world (1955-2005, with a short and fragile “peace” from 1973 to 1983) – which ended with agreements signed in Nairobi in 2005. The result of these 38 years of war were more than 2.5 million people dead and the region of the South completely devastated, impoverished and without services and infrastructures.

The resulting embryonic process of democratization peaked four years later in 2011. In that year, there was the January 9-15 plebiscite referendum in favor of secession – 98.83 % of the citizens voted for independence! South Sudan got its independence on July 9, 2011, and became the 54th country in Africa and 193rd in the world. These epochal events, aiming to unite the people have been completely undermined by the 2013 outbreak of a bloody inter-ethnic war that is still ongoing. The two major protagonists are the largest ethnic communities: the Dinka, the largest in numbers and the Nuer. Tribal fractures and difficulties have increased in the last two years, and today there are at least nine other major ethnic rebel groups in the country.

In a last attempt to bring more stability and create space for dialogue, just before Christmas 2017, the government of South Sudan and nine rebel factions, with the mediation of InterGovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), the African Union (AU) and Troika, signed a new agreement for cessation of hostilities. This makes more than a dozen agreements signed between them after the starting of this bloody civil war. But a few days after Christmas, the date of starting of this cessation of hostilities, the agreement had already been broken more than a dozen times in several locations of the country by different rebel armed groups and the government. While there has been no more fighting in the capital Juba since July 2016 – the month of madness and violence – the rebellion has slowly spread throughout the country. Millions of people have fled to neighboring Uganda, Sudan and Ethiopia, fearing more bloodshed. Still a long way to go for peace in South Sudan!

MISSION STATEMENT

The Africa Faith and Justice Network, inspired by the Gospel and informed by Catholic Social Teaching, seeks to educate and advocate for just relations with Africa and to work in partnership with African peoples as they engage in the struggle for justice, peace, and the integrity of creation.

A BRIEF HISTORY

Moved to action by their personal experiences in Africa, three Catholic missionary congregations namely the Missionaries of Africa, the Congregation of the Holy Spirit (Spiritains), and the Society of African Missions, founded the Africa Faith and Justice Network (AFJN) in 1983 to transform United States policy towards Africa and her people. Since that time, membership has grown and remains committed in faith to advocate in Washington, DC for U.S. relations with Africa that foster justice and peace, and to educate the public across the United States on the truth about Africa.

Where Are We?

The political struggle for power between President Salva Kiir (Dinka) and his rival, former vice President Riek Machar (Nuer), is at the root of the civil conflict that began in December 2013. After four years of belligerence, Machar agreed to return to Juba in April 2016 to cement a shaky peace agreement, signed in August 2015, which included his opposition group's participation in the Government of national unity. The deal was broken in July 2016, after five days of fierce combat between two military factions in the capital Juba. Opposition troops by Machar were defeated due to imbalance of forces and weapons in the field. However, there have been huge losses of soldiers on both sides, not counting the number of civilians (more than 1000, although the official figure reported by the Government is 300 dead). At the end of September 2016, from Khartoum – where he had found shelter after several vicissitudes – Machar urged all South Sudanese citizens to arm themselves to fight the Government of President Salva Kiir. The veteran dissident politician Lam Akol started a new rebel group called the National Democratic Movement in opposition to the current Government, and not necessarily in support of Riek Machar.

South Sudan is considered by some political analysts a country hostage to the gun class - that is, an elite group of men, as Kiir and Machar, who used violence, channeled through appeals in favor of ethnic nationalism, diverting resources and finances to their personal advantage. In 2016, an exclusive and important research titled "**The Sentry Report**" was published by the US based investigative organization Sentry, founded by actor George Clooney and human rights activist John Prendergast. The report is on corruption in South Sudan. It contains photos and documents how some prominent South Sudanese political and military figures have enriched themselves considerably by the civil conflict and their posts in the Government. The investigation focused on properties, bank accounts and foreign investment of Kiir and Riek Machar, some ministers and generals, as well as leaders of the various rebel groups.

