

## Against the planned National Reconciliation Process

Monday 25 February 2013

By Machien Luoi

February 23, 2013 - On January 11, 2013 the Council of Ministers of the Republic of South Sudan “approved of a memo on the national reconciliation process in the country,” according to Sudan Tribune report. The process is earmarked at an estimated amount of 8.2 million South Sudanese Pounds. Moreover, the initiative has received favorable green-lights from South Sudan Political Parties and UN Mission in South Sudan. According to the architects of this mechanism, the “focus on victims of cattle rustling, ethnic violence, sectarianism and other conflicts” are the cause for which the reconciliation in the hope to galvanize peace and stability efforts in the country is initiated. This gesture from South Sudan rulers is reasonable given history of wars, violence and hardships over many decades. However, shall this process address justice and heal traumatic damages of the past and the negative effects of the contemporary conflicts in South Sudan? Does the country have enough budgets for this? Is timing correct? Shall this national reconciliation be comprehensive and sustainable?

Indeed a national reconciliation and healing is paramount to build an inclusive nationhood. In the contemporary societies, “accounting for what happened during the conflict, seeking justice for those who were wronged, and promoting peaceful reconciliation” amongst individuals or groups in loggerheads are “the most important needs of countries emerging from violent conflict.” Once a country heads on this path it receives a respectable recognition by International Communities because seeking justice via legal means can strengthen the rule of law, while “fundamental psychological adjustments in individual and group identity—aided by reconstruction processes—are essential to reconciliation.” As a result “destructive social and political patterns ” can be avoided or overcome. A national healing is important to build relationships and to get people of one country come to terms with their past and agree to a better tomorrow for all citizens despite their diverse differences. But to accomplish a comprehensive national reconciliation is not easy, it is a painstaking task.

A true national reconciliation would have to put to account justice for the victims and punishment for the culprits of crimes or some kind of restorative justice mechanism for the victims. This includes seeking for justice from the people who may have committed such erroneous acts and are in powerful positions in the government. Our justice system is nascent and cannot deal with abuses to citizens in Juba and State capitals at this juncture in our history. What is it that will make it justified to give assurances for abuses emanating from cattle rustling, ethnic violence and sectarianism in the remote villages that have no access to justice and essential basic services? Obviously a mere citizen may be brought to the rule of the rulers, of course not rule of law today in our country but, reconciliation that encompasses the past and present harms, coupled with a justice system without capacity to address community demands will be successful only when those with actual handle of the national power involve and encouraged that the reconciliation process shall “generate new and better relationships, and new social dynamics to promote competitiveness, peace, democracy and political stability .” Besides, how shall the victims and culprits be identified in the process? Documentation of history of violence whether as a result of “cattle rustling, ethnic violence and sectarianism” is still poor in South Sudan except on a few cases which were linked to Sudan’s 2nd Civil War days. There must be fact finding and true justification for this process before rushing on this path. It may not be astonishing to assert that the implicit reason behind this process is neither to offer justice for victims of any abuses nor to hold to account perpetrators of these said acts. On the contrary, it is to help raise false expectations about reconciliation and elusive justice for the victims while on another hand giving a chance to political leaders to sell their personalities to South Sudan public.

For sure sustained violence may cause community and ethnic groups to underline “a sense of group identity and victimization” giving rise to group identity manifested in their social norms, language and dress codes. Some of these identities may be emulated, decorated and the “so-called chosen traumas, may become transformed or glorified in the retelling to subsequent generations and may be used to incite revenge and justify efforts to restore the honor or dignity of the victimized group. Societies transformed in these ways by long-term conflict can become engaged in highly (self-) destructive political dynamics in which they become locked in unending conflict with their hated enemies.” How to go about such a psychological deformation is often difficult. Sometimes, disagreement on how to deal with such a situation is an ordinary characteristic. In order to reconcile the victims of long-term violent conflicts with their adversaries, it is usually unclear as to what means should be given first attention. Medical intervention, constitutional redress, judicial reform, economic rival, education reforms are amongst many could be prioritized to remedy the psychological situation as such. Whereas medical approach may be appropriate as a mechanism for response to such a trauma, many communities in South Sudan have very limited medical capacity to handle it alone. There is no way South Sudan’s over 8 million population could undergo successful counseling for war trauma, at least at the moment. So if this will not be the case, what is then the role of the national reconciliation process underway to address the traumatic impact of the violent past of the cattle rustlers, ethnic violence and sectarian violence victims?

