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Midwives at the Birth of a Nation South Sudan Referendum January 2011

*Once in a life time the longed for tidal wave of justice can rise up,
and hope and history rhyme.*

At the invitation of the Sudan Council of Churches the **Denis Hurley Peace Institute** was invited to send an observer team to monitor the South Sudan Referendum on self-determination. The small delegation consisted of His Eminence Cardinal Wilfrid Napier, the Social Communication Officer of the Southern Africa Catholic Bishops' Conference, Fr. Chris Townsend and I. We spent close on a week in Sudan and were hosted by the Archbishop of Juba, Archbishop Paulino Loko.

The delegation was met at the airport and accompanied by a heavily armed police escort made their way to a reception in the city centre. Clearly the presence of a Cardinal at this historical moment in the history of Sudan was seen as an endorsement of how serious the South Sudan referendum would be taken in the eyes of the international community. The historical date for the referendum, agreed upon six years ago at the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement that brought relative peace, to a war-torn area, was set for Sunday January 9th 2011.

Though the referendum was the issue, Mass in the Catholic Cathedral of Juba on that Sunday celebrated by Cardinal Napier became the focal point of world attention. The President of South Sudan, Salva Mayardit Kiir, a regular church-goer was in attendance, as were John Kerry, the democratic Presidential candidate who lost to George W. Bush, and the Hollywood actor, George Clooney. While the Cardinal called for the building of a "just, tolerant, and reconciled new nation," President Kiir called on the people to accept the people from the north living in the south and pleaded that there be no discrimination against them.

In the afternoon, our small delegation witnessed both the Catholic and Anglican Archbishops of Juba cast their votes together. Long queues had formed outside the polling station and on the arrival of the Archbishops the crowds broke into spontaneous applause. This shows the important role the churches had played in South Sudan in sustaining the people in times of near despair, brokering peace deals between warring southern factions and bringing hope to a people who for many years had little or nothing to hope for.

For the South African delegation this was very much a case of 'déjà vu.' The voting was very reminiscent to South Africa's first democratic election in 1994. The organization was impeccable and the UN has to be complimented for the organization of the referendum, which was no mean feat. 2629 voting centres were established throughout South Sudan, most of which were in the open, either under trees or hastily erected shelters. Teams of dedicated election officials, very well trained, oversaw the smooth running of the referendum. The ballot paper had two symbols: one a handshake representing a vote for unity and the other an open palm of the hand representing secession. The experience of that afternoon was repeated time and again as our delegation visited various voting centres. In one rural voting centre we were told that 1176 people had registered to vote and by Tuesday evening, January 11, 902

had already cast their vote. Voting was foreseen for seven days from 8am to 5pm to accommodate the long distances many people had to walk on foot.

Monday morning, January 10, President Salva Kiir received our small delegation in his Presidential office for one hour. His biggest fear was how the north would react to the secession of the south, which for everyone in Juba at least, was a foregone conclusion. He shared many things with us, chief among which were:

- Many of the protocols of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement, signed between the north and south in January 2005 had not been implemented. These included the disputed states of the Blue Nile and South Kodifan, who were to be consulted about their future either in the north or the south.
- The demarcation of the north and south has not been done.
- The lifespan of the CPA finishes on the 7th July 2011 and there is no agreement on the oil, which is largely in the south. However, the only pipeline goes north to Port Sudan and therefore it is imperative that north and south come to an agreement about shared revenue from the oil.
- There are 23 known different factions, many who are well-armed living in the south. His question was how to unite these people in a government of national unity in the future. His fear was that some of these factions could be manipulated by the north to cause ongoing conflict in an attempt by the north to make the new South Sudan a failed state.
- Finally, the President explained that they had to begin to build a new state from scratch. There is only 45km of tarred road in this vast area larger than the size of South Africa.

It is a credit to the South Sudan to have organized such a well prepared and well administered referendum. This was a moment in history for the people of the South Sudan to savour. It is also a moment for these people who have suffered so much to celebrate. Perhaps this is summed up best when Cardinal Napier asked an old man how long he was queuing at the voting centre and he said “eight hours”. The Cardinal asked him if he wasn’t tired, to which he replied: I have waited fifty-five years for this day and another few hours won’t bother me. The delegation left Juba knowing that they had shared in a very special moment in the history of the African continent.

Seán O’Leary
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