The South Sudan Crisis: What is the way forward for peace?

Lucy Poni Modi

*Lucy Poni Modi* is currently pursuing her MA degree in Peace Studies and International Relations at HIPSIR, Hekima University College

The political crisis in most African societies is best manifested in bitter combats and hostilities, loss of lives and property, prevalent violation of human rights and, in some cases, total lack of law and order leading to chaos in the continent. The complications of such conflicting circumstances make it unbearable for all the human rights agencies concerned to find one single mechanism towards resolution. Though unique and complex in its own respect, the South Sudan conflict seems to epitomize this political crisis in African societies. This reflection focuses on the issues that cause the South Sudan conflict and wars and their impact on the people. It also considers the existing peace initiatives to either suggest pertinent reforms to improve them or alternatives recommendations for greater effectiveness and it also looks at the top-down conflict resolution mechanisms which have failed because of their narrow scope as the masses are never consulted.

**State of Affairs in South Sudan**

South Sudan descended into a civil war two years after her independence from Sudan in 2011, following Africa’s longest civil war of 21 years with the Sudanese government. The conflict is as a result of myriad of issues related to constitutional, social economic, and political crises. Almost 2 million people have been internally displaced, and another 2 million have sought refuge in neighbouring countries, with property and lives being wasted since the inception of conflict. More than 230,000 people are being taken care of in six United Nations bases in various centres across the country. Seven-and-a-half million people are in urgent need of humanitarian assistance, and the UN has declared a famine, with at least 100,000 people at risk of starvation¹ and displacement. According to *World Report 2018: South Sudan/ Human Rights Watch*, in 2017, South Sudan’s civil war got into its fourth year, wide-spreading across the country with new fighting in Greater Upper Nile, Western Bahr al Ghazal, and the Equatorias, introducing highly abusive government counterinsurgency operations. Meanwhile the government of South Sudan continues to restrict media, stifle critics, and unlawfully detain people perceived as opposition.

The United Nations Security Council in an unprecedented move voted to impose an arms embargo on South Sudan. In a statement to the council before the vote, the American Ambassador to the UN Nikki Hailey said, “South Sudan’s people have endured unimaginable suffering and unspeakable atrocities. Their leaders have failed them. They are desperate to get the most basic food, medicine and shelter. But above all, they just want the violence to stop. We need to stop the flow of weapons to armed groups, that they are using to fight each other.

¹ UN Final report of the Panel of Experts in accordance with paragraph 12 (d) of resolution 2290 (2016), S/2017/326, 13 April 2017.
and to terrorize the people.” Many human rights groups hailed the decision saying the decision came at the right time to pressure the parties to sign an agreement.

The resolution came shortly after the UN human rights office released a report documenting how government troops and allied forces committed atrocities against civilians in the country’s northern part in April and May 2018, saying that the atrocities committed amount to war crimes.

The South Sudanese parliament in mid-July 2018 voted to extend President Salva Kiir’s mandate for additional three years. The extensions will enable President Kiir and the parliament to rule the country during the transitional period and avoid a constitutional vacuum in the country. However, the US, the UN and parties to the conflict have condemned the move, claiming it aims at maintaining the status quo and is detrimental to the efforts exerted towards the ongoing peace process.

Earlier attempts to solve the crisis

In 2016, President Salva Kiir launched the National Dialogue initiative in an attempt to spruce up the government’s image on the international scene. These attempts proved fruitless as he was accused of being biased and lacking inclusivity; accusations that led to the suspension of the talks twice in 2016. The military crisis has overshadowed the other aspects of the country to the extent that most cannot even fathom an existing economy in South Sudan (SS). The country is now experiencing the highest inflation in the world; the government even resorted to taxing aid workers in an attempt to raise funds for operations. The government has now recourse to an unorthodox mode of proceeding, selling its oil in advance. In fact, observers have contended that the government has already spent all the money from its 2018 anticipated oil sells. In short, the government is already broke until December 2018 before the year even ends.

