

SUDAN

Hoping for Peace



photo by Alexander Joe ADP/AAP

The oldest civil war has been waged by men wandering across the wastes of Africa, armed with spears and Kalashnikovs, fighting for survival, and a fundamentalist government, who insists on extending their power over a rebellious south. For two decades, Sudan has been locked in a conflict over ethnic and religious identity and the south's resources: water, land and oil. **OLGA YOLDI** writes.



Last May, Sudan's government and the main rebel group the Sudanese People's Liberation Army (SPLA) signed several accords to end the civil war. US Secretary of State, Colin Powell said the parties would be invited to the White House by US President George W Bush for a signing ceremony, once an agreement had been reached. But it remains to be seen if it will lead to lasting peace.

In 1996, the US listed Sudan as a 'state sponsor of terrorism' claiming Palestinian militant groups such as Hamas and Islamic Jihad were operating from Khartoum. The Clinton Administration imposed a policy of containment and isolation that did little to produce change or reform in Sudan, but last year the situation changed. Desperate to shed their pariah status, and struggling under US economic sanctions, the Khartoum hardliners bowed to US pressure to enter peace negotiations to end the civil war and cooperate with the war on terror. BBC Africa reporter Martin Plaut said US concerns over fighting terrorism, ensuring access to Sudanese oil and supporting the south all played a part in Washington's interest in the peace process.

Many people are morally outraged by a war that has left over 2 million dead, has displaced within its borders 4.4 million people, and has destroyed the physical and moral fabric of southern Sudanese society. Adding to the outrage was the government's aerial bombardment of humanitarian relief sites, the systematic denial and manipulation by the government and the rebels of relief to civilians, the failure by the government to combat slavery and the mounting allegations that this pattern of violence and brutality is genocidal.

Sudan is one of the poorest and most fractured nations in Africa. It has rarely known stability. The country has been at war for all but 11 of the past 48 years. Sudan's grievances are old; British ruled Sudan was not a country, it was two. Following independence in 1956, Muslim Arabs in the north and black Africans in the south found themselves confined within the same borders and, except on maps, the country's two halves never became one.

Muslim Arabs and black Africans had been at odds since the 19th century, when Arabs preyed on the African tribes of the south. In an attempt to protect the black Africans from Arab slavery, the British separated north and south and administered them separately. Most development efforts were directed towards the North, resulting in an educated superior Muslim north, against a poor, underdeveloped and Christian animist south.

With independence, the ruling northern political elite defined Sudan as Islamic and Arab and embarked on a program of arabisation and islamisation for the whole country. This was perceived as another form of colonialism by the south and a civil war started even before the British had left Sudan in 1956. In March 1972 an agreement gave the south a large degree of self-government and control over its natural resources, bringing the first liberation war to an end. The fragile peace lasted until 1983 when violations of the peace agreement and the discovery of oil in the south reignited the conflict. General Ja'far Nimeiri, a fundamental-

ist, ordered that Islamic shariah law be applied throughout Sudan and deprived the southern legislature of its powers. He also ordered that oil be refined in the north. By then, the southern soldiers had revolted against the general and the Sudanese People's Liberation Army (SPLA) was launched.

