

South Sudanese living in Australia's Victoria state urged to unite - promote peace

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The participants of the South Sudanese Australian Peacebuilding Conference, which was held on June 24 and 25, 2016, at Monash University in Melbourne, Australia.

Melbourne, Australia—South Sudanese living in Australia's Victoria state were urged to unite and to promote peace in their homeland.

The Victoria chapter of the Union of Greater Upper Nile States (UGUNS) held a South Sudanese Australian Peacebuilding Conference on June 24 and 25, 2016. The Victoria chapter of UPF was the main supporting organization for this conference, which was held at Monash University.

UGUNS is a community-based organization established in 2011 to engage and promote unity of purpose among the South Sudanese diaspora originating in the Greater Upper Nile states of Jonglei, Unity and Upper Nile. The organization promotes mutual understanding through dialogue about social problems. It has an inclusive membership policy which does not discriminate based on religious or political affiliation.

The theme of the conference attracted a great deal of interest from the diaspora communities of the Greater Upper Nile states and friends of South Sudan. The audience regarded the conference aims as essential aims which should be embraced by other regions of South Sudan.

The participants acknowledged that the crisis in South Sudan had hurt the Greater Upper Nile states more than any other regions in the country. These states face great challenges to peace because of tribal and cultural differences and poor governance, it was pointed out.

Therefore, it was proposed that a collective approach is required to restore stability in the region and beyond. It was also suggested that because the peoples of the Greater Upper Nile states are human beings first, before they are tribes or members of a religion, fundamental universal human rights and common interests should be pursued, moving beyond tribal concerns.

Since war erupted in South Sudan in 2013, the livelihood of the inhabitants of the Greater Upper Nile region has worsened. Ruach Thabach, an UGUNS committee member, said: "They are suffering from hunger, disease and a lack of clean water. The people of Greater Upper Nile should embrace peace, forgive one another, and we need to start preaching peace to our people back home." He further emphasized that peace is achieved when the blind man hears children singing, equality brings people together and anger has disappeared.

Reflecting on the South Sudan crisis, Deacon George Both, another UGUNS committee member who addressed the first day of the conference on the role of civil society in promoting peace, advised that "all kinds of wars, including social media, should be stopped and peace needs to be embraced."

The keynote speaker for the second day of the conference, Honorable Bruce Atkinson, the president of the Upper House of the Victoria Parliament, highlighted the challenges that come with the birth of a new nation and further acknowledged that "the birth of South Sudan has been a particularly challenging one. Nevertheless, it will be a great country again, so long as the aspiration of the people of South Sudan for nationhood is preserved."

John Bellavance, vice president of UPF-Australia, urged the South Sudanese leadership in Australia to get their values right and act on these. “Peace begins within the individual first,” he said. “This is the first step, before we start promoting and even realizing peace in the community and in the nation. Unity is a prerequisite for peace.”

Dr. Steve Rametse, the president of Africa Day Australia, spoke about learning from the South African experience to build sustainable peace in the Greater Upper Nile region. Trust and reconciliation will be achieved once an independent and strong judicial system is established. This will prevent the continued oppression of victims. Gen. James Hoth Mai, the former army chief of staff of the Republic of South Sudan, emphasized that despite the challenges faced by the Greater Upper Nile communities, there exist positive relations between the tribes through intermarriage and sharing of resources.

Dr. Charles Mphande, a professor of international and community development at Victoria University, spoke on the role of the South Sudanese diaspora in peacebuilding in South Sudan. Diaspora members often maintain links to their country of origin, attempt to retain dual levels of identity and preserve political, cultural, and religious interests in their homeland. The diaspora can play a significant role in either promoting or preventing conflict, he said. This is because they maintain relationships with the homeland and have relative economic strength, which can impact the political and economic life of their country of origin.



Jeffah Thabach (center), general secretary of UGUNS, is awarded the Ambassador for Peace certificate by (left to right) Peter Pal, chair of UGUNS and an Ambassador for Peace; Gen. James Hoth Mai, former army chief of staff of the Republic of South Sudan; Hon. Gatwech Lam, member of Parliament, South Sudan; and John Bellavance, UPF-Australia vice president.

This role has been particularly significant after the end of the Cold War, Dr. Mphande said. This is because the nature of conflict has shifted from wars between nations to conflicts focused on identity groups in nation states. The diaspora are physically removed from the direct suffering of those at home, but are highly emotionally and psychologically involved. This removal may cause them to have a lack of responsibility and accountability, which greatly affects the way they participate in conflict. Their involvement can be negative, by encouraging conflict through communication and even financing conflicts.

However, members of a diaspora have an enormous potential as outside mediators to internal strife in their homelands, Dr. Mphande said. For example, we can see the Irish-American diaspora playing a significant role in the Northern Ireland peace agreement and the Somali diaspora's valuable financial contributions toward rebuilding their home country. Groups can lobby their host country government and international organizations at every stage of conflict, thereby forcing the international community to address a conflict either in the prevention stage or during the conflict itself. In addition, he said, members of a diaspora can promote the ideals of multiculturalism and liberal social values that they have gleaned from their host state and export these to their homeland, representing another opportunity to advance positive change in their home state.

Hon. Gatwech Lam, a member of Parliament in South Sudan, said that the people of Greater Upper Nile need peace more than any other citizens in South Sudan. “Our social fabric as people of the Greater Upper Nile region has come under strain as a result of this war,” he said. He also acknowledged that the infrastructure has been destroyed, in particular hospitals and schools.

This initiative shown by the leadership of UGUNS to engage its members to unite and promote peace will help restore the sense of harmony that existed in the region before the war, Mr. Lam said. The members of the diaspora will help the people at home to realize the benefits that come when they accept each other. However, he acknowledged that the status of the peace process signed in 2015 is now in jeopardy due to the 28-state proposal advocated by the government.

The parliamentarians who represent UGUNS opposed this proposal because they say the redistribution of states in South Sudan would undermine the work of the United Nations’ Joint Military Analysis Center (JMAC) in monitoring and supervising the implementation of the peace agreement. Secondly, they say this legislation requires a comprehensive consultation with the people of South Sudan prior to its implementation. If this is not done, tension between communities would arise further.

The conference participants emphasized and acknowledged that:

The hardship faced by the people of the Greater Upper Nile states is very severe, because of the devastation caused by war.

The unity of Greater Upper Nile state members at all levels is needed in order to restore stability in the Greater Upper Nile states.

The current 28-state proposal would be the major obstacle to the implementation of the peace process, as well as a barrier to peace and reconciliation and the healing process between the people of the Greater Upper Nile states and South Sudan as a whole.

Outcomes of the conference

It was agreed that a website would be set up as a means of fostering dialogue and projects for peacebuilding in the international South Sudanese diaspora.