

Christians and Muslims call for peace and an end to religious stereotypes in Sudan

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Issued by the PROCMURA team, Sudan.

The 21st of September which is globally marked as the United Nations Peace Day, and on which the World Council of Churches offered prayers for Africa, was marked by the Programme for Christian-Muslim Relations in Africa (PROCMURA) with a Peace Conference in Juba, Southern Sudan. The three-day conference was hosted by the Sudan Council of Churches (SCC) in collaboration with the Southern Sudan Muslim Council (SSMC). It brought together **more than 30 Christian and Muslim Religious Leaders from the Southern Equatorial region to deliberate on the theme "Christian and Muslim Relations for Peace and Development in Southern Sudan"**. The conference which took place at the Juba Grand Hotel began with prayers by the leaders, calling on God to grant peace to Southern Sudan during this crucial time of its history, when it embarks on a process of self determination in the referendum scheduled for January 2011.

In his opening remarks, the General Adviser of PROCMURA, Rev. Dr. Johnson Mbillah, assured the participants that PROCMURA and its constituencies in Africa as well as its partners and friends around the world, were keenly following the events in Southern Sudan and remembered them in their daily prayers. He urged the leaders of Church and Mosque to intensify education among their membership and the wider society of Southern Sudan, to work together for the peace and development of the region. He said that as religious people, we owe it to God and humanity to seek peace, wholeness and wellbeing (Shalom and Salaam) of the land, since as Christians and Muslims, we are called to be stewards (Khalifa) of God's creation. Dr. Mbillah concluded his remarks by reminding the religious leaders that agents of peace do not only talk peace but act and live peace. "We cannot pray for peace and our actions depict non-peace" he said.

In addressing the leaders, the Deputy General Secretary of the Sudan Council of Churches, Rev. Mark Akec, recounted the long and arduous journey of the people of Sudan seeking peace for the land. He reminded his colleagues that the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) provided a roadmap for peace and development of the region. He praised PROCMURA for keeping faith with the people of Sudan before, during and after the CPA, and urged the organisation to continue in the same spirit by providing guidance for Christians and Muslims to live in harmony. He lamented that the Interreligious Council of Sudan, which he was a founder member and chaired for a while became "a mere propaganda tool used by different forces". He was hopeful that the formation of the Southern Sudan Muslim Council would provide a new forum for genuine collaboration between Christians and Muslims for peace and development.

In his address, Sheikh Juma Said Ali, Deputy Director Dawah Section in Southern Sudan Muslim Council who represented El Tahir Bior, Secretary General, High Council of Muslims in Southern Sudan, expressed grief over the misuse of religion in the past that did not augur well to build trust between Christians and Muslims for peace in the land. He reiterated the optimism of the Muslims of Southern Sudan that they, together with the Christians of Southern Sudan will team up under the umbrella of the SCC and the SSMC to bring peace to Southern Sudan. He was hopeful that a new mechanism for genuine cooperation will evolve outside the current interreligious council which is based in the north.

The Archbishop of the Episcopal Church of Sudan Dr. Daniel Deng Bul in his address assured the Muslim community that the Christian community will not see Islam in Southern Sudan with the lens that most Muslims in Northern Sudan see Christianity. He said that the God who created all human beings was neither a Christian nor a Muslim but rather a God of all humanity. "We have to live in harmony and be an example to all others that are Southern Sudanese.," he said. "We would not carry a negative baggage of the history of Christian and Muslim relations in the Northern Sudan to Southern Sudan". Turning his attention to the upcoming referendum, the Archbishop emphasized that whatever the outcome of the referendum, Southern Sudanese will live together as brothers and sisters, Christians and Muslims, a people of diverse ethnicities. He warned that this ideal should not be taken for granted but worked at collectively.

