

PROSPECTS FOR RECONCILING SELF-DETERMINATION
WITH UNITY IN SUDAN

Statement by Mr. Francis M. Deng to the
Symposium on Unity and Self Determination

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I: Opening Remarks

A. It is a great pleasure and honour to have been invited to address this important meeting at this critical juncture in the history of our beleaguered country. I do so with humility and needless to say, in my personal capacity and not as the Special Advisor of the United Nations Secretary-General on the Prevention of Genocide.

B. To be frank, this is an honour I was initially reluctant to accept for two principal reasons:

First, I thought it was rather late in the process to be advocating making unity attractive as we approach the end of the interim period, during which unity was to be made attractive to the Southern voters in the self-determination referendum, an objective which, arguably, has not been achieved.

Second, the positions of the principal parties to the Comprehensive Peace Agreement on the appropriate framework for unity seem too far apart to bridge in time to positively influence the referendum outcome.

C. In the end, and upon reflection, I agreed to participate, for several reasons:

First, the seminar is sponsored by my colleagues in UNMIS, an organ of the United Nations in which I serve.

Second, I reminded myself of a number of principles which have guided me over the years in my efforts to contribute to the cause of peace and unity in our country. Among these principles are:

One, optimism is a vital tool for constructive engagement, while pessimism is a path that leads to a dead-end.

Two, everyone is called upon to play a role in promoting the overriding goal of peace and unity and, although only a few eventually catch the limelight as the champions of the peace process, it is the cumulative effect of all the invisible contributions that bring about the desired outcome.

Three, in light of the above principles, as long as there is time still left, efforts should be intensified to follow the age-old adage, “Better late than never.” I have invested much of my adult life in promoting the cause of peace and unity in our country and it would be incongruous with my life-long commitments to give up because of the lateness of the hour.

D. As Abdelwahab El-Affendi and I have co-authored a position paper embodying our shared perspective, my talk should be seen as a complement to the arguments and proposals advanced in that paper.

II. Participant-Observer’s Standpoint

A. To put my views in context, it may be useful to highlight some personal positions in my role as a participant-observer in the painful history of post-colonial Sudan, in which I have lived my adult life.

B. Ever since I became politically conscious, and as those of you who have either read my writings or heard me talk on the subject will attest, I have been a strong supporter of unity, but on the basis of full equality and a shared sense of belonging to the nation, with pride and dignity as citizens. I have also supported the right of self-determination for the South, not because I wanted the South to secede, but in order to motivate the national leadership, specifically in the North, to create appropriate conditions that would make unity appeal to Southerners in a self-determination referendum.

C. In September 1989, barely three months after the Revolution for National Salvation seized power, I came to Khartoum, following a visit Bona Malual and myself made to Addis Ababa to meet with the leadership of the SPLM, acting on my long-standing principle of maintaining contacts with all the parties to the conflicts in our country. I was very well received, allowed to visit members of the previous government who were detained, and given the honour to address the National Dialogue on Peace Issues, which was about to begin. I recently re-read what I said then and was struck by how much it still resonates with the challenges confronting the country today.

D. My stance for conditional unity has deep roots in my background in the sensitive North-South border area of Abyei, whose bridging role the Abyei Protocol of the CPA acknowledges and upholds. It is indeed ironic that an area which has played such a vital role of bridging and reconciling the North and the South should have become a point of confrontation, hopefully now resolved by the outcome of the Hague Arbitration.

E. With this background, I have been honoured to participate in many forums in promotion of peace and unity over the years, both within and outside the Sudan. Some of my efforts have been in partnership with world leaders, such as the then former President of Nigeria, Olusegun Obasanjo, and former President of the United States, Jimmy Carter, and some have been with institutions such as the U.S. Department of State, the United

States Institute of Peace (USIP), and the Center for Strategies and International Studies (CSIS). I was also a member of an informal Resource Group convened by the Inter-Africa Group to support the Inter-Governmental Authority for Development (IGAD) peace initiative on the Sudan.

F. CSIS focused on developing a U.S.-Sudan Policy that provided guidance for the mediation role the Bush Administration eventually played in partnership with others to end the North-South conflict through the CPA.

G. As co-chair and the only Sudanese in the CSIS Task Force, I played a role that was both conscious of my rather anomalous position as a Sudanese contributing to the shaping of U.S.-Sudan Policy and strategic in providing the insights that eventually resulted in what I believe was a balanced report.

H. A critical element in that report was the need to reconcile two contrasting visions for the country from the North and the South through the “One Country, Two Systems” formula that was later adopted by the CPA as the corner-stone of the agreement.

III. Root-Causes of the War and the CPA Solutions

People do not go to war to kill and risk being killed without a compelling cause; fighting is a measure of desperation, based on the assumption that all peaceful efforts have failed to remedy an intolerable situation. And although rights and wrongs are rarely equal, it is important to appreciate the concerns of both sides to a conflict and address them equitably.

The critical questions that therefore need to be asked and answered are:

- What were, and are, the wars in the Sudan all about?
- To what extent has the CPA addressed and resolved the root causes of these wars?
- What challenges remain to be addressed to achieve sustained, genuinely comprehensive, peace and unity throughout the country.

