

Current violence in Sudan threatens independent South Sudan

Escalating violence against civilians in Sudan's disputed South Kordofan State is leading to major humanitarian catastrophe with an estimated 300,000 people besieged, cut off from relief aid, and unable to escape fighting, according to a number of aid agencies and witnesses in the region.

Up to 40,000 people have fled recent fighting between Sudanese government troops and members of the former southern rebel group, the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA), in Kadugli, the capital of Sudan's oil-producing state of South Kordofan, the United Nations has said.

"The violence and displacement of people now taking place is a potential threat to the peaceful transition and independence of South Sudan," WCC general secretary Rev. Dr Olav Fykse Tveit said Friday. "We call on those involved to end the violence immediately and for those countries involved in the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement which led to the January referendum to place pressure on both sides to resolve this situation."

In the 9 January referendum nearly 99 percent of voters in southern Sudan – which is predominantly Christian and animist – chose to secede from the rest of Sudan. In doing so they created the world's newest nation which on 9 July will formally declare and celebrate their independence. The remainder of Sudan has a Muslim majority and leadership.

"The people of Sudan as well as the churches in Sudan have committed too much of their lives in the past decades to work for peace to see the region slip into violence again," Tveit said. "The ecumenical community worldwide calls upon the participants to now move forward into a future of peace for all. The will and desire of the people of

Sudan is for peace and justice and we must all help to make this dream a reality.”

The United States, China, African Union, European Union and Arab League all played a crucial role in brokering the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) and their involvement, along with civil society efforts that include the Sudan Council of Churches and the Sudan Ecumenical Forum (SEF), led to the peaceful referendum process.

Longstanding ecumenical engagement

Since 1994, the Sudan Ecumenical Forum, which has been supported by the WCC and the All Africa Conference of Churches (AACC), has played a major role in raising awareness in the international arena about conflicts in Sudan, with the voice of the Sudanese churches at the centre.

The Rev. Eberhard Hitzler, co-chair of the SEF, said on Friday that urgent action is needed. “A humanitarian crisis on an enormous scale is unfolding in South Kordofan State. We appeal to world leaders and governments to pay attention to this situation and urgently protect people.”

Former South African president Thabo Mbeki met on Thursday with Sudanese president Omar Hassan al-Bashir in Khartoum. Mbeki was scheduled to fly to Juba today, Friday, to confer with southern leaders.

Already, SEF has received reports by independent witnesses claiming violence and atrocities against civilians. Witnesses report seeing people perceived to be SPLA sympathizers dragged out of the United Nations Missions in Sudan (UNMIS) compound in Kadugli and executed in front of UNMIS personnel who did not intervene.

These claims from witnesses have been backed up by evidence of

churches in the region which have contacted SEF pleading for urgent assistance and to bring the killings to the world's attention.

According to a report from the Reuters news agency on Friday, the south is bracing for aerial bombardment.

In addition to killings, looting, burning of property and tens of thousands of people on the run, the violence is a serious threat to stability between northern and southern Sudan and could affect the whole region, Hitzler says.

The Sudan Council of Churches (SCC) is also calling on the humanitarian community and the UN mission to rescue survivors and on the international community to prevent a return to war in Sudan. For the last five days, survivors have locked themselves into their homes, without food or water, for fear of being killed.

Others have fled to the mountains where they are being pursued by helicopter gunships, the SCC says.