

SOUTH SUDAN – AFRICA’S NEWEST STATE

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As the clock struck midnight on Saturday the 9th of July, the town of Juba and the people of South Sudan were all agog in celebrating a new dawn and the birth of Africa’s newest nation. More than 30 world leaders gathered in the new country’s capital, the majority of them from our own ACP countries.

This marks an end to a half-century of conflict which has taken such a devastating toll on communities and physical infrastructures. The Government of the North in Khartoum should also be congratulated for having been the first to formally recognise the independence of the new South Sudan. It takes exceptional courage to accept with equanimity the partition of one’s country in this manner. But perhaps there was no other alternative.

Earlier in the year, in January, some 4 million South Sudanese voted overwhelmingly in favour of independence from the North. This was part of the 2005 Naivasha settlement. This was a Comprehensive Peace Agreement brokered by Kenya that saw the ending of a long civil war which claimed more than 2 million lives and wreaked untold devastation on an entire region.

Amicable divorces of this sort are not unknown in history, the most classic being that of erstwhile Czechoslovakia, where the Czechs and the Slovaks, following the collapse of the Soviet Empire, voted in 1993 to dissolve the union that was put together by the legendary philosopher-statesman Thomas Masaryk. It was a separation that was done without the firing of a single shot, thanks to the statesmanship of leaders such as Vaclav Havel.

When Sudan got its independence from the Anglo-Egyptian Condominium on 1st January 1956, the country was seen as a great experiment on how Arabs and Africans could live together in peace and amity as one people. Sudan stands at the vortex of civilisational fault lines; the North representing Arab-Muslim civilisation and the South representing Negro-African, predominantly Christian culture. A zero-sum vision of politics was, however, not inevitable. Like many Sudanese patriots, John Garang, late president of the Southern Sudan Peoples’ Liberation Army (SPLA) and the jurist Mansur Khalid from the Arab North, shared the vision of a united, indivisible Sudan. Sadly, their dream could not be fulfilled. John Garang died in a helicopter crash in July 2005.

Throughout the years after independence, Southern leaders bitterly complained that the North monopolised political and economic power while their own region was kept in permanent subjection. As in Apartheid South Africa, Southerners alleged that they faced systematic racial, ethno-sectarian and institutional discrimination. These grievances were to lead to one of the world’s longest and bitterest civil conflict. For decades, the world ignored the Sudanese tragedy. The recent discovery of oil has changed the geopolitical equation.

Conflict has left a massive humanitarian tragedy in its trail. South Sudan became what the Nigerian Nobel laureate Wole Soyinka would term “the open sore of a continent”. Millions of southerners became refugees, with disease and destitution characterising the life-situation of the majority.

With a population of 8 million people and a landmass of 620 square kilometres, this resource-rich South Sudan also boasts some of the most fertile agricultural lands in the world. British anthropologist Sir Evans-Pritchard and other scholars had long studied the great Nilotic communities of this ancient region of Africa. The Dinka, Nuer, Azande and Shilluk are the inheritors of a great culture that can be traced back to the ancient Cushitic civilisations that flourished in the Nile valley since Biblical times.

Even with massive oil reserves, the leaders of the Republic of South Sudan will face very daunting challenges. The country has barely 50 km of tarred roads as compared to the North’s 2,500 km. Only 2% of the population possess the equivalent of a secondary school education. With a per capita income of only US\$300, South Sudan is among the poorest countries in the world. It is also an estimated 90 percent of the population live on less than US\$1 a day. Hundreds of schools and clinics will have to be built from scratch. The basic infrastructure needs have been estimated at over \$10 billion annually. It is a very sobering reality when weighed against an annual budget of only US\$2 billion.

An entire generation has grown up knowing war, violence and humiliation as their only life-experience. There are, clearly, wounds that only time can heal. A generation that has grown up on violence will need to be re-educated on the ways of civility. The vocation of the leaders of the new country is to hasten the process of this healing and to lay the foundations for a just and lasting peace.

South Sudan observers have been increasingly concerned about the potential for ethnic conflict which remains latent. There is also the disputed territory of Abyei which remains a touchy issue between the North and the South. Given that the oil pipeline passes through the North, how the oil wealth is shared will sooner or later have to be revisited. Tackling these problems will require political wisdom and statesmanship of the highest order.

With its vast petroleum resources and rich soils, South Sudan has most of the ingredients for its own development. The task before the leadership is to build a prosperous multiethnic democracy based on the ideals of enlightenment, solidarity and the rule of law. A liberty won at the price of so much blood and sacrifice must be jealously protected at all costs.

The Republic of South Sudan will need all the support it can get from the international development community. It would require considerable investments in infrastructure, capacity development, state building and social and economic reconstruction. I am optimistic that the ACP Group will support the new country as an important new member when they formally apply to join the ACP family of nations.

- ***(Dr. Mailafia is Chef de Cabinet of the ACP Secretariat)***

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