

Tension in Sudan ahead of vote is dangerous, warns church envoy

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Nairobi, October 25 (ENI)--A former general secretary of the World Council of Churches has warned that tension in Sudan ahead of a plebiscite on independence for the south of Africa's biggest country could spark mass killings similar to the Rwanda genocide in 1994.

The Rev. Samuel Kobia, who is a church-backed envoy to Sudan, said the security and human rights of southern Sudanese living in the north of the country are endangered, with intimidation and threats increasing ahead of the scheduled 9 January referendum.

"We know it is possible these people could easily be massacred, if Khartoum is not happy with the how the referendum will go," Kobia, a Kenyan Methodist, told a press conference in Nairobi on 23 October, after a 10-day visit to the United States with senior Sudanese church leaders.

"We also wanted to sound a warning, that a situation is brewing up that could lead to another Rwanda and we don't want the international community to say, 'We didn't know, that we were not told'. We want them to know now," said Kobia, who led the Geneva-based WCC from 2004 to 2009.

On 9 January 2011, Sudan is scheduled to hold referenda in southern Sudan and the oil-rich Abyei border region between north and south Sudan. The result could see people from the south, where Christianity and traditional religions predominate, flee from the north, where most people are Arabs, and Islam is dominant.

The Abyei region will be choosing whether to join the north or south of the existing country.

The referendum is part of a 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement signed in Nairobi that sealed the end of a 21-year-long civil war between northern and southern

Sudan in which more than two million people died, making it one of the 20th century's deadliest wars.

Kobia is the special ecumenical envoy for Sudan of the All Africa Conference of Churches, a regional body linked to the WCC.

The former WCC general secretary said there are between a half million and 2.5 million southern Sudanese estimated to be living in the north. Many of them went there during the civil war.

He noted reports that Sudan's minister of information in Khartoum had warned that southerners living in the north will not have any citizenship rights if their kinsfolk vote for separation.

"They will not enjoy citizenship rights, jobs or benefits, they will not be allowed to buy or sell in Khartoum market ... We will not even give them a needle in the hospital," a report from Refugees International quoted the minister, Kamal Mohamed Obeid, as saying in September.

Kobia said he believed Southern Sudan will overwhelmingly vote to secede from Sudan, because the prospects of remaining united had not been made attractive to people living there.

"In my own observation ... I thought up to 95 percent would vote to secede. I want to revise that number upwards and say up to 98 percent or more," said Kobia. "For the people of southern Sudan, voting for unity would mean voting to remain second-class citizens in their own country. It means voting to continue being oppressed by powers in Khartoum. I don't think anybody in their right mind and conscience would want to vote to remain second class citizens."

With fewer than 100 days to the plebiscite, Kobia said the international community must prepare for disputes about the result of the referendum, and set up mechanisms to resolve any possible conflict and avoid a return to war. He said, "As churches, we will hold the international community accountable to what happens."