

South Sudan's Crisis and the Elusive Peace

Jok Madut Jok – The Sudd Institute

Jok Madut Jok, cofounder of the Sudd Institute, reflects on South Sudan's turbulent year and the prospects for resolving the conflict. Last month, it was one year since the country's governmental reform and eight months since the outbreak of a new disastrous conflict. There is no movement towards peace and a military victory is unthinkable for either of the parties. Only a negotiated settlement can be a start towards restoring the loss of hope, cementing social inclusion, repairing ethnic relations and building a homegrown peace initiative.

It has been nearly eight months since fighting broke out in Juba, capital of South Sudan, on December 15, 2013, and the prospects for resolving the conflict remain ever more elusive. Soon after it was sparked off, the conflict quickly spread to cover nearly a third of the country, destroying the capital cities of Jonglei, Upper Nile and Western Upper Nile (Unity) states, causing the deaths of nearly 20,000 people, the flight of nearly 200,000 people to seek refuge in the neighboring countries, and the internal displacement of half a million, 100,000 of whom live inside the United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) camps across the country. The fighting has also exposed nearly four million South Sudanese people to disastrous food shortages and has prevented millions from planting their food crops this year, which means that the humanitarian crisis will continue well into the next year.

Essentially, the conflict started with disagreements within the ruling Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM) between the leaders currently in office and those who had lost office and are trying to topple the government on account of bad governance and lack of reforms. At the core of this unconscionable war is political ambition, with former Vice President Riek Machar Teny seeking the top office in the land after being fired in July 2013, and President Salva Kiir pegging his claims of legitimacy to the democratic elections that brought him to power in 2010. But there is no doubt that this power politics has taken on an ethnic tint, with some leaders playing the ethnic card as a way to entice their ethnic kin to support their political causes, and subsequently damaging ethnic relations and making the conflict more difficult to reconcile.

The cost of this conflict to the country has been immense, whether measured in terms of human life, destruction of infrastructure, wrecked ethnic relations, halted development projects, membership of regional and global organizations, stoppage of foreign investment, suspension of foreign development aid or the country's image in the community of nations. South Sudanese people themselves have also quickly become ashamed that their new country is once again the focus of negative attention and many have expressed shock that a country with such a treacherous liberation history would turn to infighting so quickly after achieving the freedom that so many millions of people had died for. Meanwhile, the deaths continue, as violence, disease, malnutrition and even heartbreak combine forces against children, pregnant women, the elderly and young fighters recruited and forced to fight by the rebel forces.

Fortunately, the fighting has significantly slowed, as the Sudan Peoples' Liberation Army (SPLA), the country's national defense force, has weakened the rebels, and the ceasefire agreements have opened corridors for humanitarian assistance. But there is no movement towards peace, as this conflict cannot be ended except through a negotiated settlement. No party can achieve a decisive military victory. Attempts to broker a peace deal under the auspices of the Inter-governmental Authority on Development (IGAD) have been underway in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, since January 2014. But they have progressed haltingly, stalling from time to time due to the parties' shifting negotiating

positions, if not outright intransigence. So far the talks have been talks about the talks and 'peace' is nowhere to be seen. The peace talks have become less and less about peace, but more and more about what political gains each party wishes to achieve from the process. The preliminary deals reached so far in the current process have only been agreements to agree later. The issues that have led to the delays include the dilemma facing the mediators, between aiming for a quick deal that confines the process to the main warring parties in order to end the conflict quite quickly, but at the risk of excluding important stakeholders, who might in turn become spoilers down the line; or seeking a comprehensive process that brings everyone to the table and produces a more durable peace, but at the risk of disincentivizing the men with guns and prolonging the conflict.

Convinced that a peace deal that simply restores the old status quo would only reward the politico-military elite that started this mess in the first place, the mediators have insisted on the latter approach, trying to accommodate everyone who has made their case for inclusion. These include the two main contenders, political parties, civil society, former political detainees, faith-based groups and the various communities who wish to be represented. The result of this approach, however, is that the warring parties will hardly agree to anything that threatens their power or an arrangement that seeks an inclusive government, justice and accountability for war crimes. It is therefore unlikely that the current style of mediation will deliver a peace agreement anytime soon. Their insistence on an inclusive process from the very start has begun to look like it will keep the warring parties away from the table. If the process does not reconcile the men with guns, what can civil society, mediators and former political detainees do to bring peace? Many observers have therefore pointed out that such a comprehensive process will not end the violence and perhaps a more sequenced process might prove more appropriate for such a complex conflict. What is the point in insisting on reaching a deal with people who cannot issue orders for the soldiers to stop firing their guns? It would be better to reconcile the warring parties to end the violence and then commit them, through a transitional government of national unity, to a program of institutional reforms, justice and accountability, constitutional reviews and to hold elections in three years.

After the intransigence of the parties had led to the peace talks being suspended for nearly six weeks and because of the drive for an inclusive process that the various stakeholders and the mediators were pushing for, the African Union delegation, IGAD envoys and special envoys from the United States and Norway all went to Juba in the last week of July for consultations on resuming the talks in Addis Ababa. The talks resumed on Monday August 4th, but no one is holding her breath about their success this time around, unless the mediators change their approach and the competing leaders make a genuine commitment to a peace agenda. Only the South Sudanese themselves can bring peace to their country and the foreigners, the mediators and donors who pay for the talks can only facilitate but cannot force peace on the fighters. Outsiders will not achieve peace; only the South Sudanese, especially those wielding guns, can end the violence.

At the risk of sounding too simplistic, why do the leaders of other countries have to prod, beg and pressure South Sudan's leaders to end the suffering of their own people? One can appreciate that leaders of other countries also feel responsible for people in South Sudan, perhaps out of a sense of moral obligation, for people are supposedly all connected in this modern world and a crisis in one country touches the rest of the world, or perhaps for their own geopolitical interests, for who is entirely altruistic? But should foreign leaders be seen to be more concerned about the crisis in South Sudan than the country's own leaders?

While the suffering of the people is immense and the frustrations about the peace process are serious issues that demand a concerted effort by the people of South Sudan, the country's politico-military leadership, international organizations and donor countries, it is also important to point out that the South Sudanese people are being robbed of hope for the future in the midst of the scramble to save lives. The donor countries have for the last seven months focused on 'humanitarian' responses and have suspended all other activities. While it is very important to save lives through

these humanitarian efforts, I question the value of these efforts in terms of what they leave behind when they cease. Keeping people alive is a noble cause, but doing it in such a way that sees the recipients as hopeless and captive consumers of aid, compromises their futures, the dignity of their lives, homegrown peace efforts, and the many pockets of civility where they help each other across ethnic lines in the name of humanitarianism. Humanitarian efforts have certainly kept many people alive, but what happens when the conflict is over, given that programs of cultural exchanges, community dialogue, celebration and rebuilding of ethnic relations have been swept aside as unnecessary? The national and international support that used to go to these programs as a way to cement social cohesion has been suspended, with donors arguing that keeping people alive is more important and the national government having limited resources. The result might be the same cycle, with efforts to repair ethnic relations, promote cultural exchanges, and support homegrown peace initiatives being neglected, only for conflict to emanate from that neglect.