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UN brings Sudanese tribes together for historic peace talks



UN brings together opposing Sudanese tribes in historic peace talks

29 December 2009 – The United Nations has paved the way for historic talks between clashing tribes to bolster the fragile peace in the disputed oil-rich area of Abyei, close to the border between Sudan’s north and south and where a referendum on its future is scheduled to be held in 2011.

Nearly five years after the signing of the peace pact ending more than two decades of north-south strife, one of Africa’s longest and bloodiest civil wars in which at least 2 million people were killed, tensions persist in Abyei, home to the Missiriya and Dinka Ngok tribes.

In July, the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague shifted some of the borders of Abyei, leaving control of the Heglig oil field with the national Government in Khartoum.

Although that ruling was welcomed by both the National Congress Party (NCP) and the Sudan People’s Liberation Movement (SPLM), the two signatories to the 2005 peace agreement, the relationship between the Missiriya and Dinka Ngok tribes has been marked by clashes and inflamed tensions.

Recognizing the need for dialogue at this critical juncture, the UN Development Programme (**UNDP**), the UN peacekeeping mission in Sudan (**UNMIS**) and the Abyei Area Administration joined forces to bring the leaders of the two tribes together for the first time in the conflict's history.

During the 14 December meeting, which kicked off to cheering, drumming and dancing, top officials from the tribes discussed border security, arms control and migration issues.

Over 2,000 people from both tribes attended the talks to accelerate reconciliation and to dispel misconceptions, such as the rumour that the Dinka intend to build a barrier to prevent the Missiriya from herding their cattle between pasture and water.

"Peaceful co-existence is not a matter of choice, but is prerequisite for the continued existence of the two communities because the Missiriya and the Dinka will always remain neighbours irrespective of the 2011 referendum results," said Amir Kwol Arop Kwol, Paramount Chief of the Dinka Ngok tribe.

The dialogue was also the first in the history of peacebuilding in the Abyei area in which women took an active part in the talks.

"Women bear the heaviest burden during conflict situations," according to Nyancuk Truk, a representative of the Dinka. "We not only lose our sons and husband in the fighting, but we also lose our dignity."

UNDP stressed in a press release that "only through the support to community reconciliation dialogues in Sudan that bring together women groups, youth and traditional leaders will the region be able to ensure its hard-won peace."

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