A. The Root Causes of Sudan’s War(s)

1. One word that is often used these days as a root cause of the regionally proliferating conflicts in the Sudan, and is so widely applied to grievances throughout the country as to have lost its original focus on the South, is “marginalization.”

2. What this means is that the Center has monopolized power and national wealth to the exclusion of the peripheries in both the South and the North, which have thereby been “marginalized“.

3. There is, however, a deeper logic to stratification in the Sudan and that is the extent to which the identity factors of one group, the Islamic Arab North, have been used to provide a national identity framework, which inevitably stratifies groups on those grounds and discriminates against both the non-Arab, non-Muslim Southern Sudanese, and the Muslim, but non-Arab, groups in the marginalized regions of the North.
4. Placed in its historical context, the Islamic-Arab assimilationist process in the North provided opportunities for self enhancement to a respected status out of the denigrated categories of the non-Muslim Blacks, while the South adopted an identity of resistance to assimilation engendered by the indignities of gross historical mistreatment.
5. Divisive subjective factors of self identification eventually overshadowed the objective realities which embodied shared elements of identities, racial, ethnic and cultural. This divisive identity framework was recognized, reinforced and consolidated by colonial policies, which, by introducing elements of gross inequalities into existing diversities, sewed the seeds of post-colonial conflicts.
6. Initially, this identity framework pitted the North against the South, seen as the most neglected and the most embittered by negative memories of painful history and continuing internal domination.
7. Southern reaction was initially manifested in a secessionist war that united the whole North against the South and was eventually resolved through a compromise of autonomy for the South.
8. The unilateral abrogation of that agreement by the central government triggered the second war, but one in which the Sudan People's Liberation Movement and Army (SPLM/A) that championed the cause replaced secessionist objectives with a call for a New United Sudan, of full equality, without discrimination on the basis of race, ethnicity, religion, culture or gender. By the same token, the vision of the New Sudan inevitably threatens the identity-based interests of the dominant group in the North, which can be expected to resist such a radical transformation.
9. This began to capture the imagination of the marginalized, largely non-Arab, regions and groups in the North, beginning with the Nuba and the Ingassana (Funj), and eventually extending to the Beja, the Darfurians, and even the Nubians to the far North.
10. The call for the New Sudan began to tear down the walls that had historically dichotomized the country into North and South. Even those in the North, who resist radical transformation towards a new Sudan have

made significant concessions, although a considerable gap has yet to be bridged.

B. The Solutions in the CPA

1. The CPA has addressed the national identity crisis between the North and the South by granting the South autonomy during the interim period and the right to opt out of unity through a referendum to be held at the end of that period.
2. It did not, however, resolve the national identity crisis comprehensively, although it lay a foundation for the democratic transformation of the governance system in the whole country.
3. Although the CPA stipulated that efforts be exerted during the interim period to make unity attractive to the Southern voters in the self-determination referendum, the “One Country, Two Systems” formula that was aimed at reconciling the two contrasting visions for the country paradoxically entrenched the differences between the two, inadvertently favouring Southern secession, and leaving the crisis of marginalization in the North unresolved.
4. Although the CPA was intended to provide not only a framework for the democratic transformation of the governance system in the country, but also principles for resolving the regional conflicts in the North, it ironically became a tool for containment by the National Congress Party, which, as we argue in our joint paper, doubles as the Government of the North and the dominant party in the Government of National Unity.
5. Despite rhetorical declarations by leaders calling for unity, the unity option, far from being made attractive to the South, appears to have diminished, as there is no evidence that it has been, or is being, made attractive. And yet, aspirations for national unity on the right basis continue to rise on both sides.
6. Indeed, the vision of a New Sudan has so captured the imagination of Sudanese across the North-South divide that even if the South were to secede, the national crisis of identity and the struggle for the transformation of the governance system in the North would continue. Likewise, as the current inter-ethnic tensions and violent conflicts in the South, whatever their origin or sources of support, indicate, an independent South is also likely to confront charges of domination and marginalization, making the call for a New Sudan of full equality challenging to the South.

7. Considering that those who stand for the New Sudan in the North are either members or allies of the SPLM, an independent South under the leadership of the SPLM can be expected to continue to support their cause. Southern dissidents too are likely to continue to look to the North for support, especially if the North and the South are antagonistic towards one another.

8. By the same token, the prospects of reunification in the event of the New Sudan emerging in the North and the South cannot be ruled out.

9. It is obvious, therefore, that the secession of the South would not necessarily end the conflicts in the Sudan without resolving the national identity crisis in the North and establishing an equitable governance system in the South. Likewise, the prospects for the unity of the country do not necessarily cease with the independence of the South.

10. For all these reasons, it is urgently important to assess the situation and reflect on what can still be done at this late hour to resolve the crisis in the country comprehensively, not only to implement the CPA with credibility and genuine good will, but also to resolve the crisis in Darfur and prospective conflicts in other regions of the North, building on the principles laid down in the CPA. This could generate a surprisingly positive environment in the country and enhance the prospects of salvaging the threat of disintegration throughout the country.

