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The Role of the United States in Southern Sudan's Referendum

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On January 9, southern Sudanese voted for their independence from the government in Khartoum. In the days leading up to the referendum, the international community feared delay, bloodshed, or the complete breakdown of the peace process. Few expected the referendum to take place on time and as peacefully as it did.

While Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir has recognized the outcome, Southern Sudan's relationship with Khartoum is volatile, and many issues remain unresolved. The United States has played a crucial role in the peace process and should continue a high level of engagement in the future. This includes assisting Juba in the areas of development, holding the government in the South to high governing standards, and closely monitoring actions in the North.

A Country Divided. Since gaining independence from Great Britain in 1956, Sudan has suffered nearly constant conflict. Violent clashes between the armed forces of Sudan's government in Khartoum and rebel groups in the south are believed to have resulted in the loss of 2 million southern Sudanese lives. Since seizing office in 1989, Bashir has been responsible for the extreme marginalization of southern Sudanese, giving preferential treatment to northerners in areas such as education, employment, and housing. Furthermore, the U.S. has accused Bashir of genocide in the western region of Darfur.

With assistance from the international community and strong backing from the U.S., the government

of Sudan and the Sudan's People Liberation Movement/Army officially ended the civil war with the signing of the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA), in which the U.S. played a lead role.

January's referendum on southern independence is the most recent and one of the last phases in the peace process. Also mandated by the CPA is a referendum determining the legal geographic status of the Abyei region on the border between northern and southern Sudan. This was supposed to take place at the same time as the referendum on southern independence, but owing to disagreements on voter eligibility, the Abyei referendum was postponed.

After initially taking less interest in Sudan than his predecessor, President Obama embraced the referendum process in September 2010. At the United Nations, he strongly urged the referendum to proceed as planned. Since then, the Administration has increased its engagement with both the North and South governments and has pledged to work closely with both in the future. One of the methods employed by the Administration, according to U.S. Special Envoy to Sudan Scott Gration, is offering "cookies and gold stars"¹ to the govern-

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ment in Khartoum in return for its cooperation in the referendum process.

Despite Khartoum's unreliable track record at the negotiating table and its possible support of terrorist organizations, President Obama has proposed resuming diplomatic relations with the North and removing it from the state sponsors of terrorism list.

Remaining Challenges. After 99 percent of southern Sudanese voted for independence in the referendum, jubilation quickly spread across the south. However, many challenges remain, including the tackling of such divisive issues as oil revenue sharing, citizenship, and apportioning Sudan's debt. Southern Sudan must also overcome the challenges of poverty and poor infrastructure.

The most difficult of these challenges will be determining the how the two countries will work

together to share Sudan's oil wealth. This drives conflicts in the oil-rich region of Abyei as well as five additional disputed oil regions along the North-South border. The Northern economy is heavily dependent on the Southern oil supply, and Khartoum is determined to maintain control of as much of the oil wealth as possible. This puts Juba in a difficult position, as it is in danger of losing precious revenue needed for development. For its part, the South has little choice but to use pipelines that traverse the North if it wishes to sell its oil—a weakness that Khartoum is sure to use to its advantage.

To make a complicated situation even worse, the Southern government recently suspended oil negotiations with Khartoum. Southern Sudanese President Salva Kiir accused the North of funding militias that have escalated violence in Abyei and Upper Nile. Juba is now looking to alternative measures, such as halting the export of oil and establishing different transport routes, which could take years to build.²

The Road to Independence. Sudan's many challenges underscore the significant role the U.S. must play in the peace process. The Administration is working with Juba and Khartoum to ensure that the South develops the capacity to become an independent state and that the North does not seek to undermine the South's pursuit of self-determination.

In order to achieve this, the Obama Administration should take the following steps:

- **Assist development of the South.** Without broad international assistance and steady oil revenue, Southern Sudan could easily devolve into a failed state. The U.S. should seek to address Southern Sudan's daunting infrastructure and development challenges. More important, the U.S. should focus on helping Southern Sudanese to be self-sufficient, particularly in agriculture, thus boosting long-term prospects for sustainable economic and social development.
- **Hold Juba accountable for good governance.** The U.S. should hold the government of South-

1. Stephanie McCrummen, "U.S. Envoy's Outreach to Sudan Is Criticized as Naïve," *The Washington Post*, September 29, 2009, at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/09/28/AR2009092802336.html> (March 6, 2011).

2. Andrew Heavens, "South Sudan Accuses Bashir of Plot, Suspends Talks," Reuters, March 12, 2011, at <http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/03/12/us-sudan-south-idUSTRE72B1P120110312> (March 14, 2011).

ern Sudan to standards that embrace democracy and human rights. Many African rebel movements fail to uphold democratic standards of governance once they are in power. Juba must not be given any free passes by the U.S. or the international community.

- **Keep eyes on Khartoum.** Washington should ensure that Khartoum negotiates with Juba in good faith and does not manipulate the negotiation process through stalling tactics, as it has repeatedly done in the past. The Obama Administration should also press Khartoum to end violence in Darfur and work to rebuild the region.
- **Assist in writing constitutions for the North and the South.** According to the CPA, new constitutions will need to be written in both the North and the South. The U.S. and the international community should assist in shaping both so that they embrace representative, accountable government and protect basic human rights.
- **Reevaluate incentives offered to the North.** The Obama Administration has offered a number of incentives to Khartoum for its cooperation in the

peace process, including the removal of Sudan from the state sponsors of terrorism list. This is a hasty and presumptuous offer, considering that it is not certain whether Khartoum has ended its support for the Lord's Resistance Army.³

Starting Out on the Right Foot. On July 9, the interim period for Southern Sudan will come to a close and a new country will be born. There is much to do in the way of addressing the unresolved issues and even less time to do it. The U.S. should continue its leadership and urge the international community to take part in ensuring that the world's newest country starts out on the right foot.

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3. Morgan Roach, "Sudan: Congress Moves to Block Obama's 'Cookies and Gold Stars' Approach," The Foundry, March 9, 2011, at <http://blog.heritage.org/2011/03/09/sudan-congress-moves-to-block-obamas-cookies-and-gold-stars-approach>.