

Sudan's bishops decry lack of progress toward Jan. 9 referendum

JUBA, Sudan - With less than six months to go before the Jan. 9 referendum on the future of Southern Sudan as an independent nation, Sudan's bishops have expressed concern that there is not enough time to finish preparations.

In a statement released July 22 at the end of a weeklong meeting, Sudan's bishops called upon Sudanese officials in the country's northern and southern regions to ensure that the referendum for Southern Sudan - and a separate one for Abyei - take place "on time, in a free and fair manner, and that the outcomes are recognized and respected."

They said many people throughout the country have expressed fear that the warring factions that signed the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement have not made the referendum a priority and "that transparency and inclusiveness are lacking."

The referendum for southern Sudan will determine if the largely Christian and animist South, with its significant oil deposits, will secede from the Islamic North. Observers consider the referendum more important for Sudan's future than April's elections for national and regional offices.

"If unity is an option, we must understand what kind of unity we are speaking of," said the bishops, who noted that, in the multicultural country, "one entity still dominates and imposes itself on others in an oppressive manner, at every level."

They said that unity with the North had not been presented as an attractive option to the people of Southern Sudan, and they blamed "the leadership of Sudan and the political establishment."

“A unity which binds and oppresses, prohibits all opposition, a unity which imposes uniformity and condemns those who differ in faith and culture must be rejected,” the bishops said.

At the same time, they expressed concerns about the challenges facing all Sudanese if secession is chosen.

Regarding preparations for the referendum, the bishops cited, among other problems: lack of progress by the Southern Sudan Referendum Commission; no definition of a final border between the North and the South; and unclear voter eligibility requirements, so voters cannot register. They said voter awareness and education cannot begin without clarification of some of those issues.

The bishops urged world leaders to assist in the technical, logistical and operational stages of the referendum, monitor the election process as it is organized and as it takes place, guarantee implementation of the results and mediate disagreements that might arise after the vote.

In particular, the bishops called upon the United States, United Kingdom, Italy, Norway, the United Nations and the Arab League to encourage the signatories to the peace agreement “to implement the referendum and to act in the interests of the people of Sudan as impartial and honest brokers.”

During the five years since the peace agreement was signed, the bishops said, progress has been made in moving conflicts in the country from the battlefield to the political arena. They also acknowledged that people have greater freedom of movement and an increased awareness of human rights in most of the country, and that revenues from oil have been made available to people from the North and the South.

At the same time, the bishops lamented the continuation of war in Darfur in western

Sudan; the implementation of Islamic law in the North, which particularly affects the rights of non-Muslims; adoption of oppressive laws that minimize human rights; and weak governance in the South, which has led to corruption, nepotism and harassment of humanitarian agencies.

The bishops called upon all Sudanese people to pray for a peaceful outcome to the referendum. They committed the church to involvement in peace-building initiatives and reconciliation among all parties in the hope of achieving peace.

They also expressed concern about the referendum for the people of Abyei, who must choose which state to affiliate with, noting that the referendum commission has not yet been formed. They expressed concern that dissatisfaction in Abyei - which has already experienced violence - and in two other regions in which a popular consultation is scheduled might lead to “violence which could derail any peaceful future for the whole of Sudan.”