

Churches closing in north Sudan after referendum

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Juba, Southern Sudan, February 3 (ENInews)—Some churches, parishes and church schools in northern Sudan are closing due to a large movement of people to the south after the independence referendum, according to some church leaders.

"This is the trend. There are some centres in the parishes that are far apart and the populations have decreased drastically. These are closing," Roman Catholic Bishop Daniel Adwok, the Auxiliary Bishop of the Khartoum Archdiocese, told ENInews on 3 February.

In the referendum, held in mid-January, voters in southern Sudan overwhelmingly approved independence for their region, the site of two long civil wars. The area is expected to become independent in July.

Adwok said the closures were occurring after people who had settled in a northern area during the conflict travelled voluntarily and en masse to the south. He said more movement was expected during the interim period between February and July this year. "We expect more to leave within this period ... But we do not expect a big change in the main towns, especially in the main cathedral in Khartoum," he said.

Rev. Ramadan Chan Liol, the general secretary of the Sudan Council of Churches (SCC), a grouping of Roman Catholic, Protestant and Orthodox Churches, confirmed that some of these parishes were mainly of southern people. "With the mass movement of the southerners and people from the Nuba Mountains, some of the churches have been left empty," he said. "Individual denominations are considering what to do with the properties of such parishes."

The Roman Catholic Church is planning to restructure and merge some parishes in the north, according to the Rev. George Jangara Modi, the Khartoum diocesan education secretary. "We are updating records. We want to see who will remain in

the parishes," he said.

Jangara explained the churches, parishes and schools most affected were in the camps of the displaced people or areas where displaced people had settled. He said some schools which had nearly 500 or 400 pupils recorded numbers as low as 70 or 60.

Although many of the Christians are said to have returned to south voluntarily, some observers said they had departed because they could not be assured of their safety. "We are concerned about the security of Christians in the north because they are going to be a minority. We are trying to see if they can be protected through a law as minorities," Rev. Ramadan Chan, the general secretary of the Sudan Council of Churches recently said in an interview.

The church leaders are concerned that if the Muslim government in the north adopts strict Sharia law, as it has promised, then the church will suffer. In addition, they note that some northern government officials said during the referendum campaign that Christians in the north will not be able to have services if the south secedes.