

Allison Coady
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Journeys to the world's newest nation: South Sudan
The Church's role in nation building

"Here, look at this. I'm a Canadian too!" Simon, the MP from Malakal I've met at the South Sudan Hotel proudly flashes me his Canadian passport. "I lived 17 years in a place called Hamilton, Ontario and have taught at McMaster University. Ever hear of it?"

Have I ever. A Torontonion by birth, it amazes me to find a fellow Canadian in this tiny, dusty town of Malakal in the Upper Nile State of southern Sudan. Up until recently, Malakal, situated quite close to the disputed border between the north and south Sudan, has been a hotspot for conflict and is only now learning to live in relative peace. This is my second time in Malakal; here to facilitate one in a series of workshops on conflict resolution, peace building, and good governance – critical topics for what may soon become the world's newest nation.

How did I get here? I work for the Denis Hurley Peace Institute (DHPI), an associate body of the Southern African Catholic Bishops' Conference.¹With the end of apartheid in South Africa in 1994, the Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace was inundated with demands for assistance within the country and could not begin to address the many requests coming from neighbouring countries in the region and throughout the African continent. In 2005, the Conference established the DHPI to respond to those requests. We offer our solidarity to people seeking peace, we share the lessons learned from the South African experience and we build capacity among the key stakeholders in conflict-torn states. We work throughout Africa: in Ethiopia, Sierra Leone, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Burundi, Zimbabwe, Swaziland, and Sudan. Our involvement in Sudan goes back many years and most recently we have been working to support local church leaders help keep the peace in a very fractured society.

Last year, DHPI received a request from Malakal through Pax Christi Sudan for support in building the capacity of a group of forty pastors. Because Sudan has been at war for as long as its people can remember and conditions of underdevelopment, corruption, poor infrastructure, extreme poverty and illiteracy are rife, the Church is required to take a leadership role. With little to no developed civil society, it is the Church that fills this void and pastors, ministers and priests who hold the trust of their parishioners act along with tribal heads as community leaders and key stakeholders in ending conflict in Sudan.

In other countries I have visited including Zimbabwe, civil society is far more developed and active. There are numerous human rights organizations, women's groups, and environmental lobbyists, to name a few, that are the key actors in informing and involving the general population. In southern Sudan this is not the case. The onus lies with the local Church, which finds itself in a special position to reach out across geographical and ethnic divides. In southern Sudan mission work goes beyond the physical walls of the Church. Mission work encompasses all aspects of life.

¹ The late Denis Hurley was a well known human rights activist and Archbishop of Durban for many years.

On this particular visit it is late November. The rainy season has long gone and the dirt roads have turned to dust. It is 38 degrees in the shade but it is not just the humidity that is making the people of this small but influential town anxious. The anticipation and preparations for the referendum scheduled for January 9th is occupying everyone's mind. The vote will determine whether the South will secede from the Sudan as a whole and finally be released from the oppressive hands of the Muslim/Arab Khartoum that has been accused of treating southerners like second-class citizens.

The first day of the training is going very well. The pastors are warmed up and eager to delve into more of the material on good governance and democracy. But work in Sudan does not always run so smoothly. Minutes before we break for lunch, Simon the MP, who is accompanied by armed SPLA soliders, stormed into our meeting. The large hall seems to shrink immediately in size with the soldiers' presence. Simon has shed his friendly tone from our previous encounter and has replaced it with a sense of entitlement and aggression as he explains that there was to be an SPLM political rally in the same hall that afternoon. He requests that we make alternate plans for our afternoon session and we certainly are not about to disagree. After lunch we convene our training under a small tent close to the air-conditioned hall. Between the sounds of the diesel generators and the water tanks, our participants can hardly concentrate. Then without warning the gates of the hotel compound burst open with the sound of wailing sirens and in flooded SPLA soldiers, each equipped with AK-47 rifles, and a cavalcade of military and police vehicles. The soldiers surrounded the entire compound and for a moment I found it difficult to catch my breath. Were we under attack? Luckily the sirens were silenced and doors of one of the Land cruisers opened to reveal a short, unimposing businessman who we later learned is the Speaker of the southern Sudan Parliament, the number three man in the country after President Salva Kiir and his deputy. The fear dissipates and we continue our program into the heat of the afternoon.

Life in Sudan is a life of extremes. The work we conduct in the south has been challenging but the most rewarding, as we can clearly see the rapid changes and developments in this brand new country that is being built from scratch. There were great fears leading up to the referendum that there would be damaging interference from the north and continued bloodshed caused by the notorious ethnic divisions that plague the south. The DHPI were invited to Juba to monitor the voting week in early January of this year and witnessed an unexpectedly peaceful referendum; one that has left the people there full of hope and committed to building a strong and prosperous South Sudan. The official results of the referendum will be announced in mid-February but no matter the outcome we will continue our work, supporting them for as long as they need us.

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Allison Coady works for the Denis Hurley Peace Institute and has written this article about her last trip to a town call Malakal in Sudan