Links between Ethnicity and War

President Salva Kiir seems to have an upper hand in the ongoing war. From Juba he has been able to marginalize and ostracize his main opponent Machar and troops loyal to him. Machar for over a year now is under house arrest in South Africa, controlled by local and international police in the wrong and persistent belief that the South Sudanese conflict will stop or at least can be mitigated. Membership to an ethnic group is often used as a simplistic explanation of the conflict and of the atrocities committed against civilians by both sides since December 2013. Surely the mass killings of the Nuer people by Dinka paramilitary groups in the capital Juba were the pretext to the origin of the outbreak of the war, which at first was only a political dispute. Since then, Kiir and Machar have successfully mobilized key groups of their respective communities. The consensus of Salva Kiir among the Dinka, however, is not unanimous because he is seen as the one who promotes ethnic interests for the same restricted group – Jeng Council of Elders – to the detriment of other clans of Dinka less influential. Even the Nuer is not a united group: there are, in fact, inside them, some leaders remaining loyal to the Government and to the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA), especially in some parts of the State of Unity whose capital is Bentiu.

The big issue of the IGAD peace accord of August 2015 was to interpret the conflict exclusively as a race for power between Kiir and Machar, although this was only the tip of the iceberg.

The problem, in fact, is much more complex and a solution must involve an agreement with a more global scope since there are other rebel ethnic groups. In South Sudan there are a total of 64 different ethnic groups. At this particular moment, the main parties involved in the ongoing civil war are troops of President Salva Kiir representing the government and the opposing forces are of

former vice president Machar. Other minor rebel groups include the Shilluk, Bari, Zande, Balanda etc. There some groups in the region of Equatoria who have collaborated in the past with the SPLA, and are now opposed to both Dinka and Nuer hegemony. From time to time new factions arise against the ruling Government, but who are not necessarily in favor of opponent Riek Machar.

In the country there seems to be more than 600 "military generals," a number which equals almost that of the United States of America or Russia. Some generals belong to the regular army, others opposition forces, and others have set up their own autonomous ethnic militia. Some move from one political faction to another driven by personal interests or the clan of origin. The loyalty of these generals and their troops, however, is usually to the tribe and the tribal chief.

From South Sudan's independence in July 2011 up to December 2013, the Kiir government had drawn in many integrating rebel groups in the national army and gave military and money to hundreds of generals and soldiers, some of who have then become ministers at the national or local level occupying key roles in the 35 States in which South Sudan is now divided. What sustained this corrupt system was the oil money, but now the extraction is to the minimum because many of the oil wells are damaged or have been destroyed by the Civil War. Only two oil fields remain and oil is exported via the Khartoum-Port Sudan pipeline.

War Is A Dirty Business

The testimonies of refugees from the former South Sudanese state of Central Equatoria speak of attacked and looted villages, raped women, and young children forcibly enlisted in rebel troops. The civilian population is starving, and theft and plunder are the order of the day, legitimizing illegality. A local journalist, Jacob Lagu, reflected intensely on the fact that violence in South Sudan is increasingly polarizing ethnic communities. In this regard he writes: ***“War is a dirty business. Inevitably degrades us all. It decreases our humanity as well as dehumanizes our enemies and adversaries. We're all stuck in a narrative of victimization. All parties are believed and feel strongly victim of injustice. Each party in the conflict believes that their opponent is an aggressor who does not want to repent. This state of affairs that you live at all levels is caused by tribalism.”***

In July 2016, the response of the United Nations was a completely inadequate intervention by the blue helmets to protect the civilians. It followed a tough political and diplomatic debate with the South Sudanese government which led to the decision to send in a contingent of 4,000 soldiers under the auspices of the UN, called the regional protection Force. But Kiir has made it clear that he will not accept any interference, and the fact that the SPLA has already assassinated several members of the UN international forces is a clear message for potential nations intending to send troops to South Sudan. Currently there are over 12,000 UN soldiers in the country.

There are no winners in war. We are only vanquished, and, in the case of South Sudan, the country has become totally adrift and is at the last place in the world's indices of life for its citizens, despite having enormous potential for economic and social development. A dream shattered after only six years of independence.

