

Tribute to late General Paulino Matip Nhial

Thursday 23 August 2012

By: Deng Vanang

August 22, 2012 - The death of one of highly decorated South Sudan's Generals Paulino Matip Nhial on 22nd August 2012 in Mayo clinic in Nairobi, Kenya although unwelcomed news to most South Sudanese, expectedly came to pass at long last. The late General as known to many people had been in recent years shuttling between prestigious medical facilities abroad and Juba, capital of South Sudan in desperate search for treatment. However, Doctors with robust financial support from government of South Sudan and prayers from South Sudanese people and well wishers that loved him dearly only succeeded in prolonging his life and not putting to an end his diabetic and high blood pressure disease that put his life to eternal peace a day ago. The said diseases are currently few of the malignancies whose cures are still illusive and yet to be found globally. General Paulino as Deputy Commander-in-Chief to President Salva Kiir Mayardit was born to the family of Nhial Nyak Majok and Nyayooch Chan seventy five years ago in Tooy Payam, Mayom County of Unity state. He was a brother to several brothers: Machadh, Mariep, Mawan and sisters: Nyaloth and Nyaluet Nhial from his mother, only wife to his father, Nhial. General Paulino as fondly called is survived by seventeen wives with over forty children.

MILITARY CAREER

He joined the Anyanya One Movement in 1971 and integrated into Sudan Armed Forces SAF following the 1972 peace agreement, signed in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia between the ex-Anya Nya guerrilla movement and President Jaafar Mohammed Nimiery's socialist military government which took over power from General Ibrahim About in May 1969. He again defected from the same government and joined Bilpam-based Anya Nya Two movement in late 1970s following Akobo mutiny led by none other than first lieutenant Vincent Kuany Latjor and Corporal James Bol Kur. The movement with partial support from Ethiopian government of Mengistu Haile Mariam engaged the Sudan government in hit and run attacks in preparation for public revolt in the South against Khartoum - based Nimiery's regime. That expected public revolt was the birth of SPLM/A in 1983 in the aftermath of successive Bor and Ayod Mutinies orchestrated by fierce Captain Kerubino Kuanyin Bol and Major William Nyuon Bany Machar respectively. With misunderstanding in new rebel movement between Dr. John Garang de Mabior Atem and Samuel Gai Tut Yaang over the principal objective and leadership, Paulino teamed up the former under rejuvenated Anya Nya Two movement while SPLM/A effectively remained under the tight grips of the latter. Deprived of all South Sudan external borders to wage sustainable guerilla warfare against Khartoum-based successive regimes, Anya Nya opted to challenge the mighty SPLM/A in governments of Sudan's held territories. With tacit hosting and logistical support from the same governments, Anya Nya Two was using those helps as a tactical move until it triumphed over SPLM/A militarily and then demanded what was promised it *independence of South Sudan from the north* by Khartoum successive regimes. Or got independence as promised and then either co-opted SPLM/A or flushed it out of South Sudan by completely eliminating it altogether. Such Machiavellian strategy never came to be, instead the reverse turned out to be true according to South Sudan bloody history. But for a steeled General like him, Paulino went successfully against the grain as he held out protecting Bentiu oil fields for Sudan government in exchange for his survival and against SPLM/A perennial military incursions. In 1991 he teamed up with his Nuer tribesman Dr. Riek Machar in his failed attempt to oust John Garang from SPLM/A leadership. The two parted ways during Khartoum Peace agreement in 1997, when each supported different Nuer candidates *Taban Deng Gai, Unity state incumbent governor and the late's preferred candidate, Paul Lily* for unity state governorship.

SOUTH - SOUTH PEACE OVERTURES

Paulino and Machar joined each other company again when the former joined South Sudan government and not SPLM/A as such for the sake of South Sudan independence as his life-long dream which the SPLM/A turned around to embrace through an internationally brokered Comprehensive Peace Agreement CPA, reached in Nairobi, Kenya between SPLM/A and Sudan government on January 9th 2005. He signed popularly known Juba declaration with President Salva Kiir that buried the hatchet between their two rival groups *SSDF and SPLA* that made him deputy Commander-in-chief, an untraditionally existing post in several countries the world over. That showed how so valuable he was and invincible personality in South Sudan politics on the one hand and on the other, how determined and benevolent Salva Kiir was in making sure South Sudanese people united if they had to achieve their cherished dream of independence, a common wisdom which eluded the sage, John Garang. Simply because Garang successfully signed a very complicated peace he could not manage to implement. The pride that he managed to sign an internationally recognized and supervised peace deal where several others had failed miserably went into his swollen head. In the same line of thinking he grew more reluctant to accept invaluable advices from those he perceived rivals that could be helpful to both his leadership and people. For he felt he was capable of quelling any dissent that might have arisen if he could manage to overthrow all Khartoum - based successive regimes with an exception of a man, Omer Al-Bashir, he signed a peace deal with and whom he thought he would make a minced meat of at the general elections and a string of internal rebellions ranging from Kerubino to Arok, Gai to Machar to Kiir. Such attitude informed his press statements in Uganda in his last days there, suggesting that he would crash militarily both South Sudan - based Uganda

