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SOUTH SUDAN ONE YEAR AFTER THE DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE

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One year ago this week, on 9 July, the people of South Sudan welcomed their new Republic as Africa's newest independent nation. The tears of joy that were witnessed in Juba (the capital city and venue of the declaration of independence) on that day and most probably in many parts of South Sudan, showed how much people wished to be witnesses of the moment that the people of the South were at long last free in an independent sovereign nation state. Free from oppression, free from being denied their basic human rights and dignity, free from the threat of being assimilated into a culture and religion that they had stood against since the independence of the Republic of Sudan in 1956. It is the light of this hope for freedom that permeates whatever has come after, whether they be achievements or failures of the government during the past year.

After almost fifty years of conflict and suffering, there are certainly longstanding development challenges, including the creation of an effective national economy, poverty reduction, respect of law and equity among citizens, good governance and peace building which are all very much needed within South Sudan today. I believe that people of South Sudan knew very well that the post-independence period was not going to be smooth and fault free. In this first anniversary of independence, many know for sure that most of their expectations have not been met by their Government. Several issues between the two countries (Sudan and South Sudan) remained unresolved.

With all these difficulties and shortcomings people have not lost hope and they do not regret the sentiments of joy and feeling of gratitude to God for the freedom they have achieved through the Comprehensive Peace Agreement signed in 2005, the January 2011 referendum for self-determination and finally the declaration of independence in July 2011.

The Church has been at the side of the people throughout the years of conflict in many ways. Supported materially and through lobbying and advocacy by many Catholic Aid Agencies and other ecumenical organizations, the Church did manage to present the wishes of the people of the South and all the marginalized people of the Sudan seeking justice, respect for their human rights and dignity and for peace.

One year after independence we take cognizance of the support and the solidarity that we received over the years of war from the sister Churches over the world. In a special way the Church in England and Wales has been close to the people of Sudan through CAFOD, and we were assured of the accompaniment that was given to our cause and people in deed and supplication to God for a peaceful solution to the conflict and the accomplishment of the aspirations of the people of the South.

In both countries the Church faces different challenges. In South Sudan the Church has to rebuild herself. Aware of the fact that people who have been in displacement in the Sudan, the refugees from across the borders of the neighbouring countries and people from the Diaspora have returned to join the communities who stayed in the South throughout the period of the war, some form of tension among communities may develop because of resources that may not be enough to live on. The Church has initiated programs of reconciliation and peace building

among different communities and tribes to try to address some of these issues so as to encourage them to co-exist in harmony and in respect of each other's rights and values. While in Sudan the number of the Christians continues to drop. Many have already returned to the South. Others are waiting for means to go, others still intend to remain in Sudan but the Government's policies regarding citizenship and/or residence permits is not clear to date. People express the wish to remain in Sudan because they have been here, in some cases, for over 30 or 40 years and have no one to go to in the South. Still not clear also, is the government's consideration of the Church's presence in the Sudan. It is rumoured in some quarters within the regime that since the Southerners have gone to the South, no Church should be allowed to function any more in Sudan, with the exception of the Coptic Church whose members are originally from Egypt. However we have not lost hope that a clearer policy will come from the government. Everything at the moment appears to be measured on the way the negotiations between the two governments in Ethiopia proceed.

On this first anniversary of independence of South Sudan our wish remains a prayer of gratitude and appreciation to God and to all who helped the people of South Sudan to reach this moment of freedom in the hope that the South will acknowledge this "kairos" in gratitude to God and to all people of Good Will who walked with them in Many ways.

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