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WASHINGTON, D.C. - The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) congratulates the Republic of South Sudan on its independence and calls on the United States and the international community to strongly support the South in its democratization and development efforts.

“July 9, 2011 is a tremendously exciting day for the people of South Sudan and the world, marking the end of the Southern Sudanese’s decades-long struggle and sacrifice for religious freedom and human rights,” said Leonard Leo, USCIRF chair.

The people of South Sudan chose independence in a January referendum mandated by the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA), which ended more than 20 years of civil war between the North and the South. Of the more than two million killed and four million driven from their homes during the war, most were followers of traditional African religions and southern Christians who fought against the North’s imposition of sharia law and for religious freedom nationwide. Hundreds of thousands of Nuba Muslims also were declared apostates and targeted in the same conflict by President Omar Hassan al-Bashir’s regime. The severe nature of religious freedom violations in Sudan during the North-South civil war, led USCIRF to name Sudan the worst violator of religious freedom in the world. Since the signing of the CPA and the end of the war in 2005, religious freedom has flourished in the South, while severe violations continue in the North against both non-Muslims and non-conforming Muslims.

“The creation of South Sudan on July 9 is a tremendous achievement for American diplomacy and the work of the international community. Dedicated, bi-partisan efforts spanning the administrations of Presidents Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, and Barack Obama and numerous sessions of Congress, as well as the tireless work of many special envoys to Sudan; Roger Winter, Senator John Danforth, Andrew Natsios, Amb. Rich Williamson, Maj. Gen. J. Scott Gration, and Amb. Princeton Lyman, were central to achieving peace and creating the new country of Southern Sudan,” said Leo.

While today marks a momentous occasion, much work remains in order to help ensure the viability of this new country, one that USCIRF hopes will respect the religious freedom and human rights of all people in the South. Due to decades of conflict and underdevelopment at the hands of Khartoum, South Sudan must grapple with serious challenges including an underdeveloped infrastructure, food insecurity, inadequate access to social services, and limited government capacity to meet needs and govern effectively. South Sudan also must confront a legacy of internal conflicts and the absence of rule of law.

“It is imperative that the United States and the international community increase its development assistance to South Sudan at this important time,” said Leo.

“The United States and the world cannot miss this opportunity to help all Sudanese citizens achieve freedom and peace. I have personally witnessed this new nation’s great needs as well as its huge potential when I visited there several times as head of a USCIRF delegation. USCIRF stands with, and is ready to assist, the people of the South,” said Leo.

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.

To interview a USCIRF Commissioner, contact Thomas Carter, Communications Director at tcarter@uscirf.gov, or (202) 523-3257.