

The Budding Uneasy Feeling about 'Foreigners' on the Streets of Juba

Tuesday 30 October 2012

By Remember P.D Miamingi

October 30, 2012 (JUBA) - There are disturbing signs of anti-'foreigners' sentiments littered across South Sudan: from the unfriendly receptions fellow Africans from neighboring countries experience at our different border posts, to some serious allegations of exploitation and abuse in Juba. It has been alleged, for example, that fellow Africans have been extorted, beaten up, raped, unlawfully arrested and, in some instances, killed for different reasons. I am told that if you simply look and talk as a *wewe* (the word used to describe certain category of 'foreigners') you can easily be harassed, insulted and possibly denied basic rights.

Even though some South Sudanese have justified these shameful behaviors saying that 'we were also subjected to similar treatments while we were refugees in some of these countries whose citizens are now in our country', I find these sentiments abhorable, unjustifiable and condemnable. These behaviors are un-South Sudanese, un-African and completely incompatible with our character as a nation, our recent experience and the philosophical foundation of our statehood.

Across different cultures and traditions in Sudan, foreigners were highly regarded and treated with respect; they had priority of service and were collectively protected from abuse and exploitation. This Sudanese hospitality is acknowledged and appreciated in many places around the world. People are amazed at the richness of the Sudanese culture and its tenacity to welcome and accommodate others. I have received favor many times, simply because I am a Sudanese, from people who considered themselves indebted because of the extraordinary hospitality they got from other Sudanese. Hospitality and not xenophobia is our character as a people.

As Africans, the distinctiveness of our collective culture is demonstrated through our unconditional readiness to share. This has been captured by the concept of Ubuntu- 'I am what I am because of who we are all'. As an African philosophy of hospitality, Ubuntu makes us, according to Archbishop Desmond Tutu 'open and available to others, knowing fully that as (South Sudanese) or Africans we belong to a greater whole and our essence is diminished when others are humiliated, diminished, tortured or oppressed'. One can easily adopt the words of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. as follow 'all (Africans) are tied together; their life interrelated, and we are all caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.. and (South Sudan) will never be what it ought to be until its neighbors are what they ought to be'.

It is actually strange that South Sudanese who were treated as foreigners in their own country and suffered untold injustice simply because they dared to be different would meet out similar treatment to others. Dr. John Garang of blessed memory framed and fought for the Sudanese liberation as a prelude, so to say, to the final liberation of the black man and woman. He insisted that our liberation would not be complete if Africans in or outside Sudan still live in oppression and subjugation. Some of our brothers and sisters from neighboring countries who come to us do so to escape poverty, gain some income to ensure basic survival. Even though we ourselves may not have much, but greatness lies in sharing even the little we have without complaining.

If hatred for 'foreigners' is really strange to the culture and traditions of Sudanese, is incompatible with their political and philosophical postulations, why are South Sudanese now allergic to 'foreigners'?

It might be that:

1. Colonial hung-over is to be blamed: South Sudanese have suffered the most complicated and longest colonial experience. First colonized by the British, experienced joint rule by British and Arabs, and then by the Arabs alone until 2005. They were divided and ruled for all these years. To divide successfully, an artificial sense of differences and superiority or inferiority was promoted. Others were despised in order to defend and safeguard self-interest. As a result, even South Sudanese are still treated as 'foreigners' in other parts of the same country and are referred to in some very derogatory terms. This policy of divide and rule, 'us and them' resulted in the most ugly chapter in our struggle - the infamous *kokora*. So this alleged anti-'foreigners' sentiment might just be an extension of this colonial experience.
2. Lessons from history: South Sudanese know quite well the consequences of abused of hospitality. History has it that Arabs were initially visitors that were welcomed and treated well by the black inhabitants of the Sudan. This hospitality was abused by the Arabs, they took over the land, Arabized, Islamized it and finally oppressed and subjugated their host as slaves. To reclaim their dignity and some parts of the their own land has taken South Sudanese 100s of years; now they must be wiser not to allow the repeat of history. The flooding of 'foreigners' to Juba may just be seen as 'they are coming to take over our money, land and should be fought as we did with others'.

3. Poor economic policies by the government: South Sudanese fought a brutal war to defend their basic humanity and having been promised that victory in war meant peace and prosperity, seven years down the line they see only 'foreigners' running business: from cleaning the streets, hustling on the roads, to mega businesses and working in all the prestigious offices. Acutely aware of their lack of education and capital to compete, South Sudanese probably are turning their frustration into gradual forced eviction of these invaders.

