

Australian Diplomacy just never gets it on Africa

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By Maker Mayek

June 24, 2012 - The recent visit to Juba by Honourable Tim Fischer (Australian Prime Minister Gillard's Special Envoy to South Sudan) absolutely started on a wrong foot. When I first came across the visit being reported by various media outlets in South Sudan, it really surprised me that Australia's first official visit to South Sudan was dominated by economic questions of diplomacy; mutual interests in trade. I thought that was normal - considering Australian Diplomacy's usual blunders on Africa.

These past blunders will not be discussed here in case someone is curious to know. However, Peter Run, an Academic of South Sudanese origin (I believe) here in Australia re-activated my interest in the topic. In an article posted on Gurtong.net, Mr. Run whipped the South Sudanese media for "badly" reporting Mr. Fischer's visit. I am not sure, how it could have been reported, if the talks, as carried by the media, only centred on areas of economic mutual interests. Australia and South Sudan have a strong bond of people. This is an incomparable comparative advantage and should have been the crux of the talks. The event would have carried a silver lining if based in that context.

Mr. Run raised some very good points which I am not going to discuss all. However, I will discuss this statement and I quote, "Most South Sudanese know, Australia was one of the first countries to put soldiers on the ground and recognised South Sudan when it became independent. Given this long standing commitment, it is regrettable that South Sudanese currently seem to misunderstand the driving forces of Australia's interest in their country". Fair dinkum! This is what I understand from this statement. Mr. Run is proposing that, since Australia has had a long standing commitment in South Sudan, the South Sudanese media should have been more positive in reporting Tim Fischer's visit. Mr. Run was simply calling on the media to exercise 'Diplomatic Public Display of Appreciation - DPDA'. This is just as bad and tasteless as Honourable Tim Fischer's diplomacy.

Mr. Run was definitely right to say that Australia was one of the countries that sent troops to South Sudan on peacekeeping mission as well as readily recognising the independence of South Sudan. Really, this is what most countries do because there are always issues of image that follow, especially for influential countries of Australia's stature. Australia's contributions in the past may have been motivated by multilateral interests but they are not negligible. Of course, there are more compelling contributions that Mr. Run should have mentioned. For instance: the annual foreign aid that Australia provides to South Sudan. Most importantly, former Prime Minister and Foreign Minister, Kevin Rudd has always spoken well of South Sudan and defended South Sudanese Australians here in Australia with tooth and claw in the hour of need. Former Parliamentary Secretary, Honourable Bob McMullan also was another prominent figure that showed particular interest in South Sudan. That's just that.

This is why I think Honourable Tim Fischer's diplomacy was a wrong foot forward. South Sudan and Australia have a robust people-to-people relationship. That should have dominated the talks. Australia's South Sudan's population stands well over 25,000 people. This is an unbreakable 'umbilical cord' for furthering bilateral relations between the two countries. South Sudan for sure, would have been compelled to invoke the old adage, 'A friend in need is a friend in deed'. Australia's hosting of this massive number of South Sudanese is an unforgettable contribution and remains the fabric of relations between the two nations. Tim Fischer should have adopted this line. I call this 'Emotional Diplomacy'. There's nothing wrong with it as long as it is properly expressed. South Sudan would have been more inclined to discuss issues of mutual interests in trade and the media reports would have carried a bunch of goodies and pats on the back for South Sudan's dear friend. Bingo! There comes Australia's chance to secure its economic interests. South Sudan is aware of Australia's strengths in agriculture and agricultural technology, resource extraction and governance. South Sudan would have generously asked Australia to partake in South Sudan's development. Ah well, this wasn't so and I make my call, it is Australian Diplomacy's usual blunder on Africa.

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