



OFFICE OF THE PRESIDENT

Date: June 29th, 2024

**Pastoral Message of the Catholic Bishops of the Ecclesiastical Province of
South Sudan**

"One Body, One Spirit in Christ". (Ephesians 4:4)

We the Catholic bishops of South Sudan, meeting in Juba as an Ecclesiastical Province of the Sudan and South Sudan Catholic Bishops' Conference from 27th to 29th June 2024, extend our brotherly greetings and blessings to the people of Sudan and South Sudan, to our international friends, and to all people of good will.

This year the Catholic Church celebrates two important and joyful milestones. One is the ongoing Eucharistic Congress, reminding us of the centrality of the Eucharist in our lives and that we are truly "One Body, One Spirit in Christ". The other is the Golden Jubilee of the erection of the hierarchy in Sudan, when in December 1974 the former mission territories became a local Church in its own right. May both these themes strengthen us all in our prayer, our faith and our actions for the Kingdom of God.

The Situation in South Sudan

In his Ecumenical Peace Pilgrimage to South Sudan from 3rd to 5th February 2023 with the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Church of Scotland Moderator, Pope Francis told bishops that they should promote, through their teaching and example, service to their sisters and brothers and work for peace and justice, these being signs of the Resurrection of Christ. The social and political engagement of local Church leaders in South Sudan lies within Gospel values, Christian tradition and the teaching and pastoral vision of the Catholic Church. As the Catholic Church we enjoy excellent relations with our ecumenical partners in the South Sudan Council of Churches and with our Muslim sisters and brothers. Both ecumenical and inter-faith cooperation have contributed greatly to peacebuilding in our nation, and we pledge to continue this, as the Holy Father has called us in both his words and his actions. We especially appreciate the Holy Father's decision to appoint a resident Apostolic Nuncio to South Sudan for the first time ever in the person of Msgr. Seamus Horgan.

South Sudan is not truly at peace. While there is no serious fighting between major armed groups, sub-national violence is taking place in many parts of the country. This is often portrayed as simply "local", "ethnic", "tribal", "community" violence, but in fact it is inextricably linked to national political dynamics. While South Sudan has a power-sharing Transitional Government of National Unity, in practice there is an ongoing power struggle between the different political factions, and there is little real cooperation and trust between them. All are working for their own vested interests rather than the good of the nation and the ordinary people.

Elections are part of this power struggle. Like all South Sudanese we look forward with hope to the day when free and fair elections can be held in our country, but we are disappointed by the government's lack of preparation. An election is not a single event, it is a whole process spread over time. This involves many elements, including establishment of an independent electoral commission; demarcation of constituencies; registration of voters, political parties and candidates; training of electoral officers; civic education; the logistics of voting in our vast land which has poor infrastructure and communications; security; and a peaceful environment conducive to voting. Virtually none of this has taken place. It is also difficult to see how all parts of the country will be able to vote freely given the insecurity, and other challenges such as the widespread flooding. In addition, this is not just an ordinary routine election. This election is actually part of the R-ARCSS, a peace agreement signed by most of the parties to the 2013 civil war. In fact the election forms the final step of the agreement, the culmination which takes place only after all the other parts of the R-ARCSS have been fulfilled and which officially ends the mandate of the R-ARCSS. These include the permanent constitution, security sector reform, transitional justice, reconciliation and other elements. Most of these have not been fulfilled, thus it is difficult to see how the final element can legitimately be implemented without implementing all the others.

Some parties want elections to take place while others are reluctant. One attempt to find an exit strategy from this political impasse is the Tumaini Initiative hosted in Kenya by President William Ruto, an extension of the Catholic Rome-based initiative spearheaded by Sant'Egidio, which brings together both signatories and non-signatories of the R-ARCSS to seek a way forward, although some significant parties have declined to participate. We urge all parties to put aside their differences and to work together for the good of the people. We therefore support the aims of the Tumaini. Any solution must be based not on sharing power between elites but on constitutionality, good governance and the rule of law.

We urge the government and other parties to take these negotiations seriously. Whatever happens they should remain in dialogue and refrain from words and actions which might contribute to violence. We also urge our people to remain calm and patient during this period, and the international community to support this process.

While the R-ARCSS has halted large-scale clashes between major armed groups, it has not addressed the root causes of the conflicts in our nation, which include but are not limited to lack of constitutional government, nepotism, corruption, land disputes, and the failure of good governance and the rule of law. It has provided a welcome breathing space, but in itself it does not resolve the conflicts. We believe that the nation needs to look beyond the R-ARCSS and elections, to move beyond power struggles between different parties and factions, and to begin a true national dialogue on "the South Sudan we want", a dialogue which is independent of political and military elites and which listens to all voices, particularly faith communities, civil society, traditional chiefs and elders, women and youth. We remain convinced that the military should have no place in government in either Sudan or South Sudan, and thus we warn against quasi-military power-sharing arrangements as anything but a temporary short-term measure leading to a true civilian government.

The Church has also suffered from violence, with the death of Fr Luke Yugue and his driver Mr Michael Gbeko being just the most recent amongst many others including Sr Veronika Rackova, Sr Mary Daniel Abud and Sr Regina Roba. While we are willing to forgive individuals, we condemn their actions and the impunity they enjoy, and we urge the government to fulfil its responsibility to protect all the citizens of South Sudan.