4. Retaliation: It might be possible that some of the individuals today allegedly mistreating 'foreigners' were themselves directly or indirectly victims of mistreatment in other countries. Now with a country of their own, they consider it a repay day.

5. Unfriendly attitude of the 'foreigners': It is possible that some fellow Africans who were privileged to go to school uninterrupted, acquired some remunerated skills, have access to capital, have social capital in highest places or front for powerful individuals within the government of the Republic of South Sudan are using these privileges as a license to look down upon citizens not so privileged in the same areas. As a result, the violence targeted at the 'foreigners' is simply a reaction to abuse in one's own country.

6. Escape-goatism: It is possible that 'foreigners' are seen and blamed for the raising cost of living, increasing levels of crime, as well as facilitating and abating corruption and sliding morals. By targeting them, South Sudanese are simply expressing their hatred for the 'evils' they represent.

7. 'Unreadiness' rather than unwillingness to accept 'foreigners': It might just be that foreigners came in in great numbers just too early when the systems, the country and the people of South Sudan were not just prepared to welcome them. So the so-called violence could just be a process of adjustment.

My response to the above outlined rebuttable presumptions:

I. Colonialism: it is my submission that we cannot fight an evil only to turn around to embrace it as modus operandi to serve us. To have resisted oppression, discrimination and assault on basic human dignity to the point of killing and be killed for it was the highest affirmation of our belief and commitment to these ideals. South Sudanese, as victims of the worst form of apartheid and xenophobia on the basis of their color and creed, cannot fathomably and justifiably use these vices against their neighbors simply on the ground of some irrational lines drawn by some colonial masters. Our own experience should not make us bitter, but better human beings.

II. Repeat of history: having bought our sovereignty with over 2 million tones of blood, it is unthinkable that anyone will take it back from us at any less cost. The country is ours. Our neighbors who come are coming to serve our country and us. We set the terms. They bring what we need and we give what they want. They are not better than us and we are not superior to them. If we have anything against anyone, we may not be very educated or rich as other nations and people, but we have values, morals and civilized ways of sorting out our differences. Violence against a visitor or our guests is not in our character.

III. Poor economic policies: there are glaring evidences on the streets of Juba, in the market, businesses and offices that are indicative of very poor economic planning and regulation. But this is our fault, the fault of our leaders and not of our neighbors. Instead of turning our frustration on our well-meaning friends, we should rather engage our policy makers to protect our interest.

IV. Retaliation: it is unthinkable that a whole nation could have wrong one individual. As I move around, I have seen that for every person who have wronged me in a country there are more than two people in that country ready to do good to me. Revenge begets revenge. There are thousands of our people in Kenya, Uganda, Ethiopia, etc. some not properly documented but benefiting from schools and other services in these countries; if we go 'eye for eye', many of us might not be able to see even the borders that divide us.

V. Foreigners' unfriendly attitude: it is possible that some of our neighbors are arrogant, but two wrongs can never equal to a right. We can never prove that we are a civilized people through uncivilized means. A lion need not go around the forest announcing that he is a lion. We can overcome evil only by returning good for every evil and not always by fire-for-fire approach. We are landlocked and we have a very unpredictable and irrational neighbor who is ready to recruit few as our enemies. Let us not burn the bridge that helped crossed us over.

VI. Escape-goatism: one indicator to measure maturity is the ability to take ownership of one's problems. If things are going right, we should take credit for it and when they go wrong, we should take responsibility. We cannot, like Adam, push the responsibility of some of our failure so far as a country on the table of foreigners.

VII. Readiness: growing up with my mum in South Sudan, I cannot remember a day that a visitor came and there was no food to eat and tea to drink. Every house I went to, usually unannounced, there was always food enough for everyone around the table. Visitors were always in the picture when we budgeted for food in our culture. We cannot now as a nation say visitors took us unaware and not ready. Let us be Sudanese! Let us be who we are-hospitable people!

Way Forward

The following are some recommendations that might help address some of the issues raised:

- a. Open borders and well-regulated economy: instead of heavily investing only in more gatekeepers at our border posts, what I think the government should put its effort on also is regulating and effectively policing our national economy to serve the interest of citizens and the strategic interest of the country.
- b. Government should seriously investigate the allegations of violence against foreigners as matter of urgency.
- c. Good neighborliness policies, programs and mechanisms should be encouraged and established to raise awareness, promote cross-border friendships through dialogue, early warning system and mutual respect.

Remember P.D Miamingi is the Ag. Managing Director of Sudan's Institute for Human Rights, Good Governance and Development (SIRD). He can be reached at remember.miamingi@gmail.com