

Field Report from Malakal

Adapted from the broadcast audio segment; use the audio player to listen to the story in its entirety.

Malakal is the capital of South Sudan's Upper Nile state. There is a mile or two of paved roads. The rest of the road consists of undulating cratered dirt with ditches on each side, full of trash and fetid water. Electricity runs a couple of hours at night. Housing ranges from tents and thatched huts to basic cement and cinder block structures. For South Sudan, this is one of the more developed towns.

On Monday, November 15, the voter registration center in Malakal opened. It prompted a cheer from the 14 men waiting in line. The second man to register is Jacob Lazaro Doro, a man in his 50s. He quivered with emotion when discussing the importance of this moment.

"At 7am I'm here. In 40 minutes the officials come. I'm here because southerners have really decided for their freedom. This is the time for us that we are free from the northerners. This [registration] card means to me freedom. I am waiting for this time to come since I am a child."

Doro has spent his entire life in South Sudan. He has lived through decades of war and seen the deaths of family and friends. To him and many people in the south this registration process means freedom. The actual vote on January 9 is a mere formality.

"Today is a day that we will be free from our oppressors. They cannot press us to be Muslims because the religion is for God and the land is for the people."

Reath Muoch Tang is the chairman of the South Sudan Youth Forum. It's a civil society organization advocating for separation. He quit his job to start the youth forum to help with the voting process.

"The big reason is I see my people suffering. I don't feel okay because I'm an educated person. There is a lot of people who are not educated due to the war. A lot of people are not getting services and you can see people are just dying with malaria. There is no good treatment. I don't feel comfortable when I'm working in my office so that's why I decided to come and help my people."

The list of grievances southerners have against the north is long. Religion, politics, economics and land are all factors behind the decades the conflict.

The referendum rule states that 50% plus one will determine the future of the south but there is an important catch. Sixty percent of those who register must vote for the results to count. This has raised fear that Khartoum will resort to tricks, like sending people into poor neighborhoods in the south to buy registration cards from people so they can't vote.

But judging from the passion of those in Malakal who turned out to register, the people are not going to fail. If anything the greater concern is whether the referendum commission will fail. There were countless delays in the registration process, funding to implement the vote has been held up at all levels, and there are serious questions about whether the south can conduct the referendum successfully on January 9th.

Khor Paul Gatinal is a 22-year-old student. He voices the feelings of many in Malakal that the referendum must happen on time and the people will support anything the government of South Sudan says or does to make sure it happens. Khor recently returned to South Sudan after living in exile and studying in Kenya.

"I lost my childhood because I never grew up in my home. My father, my mom, we just grew up in the war running and running. Running there is no education. There is no good life. Things were harsh and all these things they make me lose me childhood."

Now Khor says he is home and he is happy. He says that everything will be fine once the south is independent and free. It's a common and a some say a naïve sentiment but even people like Tang at the Youth Forum believe that life will change for the better after the referendum.

"After we depart from that part of the country called Sudan, definitely there will be a lot of services. We will get what we hope for and it will happen because we will be the one controlling the government. We will be ones doing the development and all the services will be given to the people."

This attitude is both prevalent and problematic. The government is far from having the capacity to meet the expectations of the people. Future domestic conflict is a major concern but of more immediate concern is whether there will be cross border conflict.

While both the north and south have pledged to avoid violence, the fact is the north has a great deal to lose through separation. This fuels the belief that the north will resort to war to prevent the south from seceding.

There is also a concern that if the referendum is delayed, passions will boil over in the south and lead to conflict.

While the streets of Malakal appear calm and life is business as usual for now, people like Gatinal are weary. Gatinal says that he is not a soldier but this is a fight that's not just for soldiers.

"It matters for all of us. It matters for the future generation. It matters for the country."

– Reported by Sean Carberry for America Abroad