

The mentality of me-first and its danger

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By Zechariah Manyok Biar

October 25, 2012 - Why do you think, here in South Sudan, people standing in line waiting for their turn to exchange their money create second and third or more lines against the directives of officials operating the Exchange Forex Bureau? Why do you think people driving on Juba roads block vehicles coming on the opposite side of the road when there is traffic jam? The answer is simple: the mentality of "me-first." This mentality is one of the mothers of corruption. It is what motivates people to take what belongs to others so that they can be the only ones to do well economically. This mentality is now sneaking into how national resources are distributed in this country.

If you listened to news on October 23, 2012, you might have heard the Governor of Central Equatoria saying that his State was pulling out of the centralized tax system because it no longer gets the 11 million South Sudanese Pounds it used to get every month before the centralization of the tax system. He went ahead to say that he is sending his people to collect taxes at Nisito and Kaya borders contrary to the directives from the central government. Those who attended his meeting were clapping as he talked. They supported him.

This was the first time for me to hear that Central Equatoria State had been getting 11 million SSP every month. That means it had been getting 132 million SSP per a year over the last seven years. When you multiply 132,000,000 SSP by 7 years, it gives you 924,000,000 SSP. Convert this amount to US Dollars at the current Central Bank's rate of 3.15 SSP per a Dollar; you will get 293,333,333 US Dollars. This is higher than the amount used by the USAID to asphalt Juba-Nimule Roads which was about 222,000,000 US Dollars.

What is interesting is that 132 million SSP that Central Equatoria State gets per a year is in addition to the amount of money it gets from the national government together with other states. Not only that, this is in addition to services that it gets because of the presence of the capital city in the State.

When you see all the roads built in Juba, they are built by the central government despite the fact that Juba is the capital city of Central Equatoria State. When you see the roads built across the State, they are built by the central government. The roads that go to counties like Kajo Keji are now not built because central government has not intervened, even though they could fall under the responsibility of the State Government. Bridges which collapse are repaired by the central government.

Do not talk about water, electricity, and garbage collection. They are known to be the fiscal responsibility of the central government. The question is: Where does 11 million South Sudanese Pounds go every month when we know that even salaries of all the government workers in Central Equatoria State are paid from the funds that the central government allocates to Central Equatoria State? I do not know the answer. Let me try to talk of what I know.

I know that the connection of Central Equatoria to neighboring countries was done by the central government to serve the people all over South Sudan. I know that the funds used to do the connection were meant for all South Sudanese. I know that other states are not connected to the outside world where they could collect taxes at their borders not because of their faults but because of crises that are national in nature. I know that services that are offered in Juba are funded with money generated in Upper Nile and Unity States. I know that if every state is to collect taxes from its borders collected to Central Equatoria where trucks mainly come, traders will stop doing business in South Sudan because they are not charity organizations ready to distribute their money to South Sudanese states. They are working for profits and profits do not result from paying multiple taxes. I know that when traders stopped from coming to South Sudan because of multiple taxing, Central Equatoria will not have 11 million SSP per a month and they will consider the Central Government as important. These are things that I know.

If what I know is true, then I believe the centralization of the tax system was done so that national resources which are produced by roads built by the central government can benefit all South Sudanese at the time where oil was shut down. I do not believe that it is for the best interest of Central Equatoria to see the rest of the nine states and the central government collapse so that it remains as the only better off state.

But the reality is: me-first mentality is winning everywhere in this new country. One wonders Where South Sudan will go with this mentality.

Zechariah Manyok Biar lives in Juba, Republic of South Sudan. He can be reached at manyok34@gmail.com