

Unity State backs cooperation deal with Sudan

Friday 19 October 2012

By Bonifacio Taban Kuich

October 18, 2012 (BENTIU) - Unity State's parliament has backed the recent cooperation agreement between South Sudan and Sudan, which was signed by the two sides in the Ethiopia capital Addis-Ababa mediated by a African Union panel led by the former South Africa president Thabo Mbeki.

Before the cooperative agreement endorsed by the South Sudan National Parliament, on Wednesday there has been considerable criticism of the deal from officials and citizens from North Bahr el Ghazal.

As well as oil, the most significant aspect of the deal was an agreement to create a demilitarized buffer zone along the contested and largely undemarcated border. Both sides agreed to withdraw their armed forces 10km away from a notional line proposed by the African Union.

Despite the AU and United Nations and both countries agreeing that the position of the AU buffer zone would have no bearing on any final agreement on the position of the international border the inclusion of the Mile 14 area has angered officials and citizens in North Bahr el-Ghazal State.

Many citizens in the state's capital Aweil including Governor Paul Malong Awan has strongly criticized the cooperation agreement.

Awan went as far as to say that Mile 14 had been handed over to north Sudan by South Sudan's President Salva Kiir. However, Kiir and other South Sudanese officials have denied that the withdrawal of forces from Mile 14 will lead to it being handed over to Sudan.

South Sudan's chief negotiator at the talks, Pagam Amum, has said that critics of the deal do not properly understand it.

Speaker Simon Maguek Gai of Unity State's 49-member assembly warned against criticizing the President, adding that the government cannot sell land but it has to make sure people enjoy a dividend from peace and independence.

He repeated the central government's position that because Mile 14 was part of the buffer zone did not mean it had or would be handed over the Sudan and that future talks - expected to resume in mid-November - would resolve the border issue.

"I'm sure we have never given any inches of our land to the north as claimed by other people, I think they know what they are claiming for, but for us as people of South Sudan we have not given any land to our people in the North", Said Gai.

Gai added that South Sudan needed to create a peaceful environment for future understanding between two nations so that a lasting peace can be achieved.

"We have already entrusted our negotiation teams to [go] and negotiate on our behalf, and I think if the agreement was bad they would not have signed, they would have come to us for consultations but because we thought the agreement was in place that why they signed".

Gai said the recent talks are a positive step towards good future relations with Sudan.

(ST)