

Sudan Hearing - Opening Remarks of Felice D. Gaer

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Sudan's Unraveling Peace and the Challenge to U.S. Policy

September 24, 2008

Opening Remarks by USCIRF Chair Felice D. Gaer

As Chair of the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, I would like to thank you all for coming to today's important hearing, entitled "Sudan's Unraveling Peace and the Challenge to U.S. Policy."

The bipartisan, federal U.S. Commission has monitored events in Sudan since being established by federal law 10 years ago. We continue to be concerned that the substantial efforts made to bring peace to Sudan-through the Comprehensive Peace Agreement of 2005-are in jeopardy and that Sudan all too easily could slip into its third North-South civil war since independence in 1956.

American diplomacy placed a crucial role in bringing about the CPA, which ended Sudan's last civil war. During the conflict, religion was used as a means of enflaming and mobilizing Sudanese against their fellow citizens. The Commission called Sudan the world's most violent abuser of religious freedom.

The CPA charted the paths that Sudanese leaders and international mediators alike would have to travel to bring the country from a tenuous cease-fire to a lasting peace. The CPA provides for democratic accountability through free and fair elections at all levels of government, for rule of law, for the sharing of Sudan's oil wealth, and for respect for internationally recognized human rights, including freedom of religion or belief. The CPA is the key to Sudan's viability as a country. If the CPA fails, then Sudan will fail. The consequences would reverberate across Africa.

The United States carefully shepherded the negotiations leading to the CPA. The prospect of a new civil war in Sudan should awaken in all of us Americans a new resolve, a new commitment, to overcome the obstacles to lasting peace.

Key provisions of the CPA have not been enacted, due mostly to the intransigence and duplicity of President Omar al-Bashir. In government-controlled areas of the North, the religious freedom and other human rights protections agreed to in the CPA and enshrined in Sudan's Interim National Constitution have not brought significant changes in the government's practice of enforcing its interpretation of Islam to the detriment of those holding other views.

The brutal Northern assault against the contested oil-rich region of Abyei this past spring was an urgent reminder of the fragility of the CPA and highlighted that its implementation must be a higher priority of the Administration and international community.

The United States has to reinvigorate its involvement in ensuring implementation of the CPA. The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom has demanded that the U.S. Special Envoy on Sudan, Ambassador Richard Williamson- whom we are honored to have with us today- has adequate personnel and other support across the government that is needed to fulfill his mandate.

The current schedule for elections in 2009 and a referendum in 2011 on the South's political future cannot be delayed. They should ensure that the balloting represents a true expression of popular will and that their results are accepted and implemented.

New strategies to reach these goals are desperately needed. What is required is a recommitment of American leadership, and a realistic assessment of the challenge. Some of the urgent questions we must address frankly are:

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Has U.S policy done all it could to ensure implementation of the CPA, or as some critics have claimed, has it been "consistently inconsistent?"

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How can the U.S. government, up to now the leader in efforts to bring peace to Sudan, work most effectively with other countries to encourage full compliance with the CPA? Where are the pressure points, and what more can be done on implementation and effective monitoring?

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How do we reclaim the promise of the CPA, and indeed of a resolution throughout all Sudan, despite the crumbling environment, manipulation of the process, international distractions, and limited attention?

We think this is a challenge to U.S. policy and we look forward to hearing our distinguished witnesses' views of what must be done.

We will hear from three panels. The first, with Ambassador Richard Williamson and Earl Gast, Senior Deputy Assistant Administration for Africa of USAID, will focus on the efficacy of recent U.S. policy.

That will be followed by two panels of experts. The first, looking at new policy directions, features Susan Page, the Director for Southern and East Africa of the National Democratic Institute. Ms. Rice was a member of the mediation team that supported the negotiations leading to the CPA. The second panel also includes Khataza Gondwe, Research and Advocacy Officer for Sub-Saharan Africa of Christian Solidarity Worldwide, and Kenneth Bacon, the president of Refugees International.

The third panel will concentrate on alternative U.S. policy directions for the future. It is made up of: John Prendergast, Co-Chair of the Enough Project to end genocide and crimes against humanity; Ted Dagne, Specialist in African Affairs of the Foreign Affairs, Defense, and Trade Division of the Congressional Research Service; Dr. Douglas Johnson, former international expert to the Abyei Boundaries Commission; and Eliseo Neuman, Director for Africa, American Jewish Committee.

Our first witness is Ambassador Richard Williamson, the presidential Special Envoy for Sudan, and I would like to express my deep gratitude that he could make time in his schedule to make this appearance. Before he delivers his testimony, however, I would like to note that we are expecting several Members of Congress to take part in this hearing. Senator Russ Feingold, Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Subcommittee on Africa, was hoping to be here today, but he is chairing an Africa Subcommittee hearing right now. Nevertheless, he has asked that his statement be included in today's proceedings.

I also need to point to our time constraints here and ask each witness to summarize their prepared remarks so that we'll have enough time for questions from the Commissioners.