Not only that, the availability of funding is questionable. In early 2012 South Sudan’s oil was shutdown from getting to the refinery in Port Sudan. Since then, most government employees have seen their incentives slashed. The nation is operating

under austerity budgets which are probably why road constructions and maintenance and other activities necessary to curb conflicts in South Sudan have instantly stopped. So, where does the 8.2 million South Sudanese pounds come from for this elusive national reconciliation process? Additionally, timing is crucial for an activity of such immensity to ensue. First, the government should be sure South Sudanese are secure and laws governing South Sudan are fully enforced, essential services (Education, health, water, road access and communication services) have reached most long-term “cattle rustling, ethnic violence and sectarian violence” affected rural communities. It is at that moment that timing of the reconciliation national wide will be acceptable as complementary to the provided essential services. It is at that juncture that “an atmosphere in which reconciliation is possible — time for people to get away from the immediate trauma of conflict, ” personal and group loss to attend to other important matters that a meaningful reconciliation of our people will be realized.

Furthermore, the beneficiaries of the national reconciliation process ought to be specified. This is important for the intended outcome to hold water. Currently, youth leaders, influential intellectuals in towns and those seeking short-term employment are getting recruited by certain government circles to spearhead the planned national reconciliation process. This is in fact wrong. The affected victims are not necessarily the affluent people in towns but those mostly in the rural communities isolated by lack of road access and communications abandonment. In order to identify the beneficiaries of this for a national reconciliation process as intended by our rulers, the process must be grass-root oriented and spearheaded by the people in the Bomas and Payams and Counties. This is not going to be achieved with ease because access and communications in such areas are not available but their absence from such a process will make the whole thing a “white elephant project.”

To pen off, those yearning for peace and stability in South Sudan must not rush the process. For this reason, the following are some recommendations for those planning for the proposed national reconciliation process.

1. The 8.2 million South Sudanese pounds earmarked for this project If available, should be used “to improve local community lives which is paramount. It will be a waste to use this amount for national reconciliation. Build roads connecting communities to center of governance and national markets, schools, health centers and for security of the rural communities.
2. There is need for an established justice system and processes of handling both the victims and the perpetrators of past and contemporary conflicts.
3. The National Reconciliation process should be postponed and be initiated when our “power wielders” are certain that justice will be done to all including amongst them. No one will be above the law.
4. Before implementation, beneficiaries of this reconciliation process should be clearly identified and authenticated. Their brothers and sisters in the national and state capitals who have nothing to do with such conflicts should not be the ones to represent them during such a reconciliation process.
5. The processes need a lot of money to cover the whole country. A partial reconciliation process will do us no good. Let our oil refineries be first installed and oil resource makes it back to the world market so that funding is available for a comprehensive and sustained national reconciliation process to take place.
6. Let the internal insurgencies cease and services reach rural communities most affected by the conflicts first in order to begin such a process.
7. The process need to be started from the grass-roots, local rural leaders to be involved from the beginning to the end.
8. There is need for a sustainable plan for how such a process can be valuable overtime to address justice and psychological needs of the affected citizens.

*The author is a South Sudanese residing in Bentiu, Unity State. He can be reached at [mjluoi@yahoo.com](mailto:mjluoi@yahoo.com) | [dhuretingting@gmail.com](mailto:dhuretingting@gmail.com)*