Joseph Kony Lord Resistance Army rebels and Paulino Matip South Sudan Defense Force/SSDF then allied to Khartoum government. He was even busy giving instructions while in Uganda for troops deployment to Bentiu, Matip's traditional strong hold and from which the new Administrator of the SPLM, Theopolis Ochang's entry was obstructed. Matip on the other was preparing to counter Garang' impending offensive which was an opportunity for the Northerners to prove to the whole world their long held belief that Southerners could not have an independently stable state without their night watchman chip. Few days before his death South Sudanese learned that John Garang's Naivasha peace was not going to be abrogated by anybody else as he wanted the world to believe, but John Garang himself. Not that Kony and Matip were right in their anti-peace moves for they genuinely thought the peace was isolating them from their main and only backer, Omer Hassan Al-Bashir, but as the custodian and the main beneficiary of a successful Naivasha peace agreement he laboriously earned, the all out war with the two could not be in his interest as long as there was a viable option to avert it. That option was negotiation which Kiir and Machar in letter and spirit pursued after his death with the two groups. He could not be fighting an isolated, unwanted group in case of SSDF but ethnic armed groups with sympathizers right within his camp already having scores to settle through any opportunity that presented itself.

PAULINO'S CONTRIBUTION TO NUER COMMUNITY WELFARE

Secondly, General Paulino Matip Nhial was not idling with Northerners when he co-habited with them. Like a giraffe, he foresaw South Sudan of today long before the tumultuous advent of grand CPA, a South Sudan that would accommodate all its offsprings regardless of what might be past differences. And in that period what counts is capability to do something. Armed with that pragmatic vision, he recruited many Nuer civilians into his army well equipped to defend their threatened interests. To build leadership in the entirely illiterate army, he went fishing for graduates in Sudanese universities based in Khartoum and its vicinity. Mostly Nuer and encouraged them to join him either physically or in paper in due date. That due date was time of peace. During Juba declaration that integrated his SSDF into South Sudan army still maintaining the name SPLA, was a big shock to the SPLA military elites in Juba to see polished intellectuals swelling SSDF ranks capable of competing with them locally and internationally.

HIS SUCCESSES

Paulino succeeded in building for himself confidence in his clan - Bul Geka and entire Nuer community, locally and abroad. A proverbial cat with nine lives, Paulino succeeded in protecting Bentiu oil fields for over twenty five years in exchange for his military survival from Khartoum-based governments against former arch enemy, the SPLM/A with double benefit of becoming one of the affluent South Sudanese. And if money could buy life, Paulino could be the accredited everyday cells that are recharged and never die. His protection of South Sudanese civilians in Khartoum following the death of John Garang in a plane crash in July 2005 and subsequent signing of Juba declaration in January 2006 endeared him to South Sudanese. Were it not for fear of throwing his support behind Dr.Riek Machar in acrimonious 2008 SPLM 2nd National Convention that sucked the ruling SPLM into an internal power struggle between Kiir and Machar, South Sudan would be in a great turmoil at the time. With Sciences saying every person created under the sun by God in the world has nine lookalikes, Paulino was known to be a look alike of his late in-law and political ally, Kerubino Kuanyin Bol.

HIS CHALLENGES AT A GLANCE

One of the toughest challenges he faced in his expansive military career was one posed by Major General Peter Gadet Yeka in 2002 after the latter, a military genius like him, rebelled against him to join SPLM/A. Gadet is his presumed Bul clan successor on inter-Bul section and government affairs and whom he sweet talked into whirling away time in the wings until he either retired or died in office as it happened now. They both viewed each other in shared adversity and affection, envy and admiration in their on and off relationships. And the single most daunting challenge he went down without solving because of his ill-health and the most desirable unity of South Sudanese at this time of numerous difficulties might be frustrations which plagued his last years on earth: his marginalization in the running of the South Sudan army and the path of corruption and tribalism his boss, President Kiir, has amicably resigned himself to.

Deng Vanang, is a Juba -based professional journalist He can be reached at: dvanang@yahoo.com