
SUDAN

AT THE CROSSROADS

A Report on the Museum's Bearing Witness Trip

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From September 19 to October 3, 2010, Mike Abramowitz, Director of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's Committee on Conscience and a former journalist, and Andrew Natsios, Distinguished Professor in the Practice of Diplomacy at Georgetown University and a former USAID Administrator and Presidential Special Envoy to Sudan, traveled throughout South Sudan to assess the conditions as it prepares for the January 9 referendum on independence from the North. They were joined by Lucian Perkins, a prize-winning photographer and journalist.

They held meetings with close to 100 people, including the President and Vice President of South Sudan, six cabinet ministers in the Government of Southern Sudan (GoSS), the Speaker of the Southern Sudan Legislative Assembly, and the President of the Central Bank, as well as with UN staff, humanitarians and representatives from non-governmental organizations (NGOs), southern Sudanese opposition figures, church and civil society leaders, and average citizens of the South. They visited Juba, the capital of South Sudan, as well as two key southern state capitals, Rumbek and Malakal, in order to better understand local dynamics.

They were not permitted to visit Khartoum, so this report is based on conversations with people they met in the South, some of whom travel regularly to the North. However, Mr. Natsios has had extensive interactions with northern leaders over the years.

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THE GREATEST RISK: A RETURN TO WAR

While there are a range of serious threats to the stability and security of civilians in Sudan, the single greatest risk is a return to war between the North and South. **If war breaks out, the possibility of large-scale, targeted atrocities against ethnic groups increases substantially.** Armed conflict can be avoided but only if the international community remains vigilant and engaged and makes it clear to both sides—but especially the North—that they risk serious consequences if they resort to military force to solve their political problems.

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Both the North and South have strong incentives to avoid an all-out war, including protecting the flow of oil revenues and maintaining their respective grips on power. Both sides are engaged in brinkmanship but, despite the inflammatory rhetoric of leaders, many insiders we talked to believe there would be last-minute deals to avoid war. The two sides are playing a dangerous game, however, with many unpredictable factors, and if war starts, southerners expect the North and its allied Arab militias to target ethnic groups.

The South's leadership and an overwhelming majority of its people support and expect independence from the North and will be deeply disappointed, frustrated, and angry if it is not achieved.

OTHER RISKS

The most vulnerable civilian group is southerners living in the North.

Roughly one million southern Sudanese (i.e., Dinka, Nuer, etc.) live in the North in the environs of Khartoum, and their security is a paramount concern of humanitarian and GoSS officials. In recent weeks, two top officials of the North's Government of Sudan (GoS) have directed inflammatory language at this group. Although they were publicly rebutted by GoS President Omar al-Bashir, their remarks have led many to worry that these civilians will be subjected to reprisals if the South votes for independence. The UN has developed a plan to help relocate at least half of them back to the South, but the plan will take at least nine months and there is as yet no funding for it. Few NGOs are working in this area, and those who follow the situation closely fear that any killing could happen very quickly before it is even noticed. This must be a chief concern for the U.S. government and international community.

War could well be sparked by "freelance actors."

Both the National Congress Party (NCP), the ruling party in the North, and the Sudanese People's Liberation Movement (SPLM), the ruling party in the South, have much to lose from a war, including oil revenue that has brought \$7 billion to Southern coffers alone since the ratification of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) in 2005. Both ruling parties also have serious internal political and governmental problems. Since the peace agreement, the GoSS has maintained a standing army—the Sudanese People's Liberation Army (SPLA)—of an estimated 125,000 strong. The NCP understands that another war will almost certainly also be fought in the North, possibly even Khartoum—unlike the previous civil war, which was fought principally in the South and in the country's periphery. But there are other players, or "freelance actors," not totally in the control of either central government, who could precipitate hostilities. Over the last two years, the SPLA has had to contend with several militia commanders associated with the North

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who ignited bloody mini-rebellions over political disputes. In the border region of Abyei, the Misseriya tribe could start fighting if they are not satisfied with their ability to participate in the referendum (also scheduled for January 9) on whether the oil-rich region will join the North or South. The eastern region in the North, including Blue Nile Province and the Beja tribal areas, may be at even greater risk of renewed war than Abyei.

