

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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WASHINGTON, D.C. - The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) welcomes the start of voting for the referendum on self-determination for Southern Sudan, during which Southerners in Sudan and abroad will vote to remain in a unified Sudan or to become an independent country. The referendum is the final benchmark of the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) which ended more than 20 years of North-South civil war in Sudan. The fighting, triggered substantially by the resistance of the South's Christian and animist population to the attempts by the Northern government to impose its radicalized version of Islam, left more than two million persons killed and four million displaced.

"This is an historical and exciting moment for the people of Southern Sudan," said Leonard Leo, USCIRF chair. "While the referendum represents years of effort to end the civil war and bring lasting peace to Sudan, parties must ensure a secure and peaceful environment for all voters. The on-time start of the referendum poll is a significant achievement for the Sudanese people and for the future prospects of peace in Sudan."

USCIRF calls on the National Congress Party (NCP) in the North and the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM) in the South to fulfill their commitments to a free, fair, transparent, credible, and secure referendum. Both the government of Sudan and the government of Southern Sudan have a responsibility to caution against and prevent violence, provide security and immediately respond to any violence against voters, particularly vulnerable populations such as Southerners in the North and Northerners in the South.

“The Obama Administration and international community must maintain a high level focus on Sudan following the vote to address the many remaining issues vital for full CPA implementation and peace in the region,” said Leo. “Post-referendum arrangements on citizenship, oil revenue, and borders; the Abyei impasse; development challenges in the South; and continuing human rights violations in the North must all be addressed.”

Since its establishment by Congress in 1999, USCIRF has issued annual reports on Sudan and recommended that it be designated by the State Department a “Country of Particular Concern,” under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998. USCIRF delegations visited Sudan six times since the signing of the CPA in 2005.

USCIRF is an independent, bipartisan U.S. federal government commission. USCIRF Commissioners are appointed by the President and the leadership of both political parties in the Senate and the House of Representatives. USCIRF’s principal responsibilities are to review the facts and circumstances of violations of religious freedom internationally and to make policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State and Congress.

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