

Faith and Freedom in Sudan

Sudanese Christians face tough choices over whether to  secede

The future remains uncertain for Sudan, which is still plagued by unrest as it faces a January referendum.

There are positive signs, particularly in the south, where for the first time banks are moving in—a sign that cash is gaining more value than livestock. World Vision and other aid organizations also have facilitated peace conferences and border-clan meetings, encouraging conversations between ethnic groups.

But poverty, interethnic tensions and political clashes are still rampant in Africa's largest nation, raising concerns about calls for Christians living largely in the south to secede from the war-torn nation. Several ministries with a presence in northeast Africa warn that moving ahead with separation could plunge the fragile country into chaos.

“There’s a lot of potential here for violence,” says Franklin Graham, president of Samaritan’s Purse. The North Carolina-based ministry has sent some \$84 million in aid to Sudan since 2001, including rebuilding more than 380 churches.

Christians in south Sudan, however, are reportedly optimistic as they face the upcoming referendum. Molly Williams, senior program manager for World Vision Sudan, says many of her 500 Sudanese co-workers grew up in refugee camps, a common life during the nation’s 22-year-long civil war. Now they have returned to contribute to the region’s redevelopment.

"Sitting down for lunch and asking a few questions, you are quick to learn that they are optimistic, awaiting January's referendum and considering what that might mean for Sudan," says Williams, who is based in the regional capital of Juba.

The January vote is one result of 2005's comprehensive peace agreement that marked an end to the civil war. For decades the Khartoum government in the north slaughtered non-Muslims, particularly Christians who refused to convert.

The referendum follows last April's first multiparty presidential election in 20 years. Many of Williams' co-workers traveled to their home villages to vote, and plan to do so again in January.

Although they believe the Sudanese people must decide on secession, leaders such as Graham say the choice isn't clear-cut. The late John Garang, former South Sudan vice president, advocated a federation-style government to keep the nation together; without his presence the issue has gone further than he wanted, Graham notes.

"It's going to be very difficult if the South does secede," he says. "Being on their own will be very tough. It's not impossible, but it's going to be tough."

Among issues that have to be settled are post-secession lines of demarcation and who will control the oil fields that have fueled a doubling in per-capita income the past decade.

Sudan is a dangerous place. The U.S. State Department says terrorists operate there, and its president, Omar Hassan al-Bashir, has been indicted by the International Criminal Court for war crimes, including allegedly playing an essential role in the bloodshed in Darfur.

In addition, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom said in a May report that "systemic, ongoing and egregious violations of freedom of religion or belief continue

to occur in Sudan.”

Violations reportedly include penalties for converting from Islam and attempts to impose Islamic Sharia law. Even where not persecuted, Christians face discrimination in education and employment, and many live in poverty.

Seceding from the north doesn’t guarantee better treatment for Christians, Graham says. If the south departs, he worries about the impact on believers in the north. “The government may say, ‘OK, the Christians have gone south, and this is all Muslim territory,’” Graham says. “They may begin to expel Christians out of the north. That would be a terrible thing.”

Prayer is needed on many fronts, including that no one will try to sideline the election, says Galen Carey, director of government affairs for the National Association of Evangelicals. The organization is active in south Sudan through its humanitarian arm, World Relief. “There are powerful interests which stand to gain by a continuation of the conflict,” Carey says. “There are many logistical obstacles to overcome as well—transport, communications and finding qualified personnel to carry out the elections, among others.”

Graham also urged prayer for the Sudanese people and their leaders. “We certainly need to pray for the church,” Graham says. “I don’t know that any church in Africa has suffered more than the Sudanese churches.”

—Ken Walker