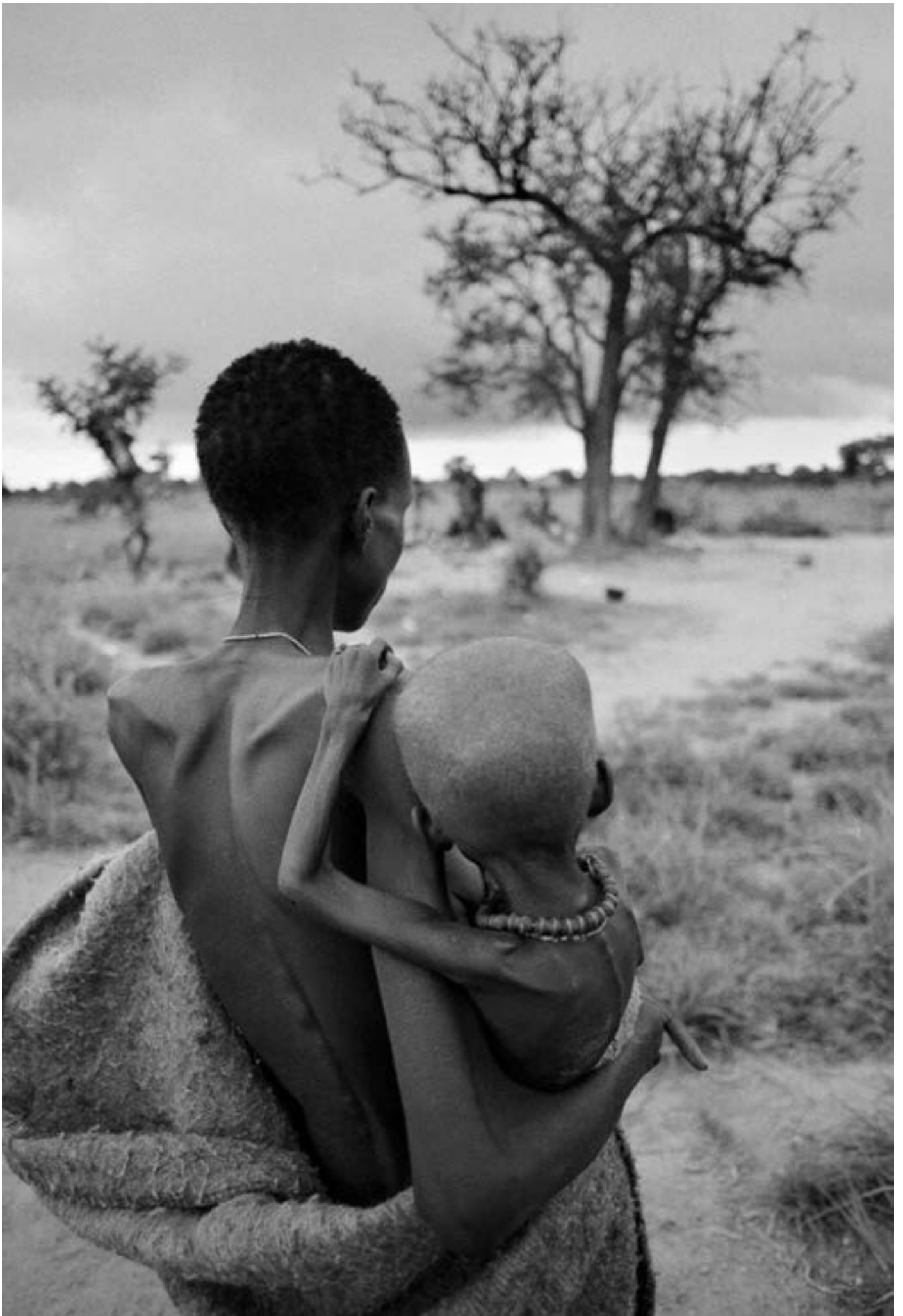
The civil war escalated into a jihad in 1989 when a military coup led by General Omar al-Bashir, seized power, plunging the country into a dark age. However, this was more than just another military coup. Behind al-Bashir was a radical political group called the Islamic Liberation Front, led by Dr Hassan al-Turabi, who wanted to turn Sudan into a radical Islamic country. Bashir's new government was made up of ideologues who believed in an Islamic agenda with great conviction and applied it with great energy. They arrested and tortured the opposition, imposed a ban on alcohol and mixed social gatherings, sent Muslim missionaries into the south and recruited volunteers into Islamic militias to fight in the south. A sophisticated repressive machine was gradually built with ghost houses or torture centres and the secret police, the feared *mukhabarat* who managed to silence all dissent.

Dr Hassan al-Turabi has been described as one of the world's most complex politicians. A master of classical Arabic, he has a wide knowledge of Western culture and history. He reintroduced Islamic law into Sudan, but spent years under house arrest.

The government used slavery and famine as crude weapons of

mass destruction, preventing aid agencies from entering the country or attacking them once they were inside and confiscating aid so that civilians would starve. The army and government-funded militias continuously attacked civilians and bombed hospitals, churches and refugee camps. They destroyed water supplies and burned villages, stealing seeds, crops, animals, killing men and abducting women and children who became slaves. No wonder the Sudanese war has been described as a disaster of historic proportions. It has killed more people than any conflict since the Second World War, produced the largest concentration of internally displaced in the world and turned the once fertile south into a graveyard. Today, few people have access to clean water; few schools, hospitals or roads remain open and famine is a constant threat. Yet the tragedy of Sudan has unfolded largely without witnesses. Writer Paul Salopek described it as "an apocalypse in a vacuum" and William Finnegan wrote in early 1999: "If such atrocities were perpetrated elsewhere –if Milosevic were to unleash similar air attacks on Kosovo, say – the outside world would be probably outraged to the point of action. In southern Sudan, it might as well be happening on the dark side of the moon."

