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South Sudan: Options in Crisis

**Testimony before the U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign
Relations**

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Chairman Corker, Ranking members, and members of the Committee, thank you very much for inviting me here today. I also want to thank this Committee for its steadfast support and focus on keeping discussions going on within the American government about the crises facing South Sudan. The views I express here are my own and not those of the Sudd Institute, where I am the Executive Director.

In addressing the crises of conflict, failure of political settlements, the violence that is unnecessarily taking the lives of South Sudanese and the humanitarian problems that confront a vast number of South Sudanese, I would like to slightly shift the focus away from the elite-centered neo-liberal peace-making and onto the level of what life is like for the ordinary people of South Sudan and how I see them being best assisted to tackle the violence that is imposed on them.

Much of the crises confronting South Sudan today, insecurity, poverty, economic decline, violent political conflicts, disunity along ethnic or regional fault lines, are really born of two sources. First, the burdens left behind by the long wars of liberation, which made South Sudan the most war-devastated corner of the world since the World War. Second, South Sudan started on the wrong foot at the time of independence. There were no programs put in place to manage the expectations of South Sudanese who had suffered so terribly and for so long. The country was born into too much wealth, resources that fell into the hands of the liberators who had not seen such wealth before and who clearly opted to pay themselves and went on a shopping spree, showing very little willingness or ability to develop programs to lift the country out of its war time miseries.

These individuals had undoubtedly done so much to make the birth of their country possible, but nearly all of them quickly became disconnected from the realities of everyday citizens. They did not think the oil money would ever run out. These include many people who held high positions in security agencies, the military and cabinet portfolios, and who are no longer part of the government today or are in opposition but **were a part of** that corrupt system that put the country on the wrong path from the beginning. They kept making promises to their people that roads, basic services, security, economic development and political stability would all accrue, but no clear programs to give people reason to hope and to be patient. Instead, South Sudan was plagued by corruption that quickly ushered the country into a deeply divided society between the small class of new rich and the vast majority of citizens who had nothing. A very strong corruption-insecurity nexus developed straight away and South Sudanese were hammering each along ethnic lines immediately following the end of north-south war. From Jonglei to Lakes, Warrap to Eastern Equatoria, more South Sudanese were killed by their own than had been the case at the hands of the north in a similar period. These were the realities that catapulted the country onto the path of war that exploded in December 2013, a war whose triggers had been in the making since 2005.

So while the conflict that has engulfed the country today is essentially a struggle for power between the politico-military elites at the center, these leaders are only able to draw everyone into their senseless war because the country's citizens have long been so deprived of basic necessities and so pitted against one another along ethnic lines that so many ordinary people came to think that their survival rests with giving support, military and otherwise, to their ethnic leaders. This means that even as the world struggles to reconcile the leaders and help them sign peace agreements and create power-sharing arrangements and make plans to develop professional security agencies, the truth remains that these leaders in essence hijack and appropriate ordinary peoples' real

grievances and turn them into stepping stones into public office. The result is that their peace agreements never really address the question of why people join these wars in the first place, why these agreements collapse as soon as they are signed. The answer is that the real grievances at the level of everyday people get swept away during the political settlements, only for these grievances to keep brewing, waiting for a few disgruntled politicians or military leaders who feel excluded from the settlements to return to their already unhappy constituencies with appeals to fight whoever they believe has kept them out of power.

This situation is the main reason why there may be a peace agreement in place and the political leaders might agree to work together, divide power and resources, especially in Juba and in state capitals, but never manage to stop violence in the rest of the country. As we speak, the political arrangements that the SPLM-lead government in Juba and the various opposition parties that have joined it to form the Transitional Government of National Unity (TGoNU), are sitting on a powder keg of turmoil that is bound to explode throughout the country. For example, Riek Machar is in Khartoum and no one knows what he and his fighting forces are up to. Most likely, they are planning to resume the war, as signalled just two days ago by an attack on a town called Nhialdiu, not so far from Bentiu, the state capital of Unity, which saw some of the worse episodes of violence in 2014. If Riek is determined to get his position as First Vice President back, this would plunge the country, especially the whole of Upper Nile, back in the kinds of vicious violence we witnessed in 2013-2015. In Equatoria, people traveling on the road linking Juba to the Uganda border, the country's life line, have been attacked numerous times, killing people and destroying property being transported on this road. Other roads in the region, especially the ones linking Juba to Yei, Morobo, Kaya and on to Koboko in Uganda, another vital route for the citizens and traders of this region and the country at large, have also come under attack numerous times, particularly in the past 2 months. The government has not been able to assure people that it has the capacity to protect life and property. The government has not even admitted that it is fighting widespread rebellion throughout the country.

