

**Testimony of Bill O’Keefe,  
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Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission  
Hearing on The Current Human Rights Situation in South Sudan  
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Thank you Co-Chairman McGovern and Co-Chairman Pitts for holding this hearing to look more closely at the ongoing violent conflict in South Sudan and the current human rights abuses we face today. It is important to take this time to analyze how we, as part of the international community, can support and partner with the South Sudanese people to advocate peace, to stop the violence, to support those in dire need, and to promote reconciliation.

My name is Bill O’Keefe and I am the Vice President for Government Relations and Advocacy at Catholic Relief Services (CRS), the international relief and development agency of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB). I would first like to thank the U.S. Congress, the administration, and the U.S. people for their steadfast support of South Sudan and the Office of U.S. Foreign Disaster Assistance and Food for Peace for supporting our programming on the ground. While South Sudan has experienced setbacks, we cannot step back from our commitment to them.

For more than 70 years, CRS has worked with the poor and marginalized around our world, regardless of race, creed, or nationality, to promote the inherent dignity of every human person and to support sustainable livelihoods for all. We collaborate with institutions of the Catholic Church and other local partners on the ground to best understand the environment and needs of the communities in which we work and to best implement programming that improves and stabilizes the lives of the poor and the marginalized.

Catholic Social Teaching, including the inherent dignity of the human person and solidarity with the most vulnerable among us, guides us in our work at CRS. This mission and our Catholic faith parallel and complement the human rights for which we seek and advocate, such as the right to life and the right to human dignity.

### **Context**

CRS has worked in what is now South Sudan for more than 30 years. Throughout the brutal civil war with the north, the hope of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) period, the joy of independence, and the pain of the current conflict, we have worked with our South Sudanese brothers and sisters. We have provided humanitarian relief in times of disaster and hardship, development assistance, and peacebuilding programs to support to communities across the country looking for a brighter future for their children.

Our deep involvement in South Sudan over the last three decades illustrates our commitment to working with the South Sudanese people, including our partners in the Catholic Church and the wider ecumenical community, to find a sustainable and long lasting solution to the crisis at hand. I recently visited South Sudan in March and walked alongside my colleagues in the field. Their

dedication inspires us all at CRS to move forward and to continue to have hope. Many of them have been affected by the conflict themselves, but they are out there, every day, responding to those still suffering from devastating violence, abject hunger, and the loss of livelihoods and homes. I testify here today to share with you not only the work CRS does to alleviate suffering and partner with those seeking peace, but also the work you can do to ensure the people of South Sudan are not punished for the failures of their leaders and to support those involved in finding peace and reconciliation before more people suffer displacement, trauma, or death.

It has been unbearably saddening to see the hope and joy of independence dissolve into the misery we now witness: the unspeakable violence and human rights abuses - shocking even to those who have weathered other violent conflicts - the growing numbers of hungry and displaced, and the unraveling economic situation. The UN reports that 7.9 million people, out of a population of between 11 and 12 million, do not have enough to eat. 4.9 million people are severely food insecure, a number that has grown by 1 million in the last two months.<sup>1</sup> Since the outbreak of violence in December 2013, 1.54 million people have been displaced.<sup>2</sup> The protracted conflict and resulting food insecurity and displacement will have a deep and lasting effect on the future of the world's youngest nation. Hunger and malnutrition, as well as overwhelmed water and sanitation systems, are damaging health (a cholera outbreak is underway as we speak – with 705 cases and 32 deaths reported to date in Juba and Bor<sup>3</sup>). Another generation of children is being denied access to an education and livelihoods capabilities and family structures have been weakened for years to come. On top of all this, attacks on civilians, the use of child soldiers, the rape and torture of women and girls, and a shrinking space for civil society actors are well documented and increasing in number and severity. Political leaders do not see a road to peace and lack political will. Failed dialogue with the opposing parties has resulted in continued and increasing conflict.