At the same time, we cannot ignore the dire economic situation of the country and the suffering it is causing for our people. Prices continue to rise, and inflation is one of the highest in the world. Salaries are often not paid. People cannot afford to buy basic necessities and are facing extreme hardships. As we have seen in many other countries, this can lead to protests, instability, insecurity, disorder and violence. We urge the government of South Sudan to address this economic crisis. We are conscious of the recent violence during protests over the economic situation in our neighbour Kenya. While we pray for the victims of violence in that country, we also view this as a warning to avoid the same situation in South Sudan. The Kenyan Catholic bishops have said, "The country is bleeding, we invite the Government to reflect on this matter with the seriousness it deserves. We appeal and plead that we have a moment of reflection and listening", and we would say the same to the government of South Sudan.

The Conflict in Sudan

While our primary responsibility is South Sudan, nevertheless we cannot distance ourselves from our neighbour Sudan. The fabric of Sudanese society has been torn apart, with people shocked, traumatised and disbelieving about the level of violence and hatred. This is not simply a war between two generals, as the military has inextricably embedded itself in the economic life of the country, and both SAF and RSF each have a network of wealthy elite Sudanese and international individuals and cartels who benefit from their control of various sectors of the economy. Apart from the horrendous war crimes and human rights abuses committed by both sides, the people are suffering a humanitarian disaster. The Church in Sudan appeals to us to help stop the war, provide humanitarian assistance, do advocacy work for peace, prepare for "after the war" in terms of reconciliation, rehabilitation, reconstruction and trauma healing, and above all, to pray for them.

Our brother Bishop Tombe Trille in El Obeid says: "So far there is not even a clue to the light of peace dialogue that can bring hope for the Sudanese. I believe that our leaders are not ready for peace. Fighting and conflict have the upper hand as we hear them say 'unless we defeat the other group, we won't put down weapons. Time has come for them to think of the people and nation. The more the fighting, the more people get scattered and the more hatred grows among various Sudanese ethnic groups. Kneel down to pray, and hear the voice of God and the voice of the people, the children, the women that cry for peace, and also the blood that cries on the ground of very innocent people who died because of crossfire. Go back to dialogue as children of one mother and one father." We endorse his words and call for unity - "One Body, One Spirit in Christ".

We thank the Holy Father Pope Francis for his concern about Sudan, and we echo his heartfelt plea in early June 2024: "May the weapons be silenced and, with the commitment of the local authorities and the international community, help be brought to the population and the many displaced people. May the Sudanese refugees find welcome and protection in neighbouring countries." We also recall his message for the 2017 World Day of Peace entitled "Nonviolence: a Style of Politics for Peace", in which he reminds us that "Violence is not the cure for our broken world. Countering violence with violence leads at best to forced migrations and enormous suffering, because vast amounts of resources are diverted to military ends and away from the everyday needs of young people, families experiencing hardship, the elderly, the infirm and the great majority of people in our world. At worst, it can lead to the death, physical and spiritual, of many people, if not of all." We once again commit ourselves to seeking peace and justice through active nonviolence, the nonviolence of the Gospel. Nonviolence is the only viable path to peace.

Even those who bear arms and commit violence are children of God, the God who called on us to love our enemies (Matthew 5:43–44). Thus, we reject the demonisation of one side or the other in Sudan's conflict, and we do not take sides. We call on all of them to lay down their arms and enter into meaningful peace negotiations. We condemn the killing, raping and looting of civilians by any side, and we call for accountability for their crimes.

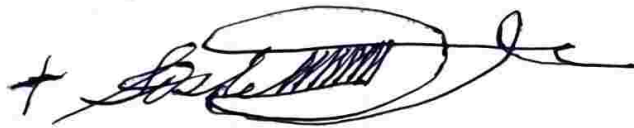
We thank the government of South Sudan for its open and generous response to returnees and refugees from Sudan. We call upon it to remain neutral in Sudan's conflict, to take measures to prevent any South Sudanese from participating in the armed conflict, and to continue facilitating peace negotiations wherever possible.

Conclusion

We extend our heartfelt thanks to the international community and particularly our Caritas Internationalis partners for their continued humanitarian support to both Sudan and South Sudan. However, we are concerned at the shrinking of aid, as other genuine causes such as Ukraine and Gaza compete for funding. While we recognise the legitimate needs of civilians in these other conflicts, and we extend our solidarity, prayers and blessing to them, nevertheless we urge the international community not to forget the extreme humanitarian needs of Sudan and South Sudan.

We the bishops encourage our people to embrace unity as "One Body, One Spirit in Christ", and we urge all people of good will to join us, trusting in God, to have hope for justice and enduring peace in Sudan and South Sudan as well as all the other conflict-ridden places in the world. Our sympathy, prayers and blessings go out to all who are suffering, whether from violence or from economic and humanitarian deprivation, all of which are tragedies created by humans which can therefore also be resolved by humans, with God's help. In Christ there is hope even in the darkest of times. "May the God of hope bring you such joy and peace in your faith that the power of the Holy Spirit will remove all bounds to hope" (Romans 15:13).

Given this 29th day of June 2024, the feast of Saints Peter and Paul, in Juba.

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H. E. Stephen Cardinal Ameyu Martin Mulla, Archbishop of Juba

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H. L. Barani Eduardo Hiiboro Kussala, Bishop of Tombura-Yambio

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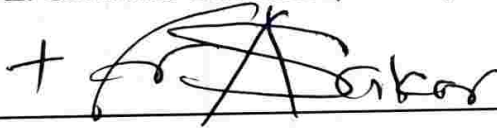
H. L. Stephen Nyodho Ador Majwok, Bishop of Malakal

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H. L. Matthew Remijio Adam, MCCJ, Bishop of Wau

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H. L. Christian Carlassare, MCCJ, Bishop of Rumbek

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H. L. Alex Lodiong Sakor Eyobo, Bishop of Yei

H. L. Emmanuel Bernadino Lowi Napeta, Bishop of Torit

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H. L. Santo Loku Pio, Auxiliary Bishop of Juba