But two factors are bringing new hope to Sudan. Neither has anything to do with the suffering of millions of Sudanese, but with the discovery of vast reserves of oil and with the US war on terrorism, which appear to be pressuring reforms on the regime.



OIL AND THE ARMED STRUGGLE

Oil has been described as “merely one more token of the schism between Sudan’s ruling north and neglected south”, but it has become central to the war. But this is a war that confounds even the Sudanese. As Paul Salopek wrote: “For many the north-south war is rooted in the old toxic relationship between Arab master and African servant. For the religious, it is a contest between northern Islam and southern indigenous religions and Christianity. For the impoverished herdsmen on the front lines, it is a local skirmish over a water hole or favourite pastureland ... yet oil cuts, literally, across all of Sudan’s overlapping wars.”

When the Sudanese government chopped much of the south into oil concessions, oil became something for the north to claim and for the south to contest and brought the fighting to new areas. Today, four oil companies are producing more than 312,000 barrels a day and more firms are exploring other reserves. Sudan’s annual revenue from oil has been calculated at \$2 billion. As a result, export revenue has doubled the government’s defence budget, and many eyewitness reports say that the new guns are being used to drive tens of thousands of southerners off their land to secure the oil underneath. While there are no American companies in Sudan, the involvement of Canadian and European firms in extracting Sudanese oil has prompted disinvestment campaigns, similar to

those directed against firms that did business with the apartheid-era South Africa.

Although companies from China, Malaysia, Sweden and France are extracting oil, the criticism has fallen hardest on Talisman Energy Inc, a Canadian firm that has 25 percent stake in Sudan’s oil fields. According to Karl Vick of the *Washington Post*, “Talisman not only did bring technical expertise to build a 900 mile pipeline from the Heglig oil field to Port Sudan on the Red Sea, but it also carried the stature of a Western oil firm, credentials craved by the government, which has spent more than a decade under UN and US sanctions because of its support of terrorism.” When its CEO and president, Dr Jim Buckee, was challenged by human rights organizations at the firm’s annual general meeting last May, he defended its record: “We share the same values as you do ... we are doing good in Sudan.” Talisman has indeed spent money in development projects, including clinics, schools and wells, but the problem is that they are mainly in garrison towns, and thus inaccessible to the rural people who need them.

The oil fields, mostly in west Kordofan State and Unity State in central Sudan, are well protected with soldiers, tanks and helicopters. The SPLA declared oil installations a target, bombing oil rigs and shooting at oil company planes. The army and militias responded by striking back against local civilians, destroying their homes, their livelihood and driving them off their land.

The SPLA, the main rebel

group, controls most of the territory in the south, populated by Dinka, Nuer and many other ethnic groups. Its leader John Garand, claims to be fighting for a secular and democratic new Sudan. But the SPLA has been accused of mistreating as much as defending civilians in the south. Since 1983, some factions, mainly Nuer militias, have split off, rejoined, made agreements and then broken them off. Nuer and Dinka and a variety of other tribes, have fought against the government and the militias but they have also killed each other mercilessly. “There is no fixed front line between SPLA territory and government controlled Sudan.” Paul Salopek writes “No walls. No razor wire fences. No permanent thorn curtain. The war is fluid. One army cedes power invisibly to another, and what changes across the no-man’s land are things far subtler and more profound than claims of political control.”

But Sudan is not just divided north-south. The conflict is considerably more complicated than the simple Muslim Christian, Arab-African duality. The conflict has spread to other parts of Sudan. The second largest armed group is the Beja Congress, based in the north-eastern province of Darfur, where for years another conflict between the government and local agriculturalists over land rights has been brewing and has resulted in one million people fleeing to neighbouring Chad, to escape the government and militia.

On the other hand, the Nuba and Ingassana ethnic groups,

who are allied to the SPLA, have also been fighting their own war for autonomy against Khartoum. Human rights organisations have been chronicling for years the decimation of the Nuba Mountain region by government armed Baggara militia.