## **CRS in South Sudan**

Showing solidarity with, and care for, the people of South Sudan during this crisis is vital, and should be done through a creative and appropriate mixture of humanitarian relief, resilience building, development programming, and support to local and regional peace initiatives. Some of the significant benefits and achievements of aid and development can be seen through the ongoing efforts of CRS and other organizations, supported by the U.S. government.

As one of the largest implementers of food assistance in South Sudan through the U.S. Agency for International Development and Food for Peace, and working right across one of the three 'conflict affected States' of South Sudan, CRS encounters the most vulnerable populations in this crisis on a daily basis. CRS has programming in Upper Nile, Lakes, and Jonglei states. Since 2011, CRS has partnered with Save the Children to implement the Jonglei Food Security Program (JFSP). The JFSP started out as a development program, working with communities on three 'resilience pillars': disaster risk reduction, improved agriculture and livestock productivity, and increased access to markets and financial services. It was, and continues to be, one of the

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<sup>1</sup> OCHA South Sudan Crisis Report, 5 June 2015.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> World Health Organization, Situation Report #14 on Cholera in South Sudan, 5 July 2015.

only programs providing food and livelihood support and services on the ground across a large section of an entire state.

When the conflict began in 2013, CRS worked with Food for Peace to modify the program in order to provide lifesaving humanitarian relief, to aid a rapid recovery from the shocks communities had suffered, and to continue to build resilience and improve livelihoods wherever feasible and appropriate. Because of our nuanced approach and credible staff, we are able to work with communities in both government and opposition controlled areas as they move along the continuum of recovery and growth. The program is a wonderful example of the benefits of flexible methods built on a relationship of mutual trust between donor and partner, and a strong foundation of contextual knowledge and understanding. The JFSP will have supported 1.32 million people in nine of the eleven counties of Jonglei State by the time funding ends in February 2016. In the last six months alone, CRS and our Caritas partners have distributed 5,666 tons of food and nutritional supplements to 222,175 people.

CRS has seen that while violence continues in South Sudan, there are many areas that have remained either conflict free or that stayed calm after the early days of the crisis. In such areas, as well as in parts of the country that have remained outside the conflict, local actors and the international community need to continue to provide resilience and development support, as children still need to go to school and receive immunizations and parents need to provide food for their families. In these areas, as I saw during my trip, there are frequently committed and credible local and state government officials dedicated to their people and neighbors.

Resiliency, improved livelihoods, and development outcomes where possible, when set alongside robust peacebuilding efforts, can prevent humanitarian disasters from getting even worse. The JFSP helped people build levies around their farms to prevent flooding and to increase their crop yield. Because of increased resilient strategies, communities in Bor were able to save money in Savings and Internal Lending Communities, which helped them evacuate temporarily, and return when the violence subsided. Feeder roads built to gain access to markets to sell surplus commodities allowed some villages to flee cattle raiders. This particular development strategy to connect the village with the world also provided them security. Indeed, CRS' own rapid return to Jonglei after the crisis provided some communities with the confidence to stay rather than flee, or to come back sooner, rather than remain as internally displaced persons (IDPs) elsewhere. Some communities were able to stockpile seeds from their previous harvest before fleeing so that on returning, they were able to sell their stock in seed fairs organized by the JFSP or to plant the seeds themselves. Since January 2015 in Bor alone, CRS has trained 4,000 farmers on post-harvest storage.

Jonglei, though devastated by violence, has also shown its capacity for peace and reconciliation. In Duk County, which is predominantly Dinka, we witnessed the peace outcomes of the JFSP approach when ethnic Nuer internally displaced persons from neighboring Uror and Ayod fled their homes looking for relief. As tensions rose upon their arrival, CRS worked with traditional leaders from both communities to ensure all those who were most vulnerable received aid. Perceived by each other as enemies, now living in the same community, these people are sharing resources, regularly discussing their everyday concerns, and finding new ways forward.

