

June 11, 2008: Sudan: Clashes Over Abyei Underline Threats to Peace

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WASHINGTON—The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom is seriously concerned over the recent outbreak of violence in the contested Abyei region of Sudan, which serves as an urgent reminder of the fragility of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) and the need for the international community to ensure its implementation in full. The agreement, signed in 2005, ended a North-South civil war that killed more than 2 million people and drove more than 4 million from their homes. Most of the victims in the 22-year war were Christians, followers of traditional African religions, or Muslims disfavored by those in power in Khartoum. While the agreement ended the war, it cannot be said that it brought peace.

Beginning in mid-May in Abyei, units of the Northern-controlled Sudan Armed Forces and associated tribal militia brutally attacked local residents and destroyed private property, laying waste to the region's main town, also called Abyei, and driving 90,000 civilians from their homes. "The violence against civilians was reminiscent of the tactics employed by Northern forces both during the North-South civil war and in the Darfur conflict, which the U.S. government has repeatedly termed genocide," said Michael Cromartie, Chair of the Commission. "The outbreak of fighting underlined that the prospects for a lasting peace in Sudan are in peril."

Northern and Southern leaders signed an agreement late Sunday to end the violence. It provides for the return of the civilians who were forced to flee the fighting, the establishment of a joint civilian administration to run the region, and international arbitration to resolve the dispute over Abyei. While the Commission welcomes that agreement, both sides must be pressed forcefully to follow up with concrete actions. The outbreak of fighting in May resulted in part from the

international failure, including by the U.S. government, to ensure that each and every vital provision of the CPA be enacted.

The Abyei region, with its history as a crossroads between North and South, was one of the sticking points in the protracted negotiations leading to the CPA. Abyei has been particularly problematic because not only is it home to a volatile mix of rival ethnic groups with ties to North and South, but it also provided a disproportionate number of fighters for the Southern-dominated Sudan People's Liberation Army. The deposits of oil in the region, and the economic competition they engendered, exacerbated the dispute.

A special U.S.-drafted protocol, later incorporated into the CPA, called for an interim administration in Abyei, the establishment of the Abyei Boundaries Commission to determine the region's boundaries, and a local referendum in 2011 so that the residents of Abyei could choose between a special administrative status in the North or incorporation into Southern Sudan (which will also be choosing in 2011 between independence and remaining part of Sudan with regional autonomy). According to the Agreement, the decision of the Boundaries Commission was to be "final and binding"—yet President Omar Bashir has rejected the Boundaries Commission's findings, establishing the dangerous precedent that one of the parties to the CPA can, with impunity, unilaterally refuse to implement its provisions.

The Commission calls on the United States and other members of the international community to ensure that President Bashir, after failing to abide by the decision of the Boundaries Commission, accepts the decision of those called to arbitrate the conflict. "Khartoum's refusal to comply with the CPA up to now in regard to the sensitive border area of Abyei, and the assault by Khartoum's armed forces that left the town of Abyei in ruins, have threatened a downward spiral toward renewed civil war," Cromartie said.

The Commission remains seriously concerned about severe human rights violations being committed by the Sudanese government in many regions of the country, including against both non-Muslims and Muslims who dissent from the government's interpretation of Islam, as well as in Darfur. It fully supports the Secretary of State's continued designation of Sudan as a "country of particular concern" for its systematic and egregious violations of the freedom of thought, conscience, and religion or belief.

"Now is the time for the United States to tell President Bashir that nothing less than full implementation of the CPA, including provisions relating to Abyei and other contested areas, is acceptable," Cromartie said. "The international community should no longer accept delaying tactics by Khartoum. That approach has been shown repeatedly to provide nothing but an avenue for abysmal abuses."

