

South Sudan: Witnessing the birth of a new country

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JUBA: Macklina Kenyi, 33, ran away from South Sudan to avoid being raped and abducted by the rebels during the war. She has since been studying in Kenya but on 9 July 2011 she returned to Juba to witness the birth of her country. In December, once she completes her Masters studies, she will return home to help rebuild her country. South Sudan's independence was, she said, a dream come true.



"I ran away from my country to Kenya to go to school and I am happy that we are now free and I urge the new government to respect women and develop a justice system that is fair to all," Kenyi said.

"I am now doing my Masters in Political Science, Women and Gender Studies and when I finish in December, I will come back home to help rebuild my country. I urge those of us in the diaspora to do the same. This country needs us," she said.

A power outage that lasted 30 minutes briefly interrupted the South Sudan independence celebrations held at the Dr. John Garang stadium. It was possibly a reminder to the new regime about the urgent work that lies ahead in providing basic services to its hopeful citizens.

It was ironic that power went off when it was Sudan's President Omar Al-Bashir's turn to address the gathering. Just as Al-Bashir was being introduced to the crowd, the power went off. But in the days running up to independence power cuts in Juba have been frequent and numerous.

But the darkness did not dampen the mood of South Sudanese who had turned up in their thousands to witness this historic moment. They sang patriotic songs until the power was restored and Al-Bashir addressed them.

While he did so, a man from the Darfur region waved a placard that read: "Al-Bashir Wanted Alive or Dead" but he was confronted by security and his poster was quickly confiscated.

Al-Bashir had sent a message to the South Sudan government saying he recognised the new country's independence.

"I recognise that South Sudan is a free country now and I salute its President, Salva Kiir and its people. Let us continue to

work together and forge a common future because we have a lot in common," he said on 9 July.

The celebrations were marked by serious logistical and protocol setbacks, which included taking three days to accredit media. The celebrations only began three hours behind schedule, but from that point on went smoothly.

The British Foreign Affairs Secretary, William Hague said his country would establish strong bilateral ties with South Sudan and help it build strong institutions to govern its people well.

Britain is the first country to establish an embassy and appoint an ambassador to head its mission there.

Ban Ki-moon, the United Nations secretary general, recognised the new state and said the UN will soon hold a meeting to discuss South Sudan's membership.

"We are happy that the independence of South Sudan has shown that conflicts can be solved amicably," he said. He urged the North and South Sudan to quickly embark on solving the remaining parts of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) concerning Abyei, South Kordofan and Blue Nile.

His sentiments were echoed by the United States' envoy to the UN, Susan Rice. Rice is head of the US delegation to South Sudan. She urged Al-Bashir and Kiir to speedily address the issues that surround human suffering in Abyei, Darfur, South Kordofan and Blue Nile.

"These issues must be urgently addressed to establish lasting peace," she said and urged the South Sudanese to work to ensure they embrace peace so that those who lost their lives in the civil war did not die in vain.

"The US will continue supporting the new government so that it establishes a regime that respects human rights, is transparent and accountable and is able to provide other essential services to all its people," said Rice.

Mwai Kibaki, Kenya's president urged the new state to work towards improving their lives rather than going to war again. Kenya has played a critical role in spearheading peace talks that resulted in the signing of the CPA. Kenya has also hosted many refugees from South Sudan.

South Sudan's speaker of parliament, James Igga, read the declaration that parliament passed recently to declare independence.

He then swore in Kiir as the country's new first president, who later signed the transitional constitution. Kiir said he was overjoyed that the country was now free and urged his people to work hard to rebuild the nation.

"We are now free. No one knows how we suffered along the way. We have been mistreated and called second-class citizens. We shall forgive but we shall not forget. We are inviting the private sector to play a leading role in the reconstruction of our country. We have all that is needed to transform this country," he said.

Kiir promised that his government would treat all its citizens equally by providing its citizens with most of the basic services.

"But the people should understand that where we fail because of our infancy, the citizens should join us and address the shortcomings rather than blame us," he said.

Kiir said that during the transitional period, he noted that there was corruption in parliament and promised to fight hard to eradicate the problem.

"We have to be fair to the people who lost their lives fighting for this freedom by providing for those they left behind. If we engage in corruption, we shall not have the money to do this," he said.

Kiir's sentiments are echoed by Michael Modi Apollo, 73, who left his teaching job to join the Sudan People's Liberation Army in the bush to fight for freedom.

"I am happy that I have lived to witness this historic event but we lost many lives along the way," said Apollo. He added that he didn't agree with the current estimates that the country lost two million people in the war.

"I think the correct number should be 4.5 million. I lost 12 nieces and sons and 65 close friends. The government should provide for the widows who were left and educate the children of those who died in the war," he said.

The new government will adopt a democracy, headed by the president, the vice president, parliament and 10 county governors. The president has appointed 32 ministers.

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