C. The Challenges to be Addressed

1. At this juncture, the country faces pressing challenges with two sets of critical questions:

First, can anything be done at this late hour to make unity attractive to Southern votes in the Self determination referendum?

Second, what can be done to anticipate the worst case scenarios in the event of the South voting for independence and to prepare constructive remedial responses?

2. Making unity attractive requires action on both material and moral grounds.

Material action would require making peace dividends immediately visible: embarking on massive construction of roads and other infrastructural projects; providing social services to the people, particularly in the areas of health and education; generating rural development activities; and sending messages of good will, genuine

change of heart, and readiness to address the grievances that have divided the country since independence.

Moral areas of action call for sending a clear message that Sudan is embarking on a genuine and sincere search for the common ground, based on what unites rather than on what divides. Subjective self-identification has led to a self-enhancing distortion of the objective realities that reflect more in common and provide a sound ground for a uniting sense of national identity as Sudanese. Proclamations by national leaders in that direction could immediately create a climate conducive to a sense of a common cause and a new ground for prospective unity.

3. However, as we argue in our joint paper, unity should not be seen as an end in itself or as the only option in the pursuit of human fulfillment and dignity. A vote for Southern independence, therefore, confronts the nation with challenges that must be addressed constructively in the interest of both North and South. This should mean making the process of partition as harmonious as possible and laying the foundation for peaceful and cooperative coexistence and continued interaction. Practical measures should be taken to ensure continued sharing of such vital resources as oil and water, encouraging cross-border trade, protecting freedom of movement, residence and employment across the borders, and leaving the door open for periodically revisiting the prospects of reunification.

IV. Concluding Remarks

A. Sudan is confronted with an extraordinary dilemma: Sudanese and the world would prefer the Sudan to remain united, but the contrasting visions for the country seem too far apart to be bridged.

B. The question the Sudanese must answer at this late hour is: What is the most important consideration for them, building on the self perceptions of identity that both distort the objective realities of the country and divide the nation, or searching for a common ground and a re-structuring of a uniting national identity framework.

C. If the latter is agreed to be the case, then action needs to be taken immediately to not only open a new page, but to also make it credibly and conspicuously evident for all to see.

D. The elements of such a new dispensation should be:

1. Decentralization throughout the country in which all regions of the country, North and South, enjoy self rule similar to the system accorded the South, short of the right to secede.

2. Equitable representation in the Government of National Unity, with due consideration to proportional representation based on demographic weight, but with due safeguards for minorities.
3. A declaration of principles for full equality of citizenship, without discrimination on the basis of race, ethnicity, culture, religion or gender.
4. The creation of mechanisms and institutions for ensuring the immediate implementation of these policies, with the objective of showing visible results well ahead of the referendum in the South.
5. Engaging the international community to support these last-minute efforts to salvage and promote the essential principles of making unity attractive to the Southern voters in the self-determination referendum.
6. Working with all concerned not only to advocate the cause of unity, but also to prepare to counter the negative consequences of separation, and promote peaceful coexistence and cooperation between the North and an independent South.

E. If I may, I would like to end with passages from my book: *War of Visions: Conflict of Identities in the Sudan*. Under the title, "Critical Options," I wrote:

The Sudanese have a limited number of options from which to choose among the discernable positions of the parties. One is to redefine the national identity so as to be genuinely uniting and to foster full equality of opportunity in the political, economic, social, and cultural life of the country; another is to create a framework that would reconcile the idealistic aspirations for unity and the realities of diversity; and a third is to recognize that obstacles to national unity are perhaps insurmountable and that partition might permit both sides to move on with the more positive tasks of reconstruction and development on the basis of their own self-perceptions and aspirations (pp.305-306).

I underscored the role the leadership is called upon to advance the cause of unity: The best guarantee for unity is for the leadership, especially at the national level, to rise above factionalism and to offer the entire nation a vision that would inspire a cross-sectional majority of the Sudanese people, irrespective of race, ethnicity, region, or religion, to identify with the nation and stand together in collective pursuit of their common destiny...only through mutual recognition, respect, and harmonious interaction among African and Arab populations throughout the country can the Sudan achieve and ensure a just and lasting peace and live up to its role as a true microcosm of Africa and a dynamic link between the Continent and the Middle East. Tragically, this has remained a mirage since independence.

F. If, as I have argued, both the North and the South will continue to face internal challenges in the event of Southern independence, and if, as I have also argued, the

prospects for reunification under the right conditions cannot be ruled out, and, further, if aspirations for unity are widely shared, as appears to be the case, then an expedited search for genuinely comprehensive peace and unity becomes urgently compelling. Consequently, the referendum and the possible independent vote should not be viewed as the end of the road, the search for harmonious and productive relations among Sudan's many component parts is surely an ongoing process that will continue to challenge Sudanese on all sides as the nation searches for an inclusive identity and common sense of purpose rooted in their shared destiny.

G. It is to be hoped that this seminar will not be a purely intellectual exercise and that it can produce some tangible proposals for action which the national leaders on all sides will consider seriously and act upon promptly in the interest of the people and the country, united or divided.