Recruitment of Child Soldiers Continues

Five years have passed since the beginning of the civil war in 2013. Children continue to be recruited by regular armed forces and armed rebel groups. According to recent UNICEF data 1,300 minors were enrolled in 2016. This leads to more than 19,000 total children used in the conflict that started. **“Now that the fight intensifies – and despite the repeated promises by all to end**

the recruitment – the children are once again targeted,” said a senior UN official. After several negotiations, SPLA's armed forces and rebel armed groups released 1,932 children in total, 1,755 in 2015 and 177 in 2016. And in January 2018 they released more than 300 children. Both sides have signed agreements with the United Nations to put an end to and prevent the recruitment and use of children.

Since 2013, UNICEF and its partners have documented: 2,342 children killed or mutilated; 3,090 children abducted; 1,130 children sexually abused; and 303 episodes of attacks or military use of schools or hospitals.

The War on the Media

The conflict has entered a new and more delicate phase. It is very difficult to know what's really happening, given the obstructionism by the Government that leaves no leaked information, providing unreliable and sometimes false news, if not completely silent on attacks and events in some parts of the country. It is well documented that security services in South Sudan have arrested, tortured and pressured and used violence against journalists and the threat against them is ongoing. In these four years of fierce civil conflict there have been dozens of cases of journalists either killed, beaten, tortured, injured and left for dead along the road or in the cemeteries of the capital. Many journalists have left South Sudan for safety reasons. It is clear, therefore, independent media is under threat and Government information is unreliability.

People are Suffering and Dying

On July 9, 2017, the government of South Sudan celebrated the 6th anniversary of the birth of this new state, but nearly five of these years were passed by its population in a civil war, which caused millions of refugees to go to Uganda, the Democratic republic of the Congo, Sudan, Kenya and Ethiopia and led to thousands of deaths of which we shall never know the precise number.

Amnesty International (AI) has denounced that a new front of the conflict in South Sudan has caused atrocities, terror and hunger, and hundreds of thousands of people have been forced to abandon the fertile region of Equatoria in the year 2016.

In June 2017, AI reported that government and opposition forces committed crimes punishable under international law, including those of war against humanity. **"The rise of hostilities in the Equatoria region has meant even more widespread brutality against civilians. Men, women and children were killed, stabbed to death with machetes and burned alive in their homes. Women and girls have been kidnapped and subjected to group rapes,"** said Donatella Rovera, senior Consultant at AI for crisis responses.

After fighting in the northern states of South Sudan among the Nuer, the conflict has moved to the Southwest in the regions richer in water, fertile land and forests, i.e. in the Equatoria. For almost three years, the Equatoria region in South Sudan had been spared from the conflict that exploded in 2013. Around the middle of 2016, both government and opposition forces headed towards Yei, the strategic center of 300,000 inhabitants, 150 kilometers southwest of the capital Juba, along an important commercial artery that winds through Uganda and Democratic Republic of Congo.

Government forces, supported by local militias including the notorious and unpunished "Mathian Anyoor" (mostly composed of young Dinka-ethnic fighters), are responsible for a long line of human rights violations. Although on a smaller scale, armed opposition groups have also committed serious abuses. Numerous eyewitnesses from the villages around Yei, told Amnesty International how government forces and allied militias killed numerous civilians deliberately and relentlessly.

In one of these cases, on the evening of May 16, 2016, the soldiers arrested 11 men from the village of Kudupi, near the Ugandan border. They forced eight of them to enter a hut, closed the door, then set the hut on fire and shot the men blindly. According to four of the survivors met by AI, two of the prisoners were burned alive and four more were killed by bullets.

Joyce, a mother of six children of the village of Payawa, explained what happened on May 18, when her husband and five other men were killed by soldiers: **"It was the fifth time the army attacked the village. The previous times had taken things, they had taken away men to torture them and girls to rape them, then they had freed them. They also did it to Susie, my husband's niece, aged 18. It was last December 18, 2016."**

On May 21, 2017, nine inhabitants of the village of Gimuni were abducted by soldiers. The local police found their bodies, marked by the blows of machetes, around the middle of June. So far no one has been held accountable.

The attacks on the villages by government forces seem often motivated by the desire to retaliate against the armed forces of the opposition active in the area. The opposition fighters are accused to have deliberately killed civilians they suspected of siding with the Government or merely being ethnic Dinkas or refugees from the Nuba Mountains. With the intensification of the fighting, the number of abductions and rapes of women and girls grew dizzy.