In the Nuba Mountains is another culture perceived as a threat to the Islamic fundamentalist ideology. Because of its traditions, Nubans often wear no clothes and men and women mix freely. But worse than that for the Islamic government, some of them are actually Muslims as well. It is quite common to find Muslims and Christians who follow animist traditions in the same family. In 2001, the Sudanese government banned humanitarian aid flights, hoping to starve Nubas out. Thousands died and others were forced into government camps, but more than a million survived and are still hoping for peace.

POWER STRUGGLES

Dr Hassan al Turabi wanted Sudan to become a model for the Islamic world, but after 10 years in government the ILF had failed not only to reform the moral, political and economic life in Sudan, but also to end the civil war and thereby cement national unity.

In 1989 al Turabi announced reform. He wrote an 'Islamic constitution' that listed fundamental freedoms which, although limited, opened the door for the opposition and the press to expose the government's failings. For the first time, they were able to criticise openly the financial

and administrative corruption of senior government officials, to expose the government's policies that led to the collapse of education and health services and to report on the protest actions of workers, teachers and the activities of the opposition. Elements within the regime, uneasy about these changes and scared of political turmoil, grouped themselves behind al-Turabi's rival, General Omar al-Bashir, and pushed him to advocate their views and become their official voice. "Al Turabi wanted to create a civilian government similar to Iran's Islamic republic," said David Lokosang, the SPLA representative in Australia, "and this is not something al Bashir and the military were prepared to accept."

The regime was weakened by the debilitating split. The arrest of al-Turabi on charges of treason, for independently negotiating with the SPLA in opposition to the Bashir regime, spilled over into the armed forces where hundreds of Turabi loyalists were detained. Al Bashir embarked on an offensive to isolate the opposition. He intensified his fight against the SPLA in the oil producing areas to ensure oil revenues were flowing into his regime's coffers, but despite the increased availability of oil money to purchase sophisticated arms, the Bashir-Turabi split curbed the army's fighting capacity.

Increased isolation and pressure from the US convinced the government to negotiate with the SPLA. It was becoming clear that no side would ever win a conflict that followed no rules and knew no end. One analyst described it as

"a perfect war, a conflict waged at tolerable cost, indefinitely."

THE QUEST FOR PEACE

Islamist groups are unhappy with the US involvement in the Sudanese peace process, accusing Americans of backing the rebels. An agreement to grant the south the right to self-determination after a six-year transition period was signed in 2002 by the government and the SPLA. Vice President, Ali Osman Taha and SPLA leader, John Garand, recently agreed on a 50-50 split of the country's oil revenues.

The recent protocols cover power sharing in three disputed regions – Abeyei, Nuba Mountains and Southern Blue Nile. "This was a major obstacle," says David Lokosang. "The government argued that they were part of Northern Sudan and in the interim period they should be under the administration of the North. The SPLA said 'no'. They have a right to choose for themselves which administration they want to be under."

Another obstacle has been the separation of the state and religion. "We should hold that religion should belong to the individual and the state should belong to us," rebel leader Garand said. But negotiators have agreed to allow sharia law to prevail in Khartoum, provided there were guarantees for citizens of Christian and animist faiths.

A delicate issue in the peace process is the existence of armed groups supported by the Sudanese government. Since the 1980s, in a divide and rule tactic, the govern-

ment has used militia for clearing and controlling oil rich areas and sowing dissent within the SPLA. According to a recent article published by the *UN Integrated Regional Information Networks*, there are still 25 militia groups in Southern Sudan operating near garrison towns under the umbrella of the South Sudan Defence Forces. "Territorial control and rivalry, ethnic tensions, competition for the spoils of war and distrust of the Dinka-dominated SPLA mean that forces or individuals within are not willing to realign themselves. The result is a large number of armed and disgruntled militias with shifting and opportunistic allegiances to different factions and leaders," the article says. These militias still have the capacity to take military control of the area and prevent stability.

The talks have also excluded a significant number of Sudanese political actors. "Only when these political parties, civic associations, armed groups are able to participate in political debate, lobby officials and form political parties, will all Sudanese be convinced that there is a place for them in the new political landscape," says Human Rights Watch.