Current Attempts at Resolving the conflict

President Kiir and former Vice President Machar on June 27 2018 signed the Khartoum Declaration of Agreement, where they committed themselves to a permanent ceasefire and pledged to settle the outstanding issues in the implementation of security arrangements and governance chapters of the 2015 Arusha Agreement, including a ceasefire to take effect from June 30, which has already been violated. The parties followed this up with another signing of a peace agreement on 25th July 2018. The agreement puts into place a power sharing agreement under a new transnational government of unity that will rule for 36 months until general elections. The agreement creates a new 35-member government comprised of 20 ministers from Salva Kiir’s current government, while Machar’s SPLM-IO will have nine portfolios and other opposition groups will share the rest of the positions. Besides Machar, President Kiir will have four more deputies during the transition period. The transition will be a litmus test for South Sudan and it has to be handled carefully. There have been concerns from different social-political quotas that the current environment of intense regional and international pressure on the government and rebel leaders may not be conducive for sustainability of peace. However,

---

at the same many South Sudanese have suffered under the war and some level of pressure is necessary to end the violence.

Possible solutions

The Agreement of the Resolution of the South Sudan ARCISS\(^3\) signed by President Kiir and former vice president Machar on August 17, 2015 stated among other things, the immediate cessation of hostilities, security arrangements, establishment of a transitional government leading to elections and the establishment of a hybrid court to try those that have committed atrocities against the people of South Sudan. However, before the ink dried on the paper, massive violations of the agreement on the cessation of hostilities were reported.

IGAD-led talks in Addis Ababa on August 17, 2015 were an opportunity to bring together the conflicting parties for a resolution to the many issues surrounding the conflict in South Sudan. Unfortunately, the loosely connected chains of command within the dozens of armed groups make it impossible for any single leader to claim fool command of the rebel groups. It is not clear whether these commanders are controlling their armies or their armies are controlling them. In the event that they somehow managed to get a firm grasp of their armies, the dictates of negotiations would easily trickle down to the foot soldiers.

A fundamental question of reconciliation has however been ignored in the attempts to restore peace in the war-torn country, as has the role of traditional leaders. The international and regional bodies have focused on a top-down approach to conflict resolution which has not given room for the masses to participate. Given that most of the conflicts are heavily dependent on historical injustices, therefore a bottom-up approach is needed and the role of traditional leaders cannot be underestimated. Therefore, of paramount importance is the establishment of a peace and reconciliation initiative that is locally driven to pursue truth, justice and reconciliation for the people addressing the injustices faced by the people of South Sudan before and after their independence.

Conclusion

When all is said and done, the recurrent situation in South Sudan obviously needs to be handled properly by the parties involved in order to curtail the loss of lives and property. Until the parties to the conflict show a greater political will to resolving the conflict, the situation will continue to degrade.

As it is, the situation is at its worst yet the world continues to ignore the crisis. Maybe ignore is not an appropriate word but the efforts to date have been nothing short of half-hearted and this has inspired the spawning of more rebel movements claiming to hold portions of territories where outside influence cannot be tolerated. It seems the division that marked the independence of South Sudan led to a slippery slope of further divisions which to this day continue unabated. At present I can safely say that the prevailing state of events is synonymous with anarchy and urgent interventions are needed if at all the situation is to be saved. The recent arms embargo on South Sudan is a step in the right direction but we can only speculate its effectiveness in the current crisis and peace efforts. At present both the rebel groups and the government forces

---

\(^3\) Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in SS
have focused all resources to finance the war rather than provide services to the civilians. Given a choice between bullets and food, it is quite obvious that they both would chose bullets over the people; an urgent bottom-up approach of conflict resolution is needed before the country falls into something worse than anarchy.

Interventions in South Sudan have been a top-down model overlooking the grassroots participation, African agency, and the role of traditions and culture. Maybe what’s needed in the future, is to explore more the role that these forgotten variables can add to the peace initiatives and peace building processes in the country.