The North-South border is now heavily militarized, according to multiple reports.

The GoS has reportedly moved its troops and heavy weaponry from Darfur to the borders near the oil-producing areas, and the South has responded by sending troops to protect itself from what it believes may either be military intimidation or outright invasion. The absence of strong command and control in either the North or South's armies could also lead to war. According to one well-informed source in Upper Nile State, after the CPA was signed in 2005, the GoS replaced the security guards in the southern oil fields with soldiers in civilian clothes and hid weapon caches in the oil-producing areas in order to prevent the South from taking over the oil fields or seizing control of them after the referendum.

The most dangerous period in Sudan's near future may not be around the January referendum but rather the July expiration of the CPA.

As South Sudan prepares for a referendum on independence some 65 years in the making, violence has actually ebbed in areas that experienced interethnic fighting in 2009. "Everyone is focused on the referendum, even the cattle rustlers," said one top GoSS official. According to UN officials, two factors led to the fighting in 2009: first, droughts and failed harvests in 2008 and 2009 caused widespread acute malnutrition and severe food insecurity; and second, in the first three months of 2009, a substantial drop in oil revenues meant the salaries of the SPLA, as well as those of militias formerly allied with the North that had been absorbed into the SPLA, were not paid and soldiers used their weapons to support themselves.

Logistical challenges and unresolved political issues make it highly unlikely that the referendum will take place as scheduled—and as the South insists—on January 9. A short delay might be acceptable as long as there is demonstrable progress on the key preparatory steps, such as the registration of voters and the printing and distribution of ballots. But given the South's soaring expectations, any extended delay, perception of voting manipulation, or an outcome that results in anything less than secession could prompt the South to issue a unilateral declaration of independence when the CPA expires in July, or even before—a scenario that could well trigger violence. The North seeks to undermine the South at every step so it will not have to face a determined adversary in the future, particularly given the North's increasing instability. The North believes that the South will be a formidable state within ten years—and thus the North will be surrounded by enemies.

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Tribal tensions are prevalent in South Sudan and could spike after the scheduled January 9 referendum on independence.

The GoSS will need support to help it manage the transition to independence and to ensure that political and social structures are created to help all its people, particularly those in the rural areas who have not benefited from the boon in Juba, the South's capital.

KEY TAKE-AWAYS

The GoS is as weak as it has ever been.

Our conversations with people in the South, as well as Mr. Natsios's long experience dealing with the North, indicate that the top political leadership in Khartoum is badly divided—despite the monolithic power that is often portrayed in the West. A hard-core Islamist faction is prepared to undermine any conciliatory steps the GoS takes. The NCP is under heavy attack by opposition groups, led by Sadik al-Mahdi and Hassan al-Turabi, for “giving away the South” and by the Misseriya tribe for their suspicions of an NCP deal on Abyei. Moreover, regional separatist sentiments are growing in Darfur, the Nuba Mountains, the Beja region of Red Sea State, and Blue Nile Province. The east may be most at risk for new conflict and most capable of sustaining a new rebellion. A coup that would replace the current government in Khartoum and abrogate the CPA is also possible.

The Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) are reportedly divided and demoralized.

Internal ethnic tensions and divided loyalties in the SAF provided an opportunity for a Darfuri rebel group called the Justice Equality Movement (JEM) to launch an offensive on May 10, 2008, that almost reached the presidential palace in Khartoum. The SAF refused to intervene to stop the rebel attack; it was instead halted by forces from the National Security and Intelligence Services, Sudan's Mukabarat. After the attack, the NCP purged the SAF officer corps to punish its members' insubordination and disloyalty—and eliminate suspected Communist, Islamist, and Darfuri sympathizers. This has further damaged military combat preparedness and demoralized the troops.

