

Sudan Hearing - Testimony of Kenneth Bacon

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Helping to Rebuild South Sudan

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Before the

United States Commission on International Religious Freedom

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I want to thank the Commission for holding this hearing. When people think of Sudan today, they think mainly of the tragedy in Darfur, where President Bush has accused the government of Sudan with committing genocide.

However, conditions in the South also deserve attention because the fate of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement will determine the fate of Sudan.

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It is impossible to imagine peace in Darfur if the CPA does not hold.

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It is impossible to imagine democratic change in Sudan if the CPA does not hold.

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It is impossible to imagine improvements in the economic conditions and human rights of marginalized areas of Sudan if the CPA does not hold.

The CPA ended 21 years of civil war that led to an estimated two million war-related deaths, displaced four million people internally and created about 600,000 refugees.

Starting months before the CPA was signed in 2005, some two million Southerners have returned home. Most were internally displaced in camps around Khartoum, but several hundred thousand refugees have also returned from camps in Ethiopia, Egypt, Kenya, Uganda and elsewhere.

There have been setbacks. For example, the violence in Abyei earlier this year displaced between 50,000 and 100,000 people. But in general the peace has held and the returns are continuing, even though the parties to the agreement are failing to meet many of the important milestones set in the CPA.

What are people returning to? Unfortunately, when they get back to their villages and native lands, they often find a woeful lack of basic services, including clean water, health care and schools for their children.

Refugees International visited Northern Bahr El Ghazal earlier this year to see first hand the difficulties returnees face. The volume of returns has far outstripped predictions and preparations. Last year the International Organization for Migration and local authorities anticipated 8,000 returnees, but 80,000 people returned. Since 2004, more than 400,000 people have returned, comprising one-third of the state's population. The returnees are overwhelming the minimal services, devastated by two decades of war.

We found a distinct lack of wells, medication, qualified medical personal and schools. Aweil Town, the state capital, has no drainage system. In Malualkon, only 3% of the population has access to a latrine.

People are desperate to return home, so the bad conditions don't seem to be discouraging them. But the lack of water, sanitation, medical care and other infrastructure is delaying the rebuilding of Southern Sudan and leading to a whole new set of tensions between returnees and those who never left.

There are several things donor countries, led by the U.S., can do to accelerate the integration of returnees and improve conditions in South Sudan.

First, the U.S. and other donors should push the Government of South Sudan to make reintegration and recovery a much higher priority. The US-South Sudan partnership, besides security and political support, should focus on expanding basic community services, medium size infrastructures and livelihood creation in both rural and urban settings.

Second, the government of South Sudan needs help in building the capacity to help its own people, particularly at the state and local level. Last year, for example, the ministries of Water Resources and Irrigation, Agriculture and Forestry, Health and Civil Service, and Cooperation and Rural Development under spent their budgets because they didn't have the capacity to carry out their work.

Third, money currently available for recovery funding is inadequate, particularly in light of the large volume of spontaneous returns.

The CPA gives the people of South Sudan a choice; in 2011 they can vote to remain part of greater Sudan or to secede and establish their own nation. No matter which future they chose, the people of south Sudan will face many challenges as they try to build a peaceful, unified, democratic, and free society from an oppressed, war torn past.

When he received the Nobel Peace Prize, Elie Wiesel said, "Mankind must remember that peace is not God's gift to his creatures; peace is our gift to each other."

The CPA was a great accomplishment, but we must continue to nurture it and the people who are trying to make it work and realize its promise.

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