

Deepak Obhrai urges South Sudan to end its conflict and return to the important task of rebuilding this new nation

Hon. Deepak Obhrai (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Foreign Affairs and for International Human Rights, CPC): Mr. Chair, it is indeed a very important issue that has been brought forward for discussion today, the situation in South Sudan.

Before I begin, let me just give a brief breakdown on the situation in South Sudan. I was born in that part of the region, in East Africa. I am well aware of the situation when the colonial powers left Africa. The winds of change were blowing on the continent, and African countries became independent.

Before that, one of the tragedies was that during the colonial power, the boundaries that were made in that part of the world were boundaries that did not take into account many of the ethnic and tribal customs and tribes living together. The borders had been made, but at that given time, we did not have much conflict; however, as the situation arose and as the countries became independent, these tensions began, the tribal tension that has been hitting the African continent very regularly.

In the earlier years, the Organization of African Unity passed a resolution to say all borders must be recognized so that there would not be conflict. Unfortunately, that did not work.

In the case of Sudan, South Sudan was joined with Sudan, one of the largest countries in the African continent. We had upper Sudan and lower Sudan, the lower Sudan being people of black origin and the upper Sudan people of Arab nature. This led to a conflict that had been there for many, many years with thousands of people, leading to rebellion.

Canada, at that given time, played a role in the comprehensive peace plan with the world community, with the United Nations, many of which sessions I attended. We brought the parties together for a comprehensive settlement. In the process, Canada being very generous with refugee claimants from these countries, we took quite a lot of refugees who were displaced from South Sudan due to the war that was taking place between north and south.

Subsequently, with Canada also being enrolled very heavily politically in the comprehensive peace plan, providing logistic support and working with our allies—the U.S.A. and all the others—pressure was put on the north and the south to come to the table, which they did. Out of that was born a new nation in the continent of Africa called South Sudan.

I had the honour and the privilege to represent Canada at the birth of this new nation in Africa. There was a huge amount of excitement when this nation was born, including on my part. Coming from the region, I found it quite historical to see a nation being born that rightfully should have been independent. As this nation was born, with it came the issue of responsibility.

In my riding of Calgary East, I have a large South Sudanese community with whom I interface quite a lot, as we continue to see how best we could build this country. Many of the ideas were that we could provide assistance, and during my visit to Juba prior to independence, Canada was giving assistance in building up democratic institutions. However, in talking to my constituents, I learned that many Canadian South Sudanese went back to rebuild this nation.

I remember at one time meeting President Kiir; half the people at the table told President Kiir that they had voted for me in the last election.

Canada played a very active role in building this new country. The country, as it was born, had great expectations for the people of South Sudan. Unfortunately, as things have progressed, as things move forward, tribalism has reared its ugly head in South Sudan, as it has everywhere else in other African countries.

Just recently, I wanted to bring in the ICC to Kenya. There was a tribal war as well in Kenya and other countries.

What is happening in the Central African Republic is very concerning. People are being killed due to ethnic and religious tensions.

I was in Rwanda two weeks ago to commemorate the 20th anniversary of the genocide of one tribe against the other, the Hutu as well as the Tutsis who were being killed by extremist Hutus. It was all based on tribalism. The same is taking place in Congo.

It is with great dismay and shock that we see South Sudan disintegrating into a tribal war. The problem is that, while the political leaders indulge in this, the poor people, the citizens, are ultimately paying the heaviest price. In South Sudan at this time the people are paying the heaviest price by being displaced.

We were sad when we learned of the attack at the United Nations. We strongly condemned the attack. People were seeking refuge from violence and ultimately lost their lives, including some peacekeepers.

This displacement is a very worrying factor to Canada. Canada calls upon both parties to return to the peace table and work toward building a nation, since they have just become independent.

IGAD is working hard under the chairmanship of Kenya and Ethiopia, and the peace talks are going on. Regrettably, those peace talks up to now have not brought any

peaceful settlement, and the war and the displacement continue. The poor people are suffering.

Later in the evening, my colleagues will talk about how much development assistance Canada has provided and continues to provide to South Sudan. We here in Canada are calling on both sides of South Sudan to return to the table as quickly as possible and work together toward ensuring that the unity government belonging to all of the tribes of South Sudan does not fall. They should look at examples of other countries in Africa and how much they have lost in the way of development. They must recognize that ordinary people are paying the biggest price. They are suffering and being displaced. More to the point, these bands are seeking all the so-called power, when in reality their people are being displaced by the thousands.

I am sorry to say it, but South Sudan currently has gone back 10 to 15 years in development due to this war. South Sudan has a lot of potential as it is one of the rich countries, with its oil. The diaspora of South Sudanese in Canada and other countries like the U.S.A. can assist in building this country.

On behalf of the Government of Canada, I again call very strongly on both sides of the conflict to go back to the table, to go back to what IGAD is doing, and sign a peace treaty and work for the people of South Sudan to build the country the people of Sudan had huge expectations for, as did I at the time it was born.