

South Sudan Young Leaders Forum: Can they restore peace and stability in South Sudan?

***By Tong Deng Anei.**

Nairobi, January 14, 2017 – First of all, the author of this article would like to take this moment to thank the organizers of the South Sudan Young Leaders Forum (SSYLF) for inviting me and all the other participants to attend this historical conference held in Nairobi on January 9th - 10th, 2017. I must say that it was nice meeting all of you, especially the new ones and the ones that I have known already through social media and other electronic forums.

The conference which started on January 9th, reminded all of us South Sudanese citizens of the suffering that our people went through during the 21 years South – North Sudan devastating conflict. The former Chairman of the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM), Dr. John Garang De Mabior, signed a Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) in 2005 in Nairobi which marked the end of the South – North Sudan long civil war, and granted the right of self-determination for the people of South Sudan to exercised freedom through an internationally supervised referendum. In accordance with the CPA provisions, the South Sudan Referendum was held in January 9th, 2011 which paved the way for the independence of South Sudan, which was later declared on July 9th, 2011. The participants at the SSYLF conference, dedicated January 9th as a day for peace. They celebrated the 12th Anniversary of the CPA signing and the 6th Anniversary of the South Sudan Referendum respectively, on the first day of the conference. To read the conference's resolutions, [click here](#).

The United States Agency for International Development's (USAID) program, Viable Support to Transition and Stability (VISTAS), and the International Growth Centre (IGC), with implementation by both the IGC and AECOM, funded the conference. The participants to the conference could not thank the IGC and USAID enough for their generous support to ensure that the SSYLF took place.

The conference started off with some palpable tensions and mistrust amongst the supporters of the Government and of the Opposition during the first morning session of the first day. After expressing disappointment and hatred, they finally decided to come together. The encouraging and supportive speeches delivered, and exchanges had with the participants, by the United States of America's Ambassador to South Sudan, Molly Phee, helped the conference to set a clear direction among the participants. Bishop Abraham Yel Nhial of the Episcopal Church Diocese of Aweil, provided prayers for peace for the participants and the people of South Sudan. The Convener, Mr. Peter Biar Ajak, sent out the invitations to all of the conferees with the reminder to every participant that none of the parties to the conflict or personalities would be politically and personally attacked or criticised during the conference. For the most part, participants did not know who was coming to the conference because some people were known to be serious political antagonists. However, after the conduct and conclusion of SSYLF conference, the mood among the participants was different, and unity of purpose was forged regardless of

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participants' various political affiliations, including the ones of this author. I am happy to now call many of those whom I met during the SSYLF conference as "former" enemies, since everyone left without any bad feelings against one another.

The above narrative highlights that South Sudanese across the board, need to talk amongst themselves to solve their problems, and thereby enable them to enjoy a lasting peace.

With this brief summary of what transpired during the conference, I would like to extend my thanks and appreciations to those who initiated the idea about the importance of young leaders coming together to advocate for peace. They have all done something that no one has ever thought about before within our current country's malaise.

I'm sure that everyone is aware of the fact that South Sudanese youth are terribly divided along political and ethnic lines, which has affected our social relations in a very serious way. These days, there are so many differences and hate speech propaganda between the South Sudanese communities across the country and within the Diaspora. It has reached to the extent that some of us don't even say hello to one another, and this attitude have denied us a space to unite as one people with a common destiny. For us to reunite and put our country back together and work collectively like we did during the referendum, it is upon the young leaders of South Sudan like the SSYLF, to act maturely, responsibly and to work extra hard to first eliminate the armed conflicts that have destroyed our country, initiate internal reconciliations to iron-out the grievances that divide us, and embark on a full scale reconstruction and development of our beloved country. I have a belief that change is not brought about by many, but it only takes a few committed individuals to effect change and positively transform the lives of a broken society like ours, where citizens are in dire need of basic services. The question which is always being asked is; how do we go about bringing change? What can we do to make South Sudan a better place where all of the citizens are treated equally regardless of their gender, religious beliefs, tribe, geography or political affiliations? If we begin to see each other as people with common cultures, history and destiny; by doing so, we will be able to provide freedom of movement for all of our citizens, and avail opportunity for our children to go school anywhere in the country. I know very well that this is the fundamental feeling among all of you who want to see a better future for our country. Based on our two day conference, I am confident that all of you want to do something which would bring change to our nascent country.

In our discussion in Nairobi, we recognized that youth are not doing much to promote peaceful coexistence in our communities, both at home and in the Diaspora. South Sudan is blessed with talented, capable young people who can bring change to the society for the betterment of all. However, they have not been given the opportunity as well as proper mentoring to exercise their abilities to effect the much needed change. There is a consistent complaint that South Sudan lacks skilled human resources to build the country, but I do not agree

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with this statement because there are so many educated young South Sudanese who are loitering around Juba, the States, and other capitals of the world, without any jobs. If these talented young men and women are given the opportunity, I am sure that the general public will notice in very short period of time the significant changes in South Sudan's public sector; i.e. Health, education, Agriculture, Water, Infrastructure and general Modern Innovation. The way forward, or step one, for the SSYLF, is to encourage the current leaders to implement the resolutions and the SSYLF to form committees to promote peace locally and amongst our Diaspora communities, who are deeply divided along political and tribal lines.

Before I conclude, I must say that there were a lot of rumors flying around that the SSYLF conference, was plotting against the Transitional Government of National Unity in South Sudan. The people who were (and still are) spreading these rumors were (and still are) only attempting to mislead the general public. Resolutions, which are already out for public consumption, will prove wrong those against the unity of our people, and against peace in our country. I know many people did not buy into these rumors but I strongly recommend that it is time for the President and the Government, to investigate these rumors and to take action against these people who want to put the Transitional Government into loggerheads with the citizens of South Sudan, and particularly with the youth of the country. By doing so, the Government will be placed in a better position to deter such rumor-mongers and anti-peace elements from doing the same again in the future.

Finally, I would like to reiterate my sincere appreciation and gratitude to Mr. Peter Biar Ajak for initiating the SSYLF, and to the IGC and the USAID's VISTA program, for their generous support to make this dream come true. I would also like to thank all of the participants for taking their precious time to come and participate in this critically important gathering. I believe that with the discourse that we had over the two days of the conference, we will set a stage for a new beginning of trust and confidence amongst all of South Sudan's young people.

*About the author.

Tong Deng Anei is a former State Minister of Health of now defunct Northern Bahr El Ghazal State and has been a humanitarian worker for many years. He can be reached at anei.tong@gmail.com or blog: www.tongdeng.nbgs-moh.org