I personally met men and women who had fled across the Nile river escaping the violence. They were still living across the river, but would return for a few days at a time to gradually prepare everything to return home. Their self-confidence and dignity shone brightly as they spoke about their complicated coping strategy. What stood out to me the most was the strength of their human spirit, their will to live, and their desire to rebuild and create a home and a future for their families. This will cannot be understated, and we need to support that drive both financially and rhetorically.

## **The Global Church in South Sudan**

As I have illustrated, CRS integrates peacebuilding into all our programs in South Sudan, searching out opportunities to leverage our work with and between communities to build trust and create right relationships. CRS is also supporting national peacebuilding and reconciliation efforts through a partnership with the Church led Committee for National Healing, Peace, and Reconciliation (CNHPR), and in our involvement with the South Sudan Council of Churches (SSCC), an ecumenical group of the six largest denominations in South Sudan.

The church and faith based organizations have proven themselves many times over to be integral and necessary actors in South Sudan for addressing violence, poverty, and human rights abuses. Throughout the civil war, when things were at their toughest, it was only the church that was always on the ground, providing basic services, spiritual support, and working for peace.

For example, the church leaders of South Sudan were instrumental in obtaining the CPA of 2005 and the Referendum in 2011 that led to full independence. In 1998, during the Second Sudanese Civil War, Riek Machar split from the Sudan People's Liberation Army led by John Garang. The split was depressingly similar to the current one; Machar accused Garang of being undemocratic and abusing power. As also happened in 2013, the two sides used their ethnic bases to shore up military support. At that time, the churches worked for peace at both the grassroots and leadership levels. They gathered influential Dinka and Nuer chiefs and elders and sought to resolve conflict through traditional peacebuilding measures in what was called the People to People Process.

With the assistance of church leadership, the dialogue succeeded in reducing tension between the ethnic communities. The churches and traditional leaders then pushed the two liberation leaders to meet during the Wunlit Peace Process. The conversations and greater dialogue between the two groups eventually led to the Strategic Linkages meetings in Kenya in 2001 where the two leaders called for peace and a unified call for independence. This paved the way for the two sides to negotiate with the north for the CPA, which would end the civil war in 2005. During the CPA period, CRS and the USCCB worked with U.S. ecumenical partners to implement an advocacy effort with the Sudan Catholic Bishops Conference and the Sudan Council of Churches. In 2010, church leaders came to the United States three times to seek support for the historic referendum that gave South Sudan independence in 2011. Between 2008 and 2011 the USCCB visited Church leaders in South Sudan three times to support their efforts to ensure the CPA succeeded and to communicate to government leaders how important it was to work for peace after decades of devastating civil war. The USCCB continued its commitment to South Sudan with visits in 2013, 2014, and another visit is under way as I speak to you now.

One lesson we all learned is there was not enough focus on social cohesion and peacebuilding programming to promote peace and reconciliation post independence. We find ourselves today in a position where we are playing catch up. The Church is in an established position to assist in this regard and the United States should invest both financially and diplomatically to support these efforts.

It is clear to us and our Church partners that sustainable peace will take an unconditional long-term commitment. Today, while peace and trust have been broken, progress and movement halted, and violence and human rights abuses have caused pervasive suffering, as a global church, we still have hope. As the U.S. government works with the international community to bring peace and unity back to South Sudan, the involvement of the Church in creating space for peace and reconciliation must not be overlooked. The SSCC is using their voice and their influence to speak reason and truth to those in power and to shed light on the senseless violence that South Sudanese people have lived through over these past two years.

Last Friday, July 3<sup>rd</sup>, the SSCC Leadership approved an action plan to bring about peace based on their Statement of Intent released on June 7<sup>th</sup> following a weeklong meeting of church leaders in Kigali, Rwanda. The churches will advocate inside South Sudan as well as in the region and further afield for peace and unity with stakeholders at many different levels in a process that will feed into and support the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) peace negotiations. They will mediate between various groups in conflict to build trust and bring them closer to agreement, and they have begun a grassroots peace and reconciliation process to help the people of South Sudan let go of their divisions and bitterness and to move forward in unity. CRS has provided technical and logistical support to the SSCC throughout this process. The SSCC understands the importance of the role they have played in the past and the responsibility they now have. They are our strongest advocates for bringing an end to the violence.

