

Abyei legislative council calls for accelerated efforts on referendum deadlock

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By Ngor Arol Garang

December 25, 2010 (ABYEI) – On Christmas Day the speaker of the Abyei legislative council, Charles Abyei Jok, while addressing the congregation on Saturday morning at the Roman Catholic Church in Abyei town, called on the two parties of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) to accelerate discussions in order to reach a compromise over the contested region.

In the 2005 CPA the Abyei protocol granted the oil-producing region special status and the right to decide whether they wish to join the south through a referendum. Sudan's ruling National Congress Party (NCP) and the former southern rebel movement the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM) also agreed that the south would be able to vote on whether it wishes to secede from the north.

However, although the southern referendum is expected to go ahead on January 9, Abyei's plebiscite has been plagued by delays and disputes between the NCP and SPLM over the referendum commission and who is eligible to take part in the poll.

The SPLM maintain that only the Dinka Ngok ethnic group should be allowed to vote, whereas the NCP want the Misseriya tribe, who enter the region to graze their cattle for a few months each year, also to be granted voting rights.

Speaking on Saturday the speaker of the Abyei legislative council said: "I know church is not where people come to talk about politics; it is where we come to pray and practice our religious faith but it is also important that our citizens are enlightened with current affairs on issues which concern the general public."

The speaker, who spoke on behalf of the Abyei chief administrator, Justice Deng Arop Kuol, said he was quoted out of context by sections of the media in the past as calling for war in the church.

"Do we call war in the Church? Church is where we come to pray. I said this because I remember I was in the past misquoted by section of the media after I held [a] brief[ing] about [the] political situation here in this church. I was quoted as calling for war though that was not what I said," said Jok, before adding that would not stop him from speak out the truth and realities on who is holding up the implementation of Abyei protocol.

As well as the referendum issues, Abyei's borders have yet to be demarcated despite the NCP and SPLM agreeing to refer the issue to the Permanent Court of Arbitration, which gave a ruling on where the controversial border lies.

"Although I was misquoted, I will not stop telling the truth and realities about who is responsible for delay in the conduct of the Abyei referendum and border demarcation," explained Jok.

"There is no secret about it as you all know that parties to the Comprehensive Peace Agreement have not until now been able to reach a compromise. Why, because the National Congress Party insists that Misseriya be included in the referendum vote," explained Jok.

The senior member of the SPLM in the area also told the citizens who attended the celebration that the situation is relative calm and that people should not be in a state of fear.

"The security situation as I am talking to you is calm. There is nothing to worry and fear. The security situation is under controlled. We are receiving our people from the north and are being distributed to their villages upon arrival," said Jok.

He asked people to contact of the local commissioner for official queries incase of any security concerns before passing on an unconfirmed speculations.

"We have seen in the past that people runs away without confirming circulating rumors and speculations. Why do you run without confirming what happened. What will you tell the other people who have courage to ask for the cause of running away?"

"This happened several times especially after the occurrence of the 2008 incident in which the two armed forces clashed here. It is important you call authorities to conform instead of running away. For now, take the contact of your commissioner for official queries to avoid spreading of speculations," said Jok.

Speaking at the same event, Zachariah Atem Fiyen, who is the chairperson of the NCP in the region as well as deputy speaker at the Abyei Legislative Council, thanked the Abyei administration for facilitating the return of the internally displaced persons who fled to Khartoum and northern states at the height of the over two decades long civil war between the north and south which came to an end after the signing of the CPA in Kenya, almost six years ago on 9 January 2005.

"The return of our people who fled twice is one of the successes made by the administration. They should now be assisted by all of us as they try to integrate into our communities and villages. They are our people and we should try our level best to share whatever little we have with them," said Atem.

The senior official of the NCP, who have ruled Sudan since 1989, also thanked returning internally displaced persons for having come with some of their belongings.

"I must confess that our people are coming with all they acquired while in the north. They have left nothing behind. All they acquired in the north is brought. They have come with all furniture for their houses. They are lacking nothing. They have come with equipments of the house. Everything is complete," explained Atem.

Atem, a native to Abyei, has in the past remained supportive of the position of the Khartoum government to include participation of Missiriya in affairs of Abyei.

Previously he has claimed that Abyei belongs to both Missiriya and Dinka Ngok; a claim denied by most Dinka Ngok who claim that his allegiance has been bought by the NCP.

However, in 2009, during oral presentations and hearings at the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague, he retracted from his earlier declined from an earlier position in support of the inclusion of Missiriya into the affairs and ownership of Abyei.

Negotiations between the SPLM and NCP have yet to find a solution to the deadlock.

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