

A new nation is born amid strife

By Stuart Notholt

On July 9, 2011, Juba, a dusty, nondescript town in southern Sudan became the capital of the world's newest nation – the Republic of South Sudan – as Africa's largest country, Sudan, split in two. CloJ Past President Stuart Notholt was there as an official guest of the South Sudanese government, representing the NGO, Humanitarian Aid Relief Trust.

The new South Sudan was born amid joy and exuberance as the people celebrated their hard-won liberty after decades of war and violence at the hands of north Sudan.

Even before the church bells rang out at midnight in this overwhelmingly Christian nation, the streets were overflowing with people dancing and honking car horns – and everyone seemed to own a brand new South Sudanese flag.

Much of independence day itself was taken up with commemorations at the national stadium, where the representatives of the international community queued up to congratulate the new nation. Ban Ki-moon confirmed South Sudan's admission to the United Nations at the earliest opportunity, and South Sudan duly became the UN's 193rd state a few days later. For the UK, William Hague announced the immediate establishment of a full embassy in Juba, the first major government to do so, while Susan Rice, speaking for the United States, received a particularly warm reception when she reminded the crowd that "your freedom was not a gift you were given; it was a prize you won." The Chinese promised that they would work closely with South Sudan on areas of mutual interest – primarily meaning oil exploitation. Given China's past partiality towards Khartoum this is potentially a highly significant development, signalling that Beijing, pragmatic as ever, is willing to engage with South Sudan as a key African partner.

Apart from the joyous South Sudanese themselves, the most enthusiastic participants in the independence process were probably the Kenyans. Clearly, Kenya sees the emergence of a new African nation on its western border as an extremely positive event. Kenya, together with Mauritius, has indicated its support for fast-tracking South Sudanese membership of the Commonwealth – giving South Sudan access to the world's second largest international body, and one to which many of its neighbours are already members as are key international players such as the UK, Canada, South Africa, and India.

The international media were also present, despite Juba being neither very easy to get to nor particularly comfortable once one



Celebrating - a new nation is born

arrives. Media coverage ranged from very positive reportage by the Kenyans and a balanced feature from Al Jazeera, through to the sour knocking copy of Khartoum and its allies. Sadly, the BBC coverage fell firmly into the latter category. The BBC correspondent on the spot filed a report at least two thirds of which was negative, highlighting the difficulties the new nation will face. Incredibly, Sudanese-born Zeinab Badawi, reporting from Khartoum, thought it newsworthy to run a feature about various southern collaborators with the Khartoum dictatorship who have lost their jobs now that the South no longer has need of their dubious expertise. Ms Badawi's star exhibit was the female quisling governor of one of the southern regions, an individual whose "personal friendship" with Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir has now been summarily rewarded with a P45. A case of he (or she) who sups with the devil needing a long spoon? Her "friend" is, after all wanted on war crimes charges by the International Criminal Court.

Journalists' actions have consequences, otherwise there would be little point being in the news business. The British are already regarded by many South Sudanese as overly sympathetic to Khartoum and the grudging coverage of the independence celebrations by the main British newsgathering organization will hardly dispel this impression.

This is not to say that journalists should be blind to South Sudan's problems. Thanks to years of northern oppression, South Sudan has among the world's highest child and maternal mortality rates Nor should it be suggested that journalists should not be free to investigate any subject they feel is of relevance. Indeed, why the BBC should

seek to align its coverage so closely with the perspectives of the Khartoum regime might itself be worthy of independent scrutiny.

Actually, it is in the north that the main news stories of the future may be found. Al-Bashir has made no secret of his desire to impose a dogmatic Arab/Islamist agenda across the whole of northern Sudan. This places Sudan's many ethnic minorities, especially those who are black Africans, in an invidious position. Many of these peoples are Muslim, but Sudan's recent history demonstrates that even being nominal co-religionists of the extremists in Khartoum will not spare them the full viciousness of the regime's racial, cultural and religious sectarianism.

President al-Bashir's address to the independence day rally in Juba set a dismal tone in this regard. While half-heartedly acknowledging South Sudanese independence, his principal theme was that Khartoum, having completed a distasteful task, now believes its duties to the international community are at an end. Indeed, the balance of his speech consisted of listing the areas in which Sudan has contributed to the peace process and other examples of self-congratulation. Some of his observations defy the reality on the ground. His claim that the contested Abyei region between north and south would benefit "through the reduction of the number of forces in the region and the heavy deployment of military and observers as was the case in the past" would, for example, carry more weight if it were it not his troops that had illegally occupied the region in June 2011.

The fact is, Sudan has not discharged its obligations under the now ended Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA). Khartoum's invasion of Abyei presents the international community with a fait accompli, while the mainly black African Blue Nile and South Kordofan regions have not had the consultations they were promised under the peace settlements. The bombing of civilian targets by the Sudanese Air Force and attempted ethnic cleansing by ground forces provide all the answer needed to the question of Khartoum's commitment to further dialogue in these regions, as does the "election", in South Kordofan, of a governor, Ahmed Haroun, who has past form – having been arraigned by the International Criminal Court for his activities in Darfur.

Sadly, all these areas will provide ample scope for further investigation by courageous journalists – provided they are willing to venture beyond the comfort zone. South Sudan finds itself born in interesting times.