Elections will allow the inclusion of groups left out of the peace talks and will put Sudan on the way to democracy. It is expected that they will be held during or after the six-year transition period. But six years is a long time in politics and many fear that the government and the SPLA will be nothing more than two entrenched dictatorships

that will close all political space and rig the referendum. Some political parties, excluded from the peace talks, have cautioned about this possible "two dictatorships outcome". They believe that neither the Sudanese government nor the SPLA should be allowed to maintain one party rule in the south. David Lokosang claims that the SPLA is committed to democracy: "We have been fighting for justice, equality and freedom, for a secular, pluralist and democratic Sudan ... The people of Sudan have a right to live in peace and determine their own future."

Human rights groups have warned that any lasting peace agreement in Sudan must provide guarantees for the protection of human rights of all Sudanese, including their right to participate in post conflict political processes. The peace agreement according to insiders, includes a bill of rights. But human rights groups say that, "given the lack of respect for human rights in Sudan, the only way to ensure they are included is the creation of an effective and impartial justice system allowing international human rights monitoring."

Hopes for a Sudanese peace have been tempered by distrust. The negotiations to end the conflict have taken years. "There is still a long way to go," says Lokosang, "we are dealing with a government that is deeply fundamentalist and totally committed to spreading Islam in Africa. They are not negotiating in good faith, but because of pressure from the US. We are also dealing with a

government that still has many links with al Qaeda and this complicates things."

Although the government announced they had expelled thousands of al Qaeda militants, according to the *Washington Post*, only last September financial officers of al Qaeda and the Taliban shipped large quantities of gold out of Pakistan to Sudan. According to that newspaper, Sudan may have been chosen because Osama bin Laden and other members of the network still retain business contacts in Sudan where he left a number of assets such as construction companies, banks and agricultural farms. The article says that according to a senior European intelligence official, there is growing evidence that Khartoum was again serving as a hub for al Qaeda business transactions. "bin Laden, who invested tens of millions of dollars in the country when it harboured him, continues to have economic interests there. He has banking contacts, he is intimately familiar with the political and intelligence structure there," the official said. "He never fully left Sudan despite moving to Afghanistan."

The agreement does not address the conflict that has led to the crisis in Darfur. Concerns are being raised that there will be no peace until the conflict is ended. The latest killings, rapes and destruction have put in doubt the Sudanese government's commitment to peace. "We can't get the new Sudan we want with Darfur on fire and bleeding as it is," Charles R Snyder, the acting US

assistant secretary of state for African affairs, told reporters in June. He said that the US would press the Sudanese to renew a cease-fire with the Darfurian rebels.

According to Luje Zahner, a spokesman for the US Agency for International Development, the fighting in Darfur has created one of the worst humanitarian crises in the world. "Three million people are beyond the reach of the aid agencies and mortality rates in the Darfur region are catastrophic – possibly as high as 1,000 per week." The government, however, continues to refuse international aid groups access to the displaced Darfurians.

BUILDING A NEW SUDAN

Given the history of Sudan, building consensus and national unity will present some challenges, but finding the right political system that will be inclusive of 65 national ethnic groups may be the biggest challenge. Academic Dr Peter Adwok Nyaba argues that "the real assets of Sudan are neither found in petrol fields nor watercourses, but in the extraordinary cultural diversity." He describes Sudan as "a colourful patchwork of cultures and languages, a delicate texture showing a great variety of social systems, customs and beliefs." He has warned that the post-colonial European model of government dominated by the largest ethnic group will fail. "The state of Sudan must be conceived in the framework of a multinational state that recognises ethnic, political and cultural diversity and gives

voice and visibility to all nationalities including the smallest and most marginalised ones" he said. "This model does not represent a reversion to tribalism, well on the contrary, it must be considered as a paradigm of nation building that is deeply rooted in the realities of the South Sudan."

The most likely outcome will be the creation of a single Sudan with two viable systems, north and south. A unified Sudan composed of two self-governing regions with the SPLA playing a leading role. But nation building will involve more than creating strong institutions of governance, it will also mean revitalising the traditional institutions for the peaceful resolution of conflicts, and most importantly, solving the more fundamental issues of the conflict.

David Lokosang has been waiting for peace for some years. He has often dreamed of the day when a final peace settlement will be signed. This has not happened as yet. But this will be the day when, leaving his family behind, he will make his way to the airport and will board a plane and fly back to South Sudan to help build a new nation. ■



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