In his key note address the Guest of Honour Rev. Tijok Hadir, who is the Adviser on Religious Affairs in the office of the President of Southern Sudan reminded the participants of the commitment of the Government of Southern Sudan to uphold religious freedom, adding that Southern Sudanese (both Christians and Muslims) have learnt hard lessons from the North and cannot afford to repeat them. Commenting on the upcoming referendum, he said that for many Southern Sudanese, the many years of struggle between the North and the South and the experience between southerners and northerners had made unity between the two unattractive. He reiterated the commitment of the government of Southern Sudan to make the South attractive for Christians, Muslims and the diverse ethnic groups whatever the outcome of the referendum. He said that the anxiety of the general Sudanese society precipitated by the upcoming referendum was in many ways understandable even if not acceptable. For it is true that when two groups of people are together and have to decide whether or not to remain together there is bound to be anxiety.

He praised PROCMURA for always bringing Christians and Muslims around Africa to talk and live peace adding that peace is a partner in development. He implored the Christian and Muslim leaders to work towards the achievement of such a goal.

The communiqué below was issued after the three day deliberations:

THE SOUTHERN SUDAN CHRISTIAN AND MUSLIM RELIGIOUS LEADERS COMMUNIQUE

We, Christian and Muslim leaders drawn from member churches of the Sudan Council of Churches (SCC) and the Southern Sudan Muslim Council (SSMC) from 20 to 22 September 2010, met at the Juba Grand Hotel, under the umbrella of the Programme for Christian-Muslim Relations in Africa (PROCMURA) and on the invitation of the Sudan Council of Churches.

Having deliberated on the theme ‘Christian and Muslim Relations for Peace and Development in Southern Sudan’ where crucial issues were identified and frankly discussed

Convinced By the fact that peace is a prime factor for development in Southern Sudan and realising that peace can only be achieved if both Christian and Muslim leaders are fully involved in the process.

Aware that challenges and matters concerning the Southern Sudan can only be resolved by Southern Sudanese themselves.

Conscious that we are one people with a common destiny and aspirations regardless of our religious and ethnic affiliations.

Disturbed by the slow pace of the implementation of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) as it relates to the referendum, that to date the registration and civic education of the voters is delayed with unconvincing explanations, which cause a lot of worry and anxiety among the Southern Sudanese.

Wary of internal and external forces that may work to subvert the CPA and the principles it stands for.

Pledge to uphold the principles of justice, peace and reconciliation for development in our land.

Commit ourselves to educate Christian and Muslim communities and all peoples of Southern Sudan to embrace one another in unity and to desist from associating Islam with Arabism and Christianity as a Western import.

Determined to ensure that religious freedom and all that it entails for people of religion and all others in Southern Sudan becomes the norm and not the exception.

Resolve to work towards the establishment of a consultative body made up of Christian and Muslim leaders from the Sudan Council of Churches and the Southern Sudan Council of Muslims to facilitate and promote peace in our land.

Call on the government of the Sudan and its constituent political parties to institute pre-emptive measures that will help curtail religious persecution of any kind that may emanate as a result of the outcome of the upcoming referendum.

Call on the International Community and all who mean well for the people of Southern Sudan to be in solidarity with the people of Sudan at this crucial time of its history.

Express our deepest appreciation to PROCMURA and its leadership for keeping faith with us at this crucial time of our history, and urge them to continue to be in solidarity with us and provide us with the much needed guidance on Christian-Muslim constructive engagement for peace and development.

Signed by:

By participants of the Christian and Muslim Religious leaders conference on Peace and Development in Southern Sudan

22nd September 2010

ENDS

Notes to Editors:

- The Programme for Christian-Muslim Relations in Africa (PROCMURA) is the oldest and pioneer interfaith organisation in the continent of Africa, with a specific focus on Christians' relations with Muslims. Founded in 1959, PROCMURA is dedicated to promote within the churches in Africa:
 1. Faithful witness to the Gospel in an interfaith environment of Christians and Muslims;
 2. Constructive engagement with Muslims for peace and peaceful coexistence.