I was recently in Wau State, Gogrial State, the home state of the country's president, Salva Kiir Mayardit, and in Tonj State, and my assessment of the situation there is that the recurrent sectional warfare that has plagued the region over the years is continuing to affect people's ability to produce crops and look after their livestock. Even in places that have not been impacted directly by the violent crisis between the government and opposition are being impacted by the broader national crisis. Areas that are not part of the "current war" are affected by other types of violence, like ethnic feuds and crime. In Jonglei, ethnic rivalries and violent confrontations between the Murle, Dinka and Nuer ethnic groups, have continued to wreak such havoc in that region that large numbers of the Dinka sections have continued to flee the area. All these ethnic or sectional fights are not only making life unbearable in these areas but are also a sign that the country is becoming undone at the seams. Juba might be able to consolidate political power and get the best of the various power contenders, but the country is likely to remain ungovernable, if it does not disintegrate entirely.

On the diplomatic front, no marked progress has been made since UNSC resolution 2304 to deploy an additional 4000 regional force to join the existing UNMISS to protect civilians better. The visit of the UNSC ambassadors, the threats to impose an arms embargo on the country, should the government prove uncooperative on the deployment of this force, and the likelihood that this force would make a difference in protection of civilians, have been

subject of much debate among South Sudanese and people in the region. There can never be a collective verdict, as the issue of an intervention force is a very divisive issue, but both the opponents and supporters of such a force seem to agree that they are not holding their breaths on two accounts. First, deployment of the force might not actually come to pass, given that there is still uncertainty about troop contribution, financing and agreement on the modalities of deployment. Second, the fact that the force would be strictly based in Juba does not provide much confidence, especially among civilians living in all the various embattled communities throughout the country, that they would feel any benefit from a force based so far away.

What could the world community do to help the people of South Sudan? It is my considered position that the country has been on a life-support for over two decades and this has produced two glaring realities that hardly anyone has thought of or explore with seriousness.

First, the international community has always bailed South Sudanese leaders out of their responsibility for the welfare of their people. In other words, international assistance, especially the humanitarian interventions, may be keeping some citizens alive, but will never amount to a solution to what is essentially a political and social crisis. So, to keep going with it is to merely keep the country on a life-support, without any conception as to how long and to what end this approach should be maintained; or to sever it at the risk of losing lives of so many people who have come to rely on food aid for quite sometime.

Second, South Sudanese have never really been pushed tightly against the wall to the point where they have to think for themselves. It has always been a story of crisis, followed by a bail out from the world community, and another crisis, followed by another intervention. I suggest that there should be a discussion on ways to wean South Sudan from food aid, not as a punishment to the citizens who are still living in very disastrous circumstances, but as a challenge to South Sudanese leaders to come up with their own plan about how they see their country able to steer its way out of this crisis. It does not make sense that the country remains with the same programs that have kept the country from taking responsibility for its own future should be supported by the global community.

I am not suggesting that aid is bad, but aid that shows very little impact for the massive investments made is a waste of resources and a straight jacket for the country. If aid must continue as a way to maintain a moral posture, if the West must continue to be seen to be taking responsibility and a mere symbolic gesture from the world community, then we should at least try to do it differently, not in the same way we have done it since 1989 when Operation Life-line Sudan was created. The approach since 2005 has been state-building, strengthening the institutions of the state, with the hope that the state would then turn around and take responsibility for the provision of goods and services. While it is important to build institutions, this is a process that takes a generation or more. Why should communities living far away from Juba or other cities be waiting for these goods and services until such time the state is ready to do it?

A new approach would be to inject aid directly into small community-run projects, not channeling it through the bureaucracy of the government. If you take a look around the country, one observes that community-run projects or those championed by local NGOs, are the only products of foreign aid that you see all around the countryside. Peace should not be seen as an act of signing peace agreements between the elite but more a process of

addressing the drivers of conflict at the level of society, including investing the youth in the country's success and economy so that they have a future to look forward to, an investment they would fear to lose if they respond to anyone's war drums.

If the international community, particularly the American people and their government, continue to see a crucial for the US in stabilizing South Sudan, it would be best to engage with an eye to challenging the leaders of South Sudan produce their plan so that the role of outsiders to support a clear project that is well-developed, addressing the priorities of South Sudan from the perspective of the people of South Sudan. Such a plan should focus on security, addressing the massive humanitarian crisis (IDPs, refugees and famine), stabilizing the economy, including a robust anti-corruption mechanism, justice and reconciliation and respect for human rights and civic liberties. It is then and only then would this leadership have a moral ground for requesting help from the international community. Such help if, it is well-justified and credible, would only be a support to that which is a national plan. If the people and government of the United States are going to continue to stand by the people of South Sudan, as they have done for many decades, there has to be a seriousness on the side of US law makers and the executive branch of the government to put in place strong mechanisms to ensure accountability for US resources and to ensure that these resources actually make a measureable difference in the lives of South Sudanese - in Juba and across the country. Quoting how much money the US has spent on South Sudan for the last ten years is not sufficient, we must ask what it was spent on and what are the results.