

Can South Sudan survive without Sudan?

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By Luka Biong Deng

February 2, 2013 - As expected, the summit between presidents Salva Kiir and Omar el-Bashir on January 25 did not produce any results. The term summit, which usually refers to a high-level meeting, is losing its meaning in the context of South Sudan and Sudan. Since the independence of South Sudan on July 9, 2011, the two presidents held a series of summits. All of them failed to yield any positive outcome towards the normalisation of relations between their countries.

The last meeting did not only fail but gave Bashir a chance to show his utter arrogance, egotism, insensitivity, inflexibility and even disrespect for the mediators and the members of our delegation. Some international observers who attended the summit were shocked by the negative attitude shown by Bashir during the summit. This is not surprising. Bashir has been consistent in revealing either consciously or sub-consciously his racist attitude towards Africans.

One would sympathise with President Salva Kiir and appreciate his patience and stamina to continue engaging Bashir who has proven beyond doubt to be cynical, sarcastic and unwilling to improve relations with South Sudan. Some international observers saw a big contrast between the two presidents. President Salva Kiir showed statesmanship, cool-minded and respect.

The real question is: How long will the South continue attending these summits and how much hope can we attach to Bashir's Sudan? It is clear that such summits are being used by Sudan to boost its public relations and buy time.

The current status of the disputed and claimed border areas and Abyei is in favour of Sudan. In Abyei, Sudan is scooping all the oil revenues from Abyei while South Sudan, Warrap state and the Ngok Dinka are getting nothing from their respective shares of 42 percent, 2 percent and 2 percent they are supposed to get under the Abyei Protocol. The presence of UN forces in Abyei is providing security for oilfields and the Arab nomads and possibly may be used by Sudan to implement its settlement plan of Arab nomads in the area. Also Sudan is in control of all five disputed border areas, except for the 14 miles area, and all the claimed border areas, including Panthou (Heglig).

The leadership of the National Congress Party has taken a clear decision not to implement the nine agreements as they came to see them as detrimental for their survival. Because South Sudan will receive about 75 percent of the oil proceeds and Sudan will only get 25 percent, the extremists in the NCP want to deny the South these much-needed resources and strangle it economically.

Some NCP leaders even anticipate that the Juba Government will fall within six months because of their actions of stopping the export of Southern oil and destabilising the South, as manifested in the recent incidents in Wau, Yei and Jonglei. Sudan has declared by law its southern neighbour an enemy of the people of Sudan, like Israel. There are, however, other voices in the NCP which call for reasoning. They want the nine agreements to be implemented, not only to share the oil proceeds but also to establish good relations and soft borders which may benefit Sudan more in the long term.

The international community and the African Union are reluctant to confront Bashir and force him to implement the agreements. They are instead pushing South Sudan to continue conceding to Khartoum on the pending issues to the level that the SPLM may run the risk of depleting its political support.

In such an impasse, South Sudan should go back to the drawing board and plan as if it has no border with Sudan. While President Salva may continue to try and engage Bashir in the forthcoming summits, the Government may need to embark on strategies to survive without Sudan. The reliance on Sudan as the only outlet for its oil exports to be challenged, not by rhetoric but by practical actions that will send a clear and strong message to Khartoum.

In particular, the Ministry of Petroleum needs to prepare clear and coherent policies and strategies for the oil sector in terms of alternative pipelines, exporting oil out by trucks, and building refineries. The National Petroleum and Gas Commission has been formed but it has not been meeting regularly. It is critical that the policies and strategies prepared by the ministry be adopted so as to provide a sense of direction. The current composition of the commission is rather weak as it does not include some relevant policy makers.

Also, there seems to be no proper coordination between the Ministry of Petroleum and other relevant ministries, particularly the ministries of justice and electricity. Therefore, oil policies need to be discussed by the Council of Ministers to ensure effective coordination in the implementation. One would expect that these policies would ensure by the end of this year functioning oil refineries, effective mining and export of other minerals, transport of oil by trucks if feasible and commencing of construction of alternative pipeline.

The current leadership of the Ministry of Finance needs to be supported in pursuing the current austerity measures, which may continue even if South Sudan manages to resume oil production. There are constant rumours of a reshuffle in the national Government after the recent sweeping changes in the army and the police. The expected new Government should be up to the challenge of proving that we can survive without Sudan.

This new Cabinet should not only be lean but also bring competent and new blood, people who will be able to deliver. Any delay in the much-awaited reshuffle will paralyse the Government. We need to avoid such uncertainty during this critical period. Also the new Government should prepare our new nation for a real democratic transformation in the run-up to the general elections in 2015.

Diplomatically, President Salva should continue engaging the African leaders over the pending issues of Abyei, the border and the nine agreements. Africa must be mobilised to confront or even isolate Bashir. Given the deteriorating relations between both countries, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs may need to consider recalling its ambassador to Khartoum until relations improve. We also need to mobilise the international community to avail soft loans for infrastructure development, alternative pipelines and livelihoods recovery.

If we take such actions, I am confident we will be able to prove that we are able to survive without Bashir's Sudan. I am confident that we can make it because we have the will and the resources.

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