## **Recommendations**

As we look back on four years of South Sudanese independence, we see political dysfunction leading to unthinkable violence, displacement, hunger, and fear. Attacks on civilians, violence against women, child soldiers, and mass hunger are daily experiences, which many civilians say are worse now than during the war against the north. In these conditions, the U.S. government must stay active in alleviating suffering and bringing an end to the conflict.

The international community has imposed limited, targeted asset freezes and travel bans on military leaders on both sides of the conflict. While this is a valid effort by the United States and others to stem the violence, it is not the solution that will lead to peace. Despite the horror, violence, and lack of progress we hear of each day, there are areas of opportunity and movement for the international community and the U.S. government.

We would like the U.S. government to call for a stop to the fighting immediately, to continue to provide life-saving humanitarian relief to those who desperately need it, to support development and resilience wherever possible in order to create peace dividends and reduce the perception

that only conflict is rewarded, and to support influential local and regional actors involved in peace movements such as the IGAD, the CNHPR, and the SSCC.

**Support the international community to protect civilians and stop the violence.** Violence continues to plague South Sudan and is forcibly displacing new people every day, causing greater humanitarian needs, particularly in relation to food security and nutrition. With a growing culture of impunity, increased violence against women, and a large number of child soldiers, the U.S. government must pressure the United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) to effectively carry out its mandate to protect civilians in their Protection of Civilian sites (PoCs) and monitor the conflict. The perpetrators of violence must also be brought to account. Those responsible for promoting violence and perpetrating human rights abuses must be brought to justice.

**Pressure local and regional actors to complete a sustainable peace deal.** We all know the SPLM and the opposition have broken numerous peace deals, but the United States must push IGAD and other regional actors to continue dialogues such as those that occurred in Arusha, Tanzania. We cannot give up hope that continued efforts will produce creative solutions to stop the violence. A full diplomatic response must robustly engage all sides in the peace talks to achieve a good faith agreement and prevent conditions from further deteriorating.

**Focus on humanitarian relief and development response where possible.** With refugee and IDP numbers rising around the world, it is important we do not forget the victims of violence and support them in any way we can. CRS, along with many other aid agencies, not only provide life-saving aid where needed, but also build resiliency and capacity in areas less affected by the conflict. With millions suffering in South Sudan and neighboring countries, financial support for humanitarian relief is critical.

We also recommend the U.S. government coordinate with UNMISS and other international partners to pressure both the government and opposition forces to remove all barriers in the command and control structure that prevent humanitarian actors from reaching those in need, to ensure humanitarian agencies have adequate security and unobstructed access to PoCs, and to continue to seek funding support from other donors.

The U.S. government should continue to fund conflict mitigation, peacebuilding, and longer term development activities. By funding these programs where feasible, the United States will prevent further openings of conflict and an increased need for more humanitarian assistance in the future.

**Support church led responses to violence and their call for peace and reconciliation.**

The SSCC has proven their ability to advocate for peace in the past. The church community has been able to see past ethnic lines, embrace the common humanity we all share, and promote peace and reconciliation regardless of the differences they may face. As they plan and act, the U.S. government should support engagement in Track II diplomatic efforts, and walk with them in their search for sustainable and just solutions.

## **Conclusion**

On behalf of CRS, I would like to thank you and the U.S. people again for your generosity and laudable commitment to South Sudan. CRS will remain present in South Sudan to partner with and to serve our brothers and sisters. As a Catholic organization, we stand in solidarity with all those who are suffering and seek a solution that will promote peace and dignity for all people involved. We will not give up hope. As South Sudan struggles for peace and unity, we hope the South Sudanese people will see that one nation, one people, and one lasting peace is possible.