

Canada/South Sudan Roundtable: Responding to the Crisis

Meeting report

Summary

Deeply concerned by the widespread political violence that has racked Africa's newest nation since mid-December 2013, Canadian South Sudanese community members and leaders met in Toronto on March 26, 2014 to share information on the crisis, build peaceful relationships across the Canadian South Sudanese diaspora, generate options for bringing an end to the violence and for coming to grips with its underlying causes.

The day-long meeting was hosted by York University's Institute for Research and Innovation in Sustainability (IRIS), with organizational support from the SubSahara Centre, Peacemedia-paixmédia, Peacebuild – The Canadian Peacebuilding Network and South Sudanese community activists and opinion leaders. Discussion initially focused on sharing personal experiences of the crisis among the approximately 30 participants. It then turned to identifying the range of options available for short-term peacemaking and long-term peacebuilding, including tackling the country's glaring governance deficit.

While strong tensions within the South Sudanese community in Canada and elsewhere were acknowledged, roundtable participants, representing a broad cross-section of the South Sudanese community in Canada, pursued discussion in a spirit of solidarity and respect for all and their opinions. No insults or verbal abuse of individuals or specific groups were expressed, despite the depth of anger and sorrow. Each participant had the opportunity to voice their feelings and views on the crisis without interruption. Compassionate listening was encouraged.

This report highlights the multiple common perceptions of the disastrous direct and indirect impacts of the violence on South Sudanese in their home country and in the diaspora, regardless of ethnic or religious background, age group, gender or educational attainment. It also sets out suggested collective responses to the crisis for urgent further consideration and action both in South Sudan and in Canada.

To encourage open discussion during the roundtable, it was agreed that comments by individuals would not be attributed in this report, and a very few asked that their names not be included in the list of participants attached.

Part 1 – Participants’ Reflections on the Crisis

The morning session was dedicated to allowing each participant to describe how the crisis has affected themselves, loved ones, and friends. Participants were also encouraged to express their own vision for healing and peacebuilding in South Sudan and in the diaspora.

The session started with a prayer for peace. Participants were reminded that more than 2.5 million souls lost their lives over 21 years of war between and within Sudan and South Sudan, and an estimated 10,000 have died and more than 1 million have been internally displaced or made refugees in the recent outbreak of violence. The prayer asked for forgiveness for individuals and communities, and called for truth seeking and the joining together of hearts.

One participant estimated that there were about 20 different South Sudanese ethnic groups represented in the room. Another noted his own plural identities: his home region, where he was displaced to in South Sudan by fighting, later living as a Sudanese refugee in Egypt, then coming to Canada and becoming a Canadian.

A number of the participants said they have lived surrounded with hate, and directly witnessed war and bloodshed. Some survived the First Sudanese Civil War of 1955-1972, the Anyanya rebellion. Some were drafted into the Sudan People’s Liberation Army (SPLA), several mentioned being drafted as child soldiers. All have been affected, lost loved ones, relatives, or have displaced family. “I was born in war, I fought in war and I don’t want to die in war,” one participant said.

Many were refugees or displaced people before coming to Canada, living in Khartoum, Kenya, Uganda, or Ethiopia and surviving deprivation and violence in United Nations refugee camps. Repatriated refugees coming home after the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement between north and south Sudan in 2005 have been plunged back into war.

With more than a million people fleeing the violence within South Sudan or made refugees in neighbouring countries, one participant who had visited a camp in Ethiopia noted the extreme living conditions, high risks of disease and dangers of physical abuse. Several participants also pointed out the strain on diaspora family resources to support family members who have lost their homes and businesses in the violence or are struggling for survival as internally displaced persons or refugees.

Root Causes of the Conflict

Several roundtable participants were present in Juba when the fighting broke out in December and saw gruesome killings. For some, the conflict, triggered by what has been portrayed by President Salva Kiir as a coup attempt by a faction within the ruling Sudan People’s Liberation Movement (SPLM) government led by Vice President Riek Machar, came as no surprise in a context of ethnic tension. However, several participants argued that this is not fundamentally a war between Dinka and Nuer, the country’s largest tribal groups and so far the main casualties,

but the result of the rivalry for power within the party between Kiir and Machar, although Kiir is an ethnic Dinka and Machar a Nuer. The media and some political and ethnic voices are fuelling perceptions of intertribal conflict, but South Sudanese from all backgrounds are suffering. In Canada, South Sudanese have also fallen victim to tribal labeling that has heightened tensions and negatively affected individual and community relations.

South Sudan proclaimed its independence from Sudan in July 2011 after a near unanimous referendum vote to secede, but life was harsh before and since independence for most South Sudanese. The maintenance of a large standing army is seen as one key factor behind the current violence. Another is the lack of national cohesion among the population.

The SPLM has not transformed itself from being a militarized liberation movement to a political party with a platform and an ideology, promoting and providing the political space for a healthy national debate. Instead, the SPLM/A has remained stuck in its liberator mentality. Democracy is more than elections. It includes nation-building and state-building that go beyond cosmetic reforms. The SPLM needs a political vision to build the society that all citizens want, one participant noted, to end corruption and dictatorship, by which foreign donor money sticks to the hands of political leaders and their networks, while natural resource revenues are also pocketed or squandered. Meanwhile, many non-governmental organizations have failed to address divisive cultural issues or the issue of monitoring the use of donor funds.

The president has granted privileges to members of his personal network rather than treating all citizens equally, a participant argued. Meanwhile, the language of tribalism and the notion of dictatorship by those identified with a particular tribe have become increasingly problematic, reflecting a structural weakness of South Sudan as a nation. Poor education has failed to transcend narrowly-defined identities and give priority to a broader national identity. Within a broader national identity, tribal identity can be used in a positive way to instill pride and self-esteem. However, the negative use of tribal identity for waging war and emphasizing a spirit of revenge has caused a lot of problems and confusion, of note among mixed families. Because South Sudan's tribal groups transcend regional borders, political mobilization along tribal lines could also pose risks of violence in neighbouring countries and in the wider diaspora.

The young nation should be a model for the rest of the world, one participant said. Most people voted for independence and a common future. But the history of violence has been repeating itself because the government did not dedicate resources to begin healing past traumas, particularly among SPLA generals and young officers. The lack of economic development, civilian jobs and warlordism push fighters to remain loyal to their army commanders. In relations between soldiers and civilians, violence is omnipresent in a culture of impunity and mistrust.

The current crisis should not be isolated from other repeated episodes of violence since independence such as those triggered by heavy-handed attempts at disarmament of different groups or the cycles of violence generated by inter-clan cattle-raiding. Jonglei State has often been the centre of violence, but other parts of the country have also been affected.

South Sudan's neighbours, some of which are attempting to mediate a resolution of the immediate crisis under the auspices of the regional Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), are seen to only be interested in looting South Sudan's resources.

Social media posts have echoed the conflict, amplifying negative talk and perpetuating tribalism.

Impact of Violence in South Sudan

Millions have been killed by bullets, but people are continuing to die from the secondary impacts of war: forced displacement, food shortages, epidemics, a participant pointed out.

The conflict is draining the resources of individuals, families, the nation, and the diaspora. It has hampered development of an only two-year-old nation unable to progress. Youth going to school have dropped out, nurtured businesses have fallen apart and daily lives have been shattered.

Refugees are susceptible to epidemic disease and abuse in refugee camps and remain affected physically and mentally. Women, children, and the elderly and disabled suffer the most. Children are sent to wage war rather than attend school. Vulnerable people live on the street with no shelter.

The Situation within the Diaspora

Tension has grown visible within the diaspora. Increasingly, expatriates identify themselves using their tribe before their nationality.

The Canadian government fails to understand the crisis and appears to be uninterested in the conflict. However, Canadian South Sudanese have a role to play in informing the Canadian government of what is going on in South Sudan and seeking its support for efforts at resolving the conflict and bringing peace. This could happen only if South Sudanese people act as true Canadian citizens and participate in all aspects of Canadian society, especially in the realm of politics.

The diaspora community has a vital role to play as a united force that speaks with one voice, encouraging intercommunal dialogue in Canada and in South Sudan. But members want for civic education and the support of a broad-base of people within their own clans. This mindset needs to change.

Part 2 – Current Responses and Directions

During the afternoon session, participants were asked to break up into four working groups, each one addressing a theme to explore. To enrich the discussions, participants later rotated to other groups. The summary of each group's findings and proposals follows.

Community and Diaspora

People have a moral right to share their feelings with the broader South Sudanese community. Networks of close and trusted friends can be leveraged to influence attitudes and behaviour. Community outreach, dialogue and events can bring people together and rebuild trust to move forward.

An effective community consultation mechanism — a “Committee for Peace and Reconciliation” or “a Diaspora Cultural Group for Peace” — can foster positive relationship-building, nation-building, and perhaps provide conflict resolution workshops and seminars, redress inaccurate media reporting, or bring about the establishment of an umbrella body that represents the South Sudanese community across Canada.

A diaspora discussion group supported by leaders of local communities could influence the existing peace negotiations. Another possible option is forming an advocacy group that will support the human rights of South Sudanese.

Negative dialogue on social media and the spirit of revenge must be denounced and replaced by a discourse highlighting shared commitments to uphold common values of peace and diversity, respect for all others, promoting racial and ethnic harmony within the Canadian community, while advocating for democracy, stability, and the construction of schools, hospitals and other social institutions in South Sudan.