"The only way to be safe for women and girls is to be dead. There's no way to be while you're alive. It's bad to say but the situation is this..." said Mary, 23, mother of five children. In April 2017, three soldiers broke into Mary's house in the middle of the night and two of them raped her. She moved to another abandoned house, but one night a stranger set it on fire, forcing the family to flee once more.

Women are in danger of being raped, especially when, due to the scarcity of food and the continued looting, because they go to find something to eat in the fields around the villages. Sofia, 29, said that she was abducted twice by armed opposition groups. They held her captive with other women for a month the first time, and for a week the second, raping her repeatedly on both occasions, although she pleaded to be spared as a mother of three children and widow of a man killed by governmental forces. Later, Sofia fled to Yei where she has great difficulty in providing for her family.

Access to food is extremely limited. Both the government and opposition groups have blocked food supplies in certain areas. Instead they themselves loot the markets and private homes and target those who try to pass along the front line even with a minimal amount of food. Each of the parties accuses civilians of delivering food to the enemy or being fed by the later.

In Yei, where most of the inhabitants have fled in the last year, the few remaining civilians are practically under siege. They hardly are able to go look for food in the fields. On June 22, 2017, the United Nations warned that food insecurity reached unprecedented levels in South Sudan. Joanne Mariner, Senior Consultant of AI for crisis agreed with the UN assessment saying: **"It is cruelly tragic that this war has turned South Sudan's barn, which a year ago could feed millions of people, into a death camp that forced nearly a million people to flee in search of salvation,"**

Over the past four years, there have been examples of superficiality and non-intervention by both the United Nations and the South Sudanese Government in order to protect citizens from assaults from all sides of the conflict. The testimonies we have reported in these lines are proof of it.

Hope for South Soudan

What is surprising is that, despite everything, there is still so much hope in the hearts of the people. There are, in fact, many people of goodwill who are offering concrete support and assistance to the South Sudanese population, seeking to take it on a journey of reconciliation, necessary and urgent, despite the fact that the government does everything to create obstacles. The Churches – religious, missionaries, volunteers and laity – are working together with South Sudanese citizens to build pockets of peace where to experience reconciliation between the different communities. In this direction of building peace and reconciliation was the opening of the Good Shepherd Peace Center, built in the village of Kit, about 15 km from Juba. The birth of this ecumenical center took place on the impulse of the Religious Superiors Association of South Sudan (RSASS), formed by 47 Catholic congregations and more than 500 religious members, in collaboration with the Local Church. The center offers opportunities for interethnic integration, human and spiritual formation and healing from the traumas. It is a sign of hope and a point of support and inspiration for the construction of a lasting peace for the citizens of South Sudan.

At the beginning of January 2017, a few days after my departure from South Sudan, we Comboni Missionaries lost the mission of Lomin Kajo Keji, fallen into the hands of the rebels first and the government later. One of the more effective and organized missions in South Sudan, located in one of the most prosperous areas, has been looted and totally destroyed which forced our Comboni priests and sisters to follow the displaced people in the refugee camps in Uganda.

Pope Francis, who strongly wishes to go to South Sudan and who hopes to do so in 2018, has repeatedly pointed out that good and peace is not achieved with arms. He said: **“It is an absurd contradiction to speak of peace, negotiate peace and at the same time, promote or allow the trade of arms that causes so many innocent victims. Among other things, insecurity and instability are exacerbated the greater the spread of weapons. It is not human to remain inert while so many of our brothers and sisters, for the selfishness of a few, suffer untold violence. It is therefore necessary to have a global involvement, not easy but not impossible.”**

**Father Daniele Moschetti, MCCJ
Comboni Missionary**

Fr. Daniele Moschetti, Comboni Missionary, is author of the recent book “South Sudan: the long and painful journey towards peace, justice and dignity” (In Italian language) Introduction of Pope Francis, with contributions by Fr. Giulio Albanese, Bp. Giorgio Biguzzi, Fr. Tesfaye Gebresilasie, Fr. Alex Zanotelli (2017 Dissensi Edizioni)

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