The GoS also faces the possible balkanization of its country, with marginalized populations not only in the South, but also in the west (Darfur) and the east and along the North-South border.

The NCP is not in control of the country and, as one well-informed person who has business interests in Khartoum told us, “It is fighting for its life.” Although we were prohibited from traveling to the North, we spoke to many people who have close contact or experience with the GoS led by Omer al-Bashir. Said one: “The dismantling of Sudan will be the solution” to its internal problems. Bashir himself recognizes the North has serious unity problems, even apart from the South, and there is a widespread perception

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in the South that he is prepared to let the South go peacefully as long as he extracts a final price in oil revenues and borders. The question is: Will the price be too high for the South to accept?

The South faces serious challenges that could continue to incubate violence.

The South endured complete marginalization since its colonization in 1821 by the Egyptians and Turks, as well as some 50 years of warfare—with only a brief interlude of peace in the 1970s and early 1980s—until the signing of the CPA in 2005. Since then the capital city of Juba has been transformed. It has grown from 100,000 people in 2006 to 1.1 million today (12% of the population of the South). Some 175 small hotels and dozens of restaurants have opened where there were only two before. A dozen government ministries and offices and the University of Juba, wrecked by war, have been rebuilt. More than 300,000 southerners now have cell phones. Main city streets have been paved, new electric distribution lines have been erected, and 7,000 new businesses have been registered, including eight banks, seven water bottling plants, and a brewery.

But the remainder of the South lags far behind, and without development in rural areas, a visible peace dividend, or an improvement in governance, it will become a breeding ground for the ethnic-based violence that has characterized all of Sudan since independence.

South Sudan is plagued by extremely poor health indicators, low levels of literacy (though the number of children in school has increased 400% since 2005), and severe food insecurity, which led the UN's World Food Program to divert food intended for Darfur to the South in a successful effort to avoid famine. The region remains unstable, with sporadic violence, readily available weapons and ammunition, hostile interethnic relations, and limited rule of law outside the cities. The GoSS suffers from corruption and, outside of some talented senior ministers, an unskilled bureaucracy.

International sanctions against the GoS are perceived to be a failure among some of the officials we talked to in the South.

Without commenting on the merits of sanctions, we were struck by the remarks of some senior GoSS officials who believe that sanctions have had little influence on the GoS's behavior. A top GoSS finance official stated that the GoS can get anything it wants from China, Europe, and the Middle East and described the sanctions as a "joke." The Chinese, Indian, and Malaysian oil companies have replaced Chevron—for which, according to one British scholar, there is great nostalgia in the oil fields—as the major drilling firms in the South. These Asian companies were described as much less competent in or careful about minimizing environmental damage from their operations, protecting the rights of the people in the villages near the drilling, and undertaking development projects.

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What could determine whether the North and South return to war is Khartoum's perception of the relative balance of military power between them.

Two major factors that pushed the North to negotiate the CPA were repeated military defeat at the hands of the SPLA and the South's growing military capability at guerilla warfare. Today, both armies are engaged in an arms race. Should they return to war, it will be a conventional one with heavy casualties over a short period of time and could involve retributive violence against vulnerable civilian groups, particularly in the North. The North has a growing air force, much more heavy weaponry, and a larger army, but successive purges of the military to prevent a coup or to punish disloyalty have severely damaged morale. Morale in the South is high, and its citizens will be defending their homes and families. Ethnic tensions in both military forces, but particularly in the North, make it difficult to predict which units would fight and which would refuse.

Oil revenues have allowed the North and South to dramatically expand state employment and enrich their elites.

This has upsides and downsides. It means the livelihoods of a large number of people in both the North and South depend on oil revenues and thus both sides have a vested interest in peace (the oil fields are in the South; the pipeline, two oil refineries, and shipping ports are in the North). But it also means that if war shuts down oil production, there will be widespread instability in both the North and South (but particularly in the South, which relies on oil for 98% of its revenues). Without cooperation between the North and South the oil production system cannot work.