South Sudanese don't use their voting power in Canada. Establishing a relationship with elected officials, including local MPs, is needed to obtain support. The Canadian government must be asked to express its concern on the crisis, and perhaps send a special envoy to South Sudan and the peace talks.

Local churches connected to South Sudanese churches can contribute to the dialogue and collect donations for alleviating poverty.

The young generation is disconnecting from South Sudanese culture and identity, losing their sense of community belonging, and should be re-engaged in order to contribute to the initiative, rather than live their social life on the margins of the community.

The diversity of South Sudanese women's voices must be made yet more visible. The IRIS meeting was largely attended by men. Gender analysis and consideration must be brought to the building of the Canadian South Sudanese community network.

Moving to Peacemaking (short-term)

The first task is to obtain a ceasefire.

Pressure for peace must be exerted on South Sudanese leaders by the external mediation team with the support of the United Nations and the African Union.

Mediators need to understand what is blocking the negotiations. Negotiations have become a show of force and faction leaders want Westerners to foot the bill for reconstruction.

Foreigners' pressure for a cessation of violence will not be fully implemented unless influential traditional leaders support those demands. The diaspora can play a role by convincing clan leaders and elders, who have the authority to exert control over various militias, including the Nuer White Army and the SPLA Red Army, to assert their authority and order for the violence to end.

At the same time unrestricted access to government and rebel-controlled areas must be granted to humanitarian workers.

By demonstrating the impact of unrest on their daily lives, women and children can be instrumental in bringing warriors to their senses and influencing them to stop fighting. Beyond this, women must be recognized for the power, networks and peacebuilding roles that can be leveraged further, in partnership with, rather than subordinate to, men.

NGOs can be encouraged to contribute to immediate peace efforts by fostering community and inter-communal dialogue.

Canada and other governments can raise the threat of targeted sanctions and provide reconstruction funds as well as ground forces.

Peacebuilding (long-term)

Civil society must take ownership of the peace-building effort at the grassroots level or else leaders will continue to defend only their personal and narrowly-defined tribal interests.

An awareness campaign can highlight the emergence of a peace movement, perhaps involving the establishment of peace-building clubs within communities. These, with support from churches, local NGOs and international NGOs can promote positive peace (even love and compassion for other citizens) and not just the absence of war. The efforts of the International Dialogue on Peacebuilding and Statebuilding (IDPBS) should be built upon.

Punitive or retributive justice does not bring peace. Perpetrators serve jail time then go back to war, one participant argued. Leaders will not sign an agreement to be sent to jail but will instead protect their political survival. Restorative justice based on traditional mechanisms of conflict resolution must be used. In Rwanda, grassroots justice was produced by Gacaca courts, community-level hearings for the victims based on public acknowledgment and apologies for crimes committed by perpetrators.

In South Sudan, two levels of reconciliation must occur: at the political and at the community levels. The root causes of the conflict must be investigated through an honest assessment inspired by Nelson Mandela's vision (rather than blaming others like North Sudan) and carried out by a neutral body to prevent further cycles of violence. The politicians and other perpetrators have to come forward and apologize for atrocities and human rights violations. Tribal chiefs reconciling with other chiefs is a tradition that has worked in the past and should be valued and used to move forward.

Retributive justice may also be needed for some perpetrators. The international community can hold perpetrators accountable through the International Criminal Court.

Economic development, foreign aid and humanitarian assistance that is conflict sensitive can strengthen peace.

Governance

Current leaders deceived the people with an illusion of democracy. Kiir and Machar must leave, and their private militias must be demobilized.

Elections must be organized for a political settlement that will bring new leaders that maintain unity and work for the common good of citizens.

The present constitution enables a dictatorship where the president has too much power. A new constitution must be drafted and submitted to a review committee and then approved by referendum.

Bad governance is a symptom of fragility. Corruption, bribery, nepotism, and land grabs must end. Attribution of government positions must be based on qualifications and experience rather than nepotism. Oil revenues must be fairly redistributed, drawing from best practice of other countries. Transparency, checks and balances, and government accountability must be put in place.

A functional government based on the rule of law must emerge where civil society has a role to play, possibly based on a confederation like Canada with respect for social diversity and a project for sustainable peace. Guaranties for freedom of expression, freedom of the press and other fundamental civil liberties must be included.

Security sector reform is needed to reduce the size of the national army and to create a police force that respects a regional balance. Child soldiers must be demobilized and reintegrated, and adult soldiers must be retrained with farming or other skills consistent with peaceful and equitable considerations of the future.

Civil society, and in particular women and young girls, must be empowered by education to know their rights. Gender mainstreaming must be included in all legislation, from education to government nominations, perhaps through the use of quotas.

Equitable development is needed along with an employment policy. The existing pro-poor development strategy must be pursued. Allocated budgets must be better distributed and commensurate to a district's population size, although at times, a smaller population may have larger needs.

Conclusion: Options for Action

Due to time constraints, the participants did not have an opportunity to analyze in depth and prioritize desirable actions from among the multi-layered set of issues and possible prescriptions discussed throughout the roundtable. To advance the process of further elaboration and prioritization, 12 participants volunteered to form a Follow-up Team. Their names and contact details are attached to this report.

Several major preoccupations were apparent in the day's discussions:

- The South Sudanese national project must be saved, but short-sighted solutions that do not address structural problems, particularly governance, will reproduce the same cycle of violence.
- Among members of the Canadian South Sudanese community there is a large degree of consensus around shared values of peace and nonviolent settlement of conflicts, of unity and diversity, respect for others, transparency, trust and shared commitment.
- Concerned Canadian South Sudanese are urgently seeking ways and means to support and be involved in positively influencing events on the ground in South Sudan and contributing to efforts at immediate peacemaking and humanitarian assistance and longer-term peacebuilding in the country.
- There is a need for dispelling animosity and distrust among South Sudanese in Canada and rebuilding unity and collaboration within the community.
- There is a need to participate constructively in private and public discussions of the crisis, its causes and potential short- and long-term solutions and also to counter inflammatory misinformation in social media, electronic forums and other interactions.
- Various community platforms exist but there is an apparent need for an umbrella platform to reach out and bring together local or regional efforts and engage more members of the South Sudanese community and friends and potential partners in

Canada, in South Sudan and throughout the diaspora in more systematic and constructive ways.

- Local “Peacebuilding Clubs” and conflict resolution training for community members is another identified need.
- Women and young people are crucial to peacemaking in South Sudan and to the future of the diaspora community, but more work needs to be done to recognize the work they are already doing and to further support their engagement.
- Identifying the human resources within the community and creating a database of skilled and qualified experts in education, governance, development, and other fields could help fill a gap in technical and political knowledge.

Follow-up team

Malith Kur	226 700 7437	Malith_kur@yahoo.ca
Alice Acando	519 570 0274	Sitima11@yahoo.ca
Paul Wel	905 318 3806	Generationsforpeace@gmail.com
Gatdin Diew	226 978 3806	gatdin@yahoo.com
Rudi Okot	226 706 5613	oballoker@gmail.com
Bashir Ismail	289 925 9885	bashirik@hotmail.com
Joseph Oywak	226 606 5445	joywak@gmail.com
Philemon Daud	226 606 5445	philemondaud@ymail.com
Abraham Tuom (Jack)	226 789 2985	Jackkong60@yahoo.ca
David Lord	613 408 6123	Davidalord99@gmail.com
Eric Abitbol	514 513 3476	peacepub@yahoo.com
Emmanuel Seitelbach	613 260 1203	emmanuel.seitelbach@gmail.com

Roundtable participants

Dr Wudu Lado, Joseph Oywak, Rudy Okot, Alice Acando Yokwe, Philemon Daud, Paul Wel Lual, Catherine Hakim, David Ibrahim, Peter Mayum, Abate Wori Abate, Machar Buol, Gordon Buay, Gatdin Diew, Abraham Tuom (Jack), Pastor Malith Kur, Bashir Ismail, Simon T. Mach, Pastor Peter Kong Gatluak, Eric Abitbol, David Lord, Peter Penz, Emmanuel Seitelbach, Isaac Gattuor Kuon, Mayang Gattuor Kuon, Dacia Douhaibi, Kuer G. Kuer Ashouny,

Acknowledgements

The roundtable was a collaborative effort made possible by the networking and organizing efforts of a number of individuals and institutions, particularly Tag Elkhazin, Paul Wel, Joseph Wuol and Catherine Hakim. Rapporteurs for the event were Emmanuel Seitelbach and Bashir Ismail. Special thanks go to York University's Institute for Research and Innovation in Sustainability (IRIS) and Annette Dubreuil, its Coordinator, for hosting the meeting on short notice, as well as co-organizers SubSahara Centre, Peacemedia-paixmédia, and Peacebuild – The Canadian Peacebuilding Network. The meeting was co-facilitated by Eric Abitbol (Vice-chair of Peacebuild, Senior Fellow at IRIS, Director of Peacemedia-paixmédia, and Professorial Lecturer in environmental peacemaking at American University, Washington, DC) and David Lord (former Executive Director of Peacebuild). The Toronto roundtable at IRIS came as a sequel to a meeting organized in late February by the University of Ottawa's Centre for International Policy Studies, the Fragile States Research Network (FSRN) and the SubSahara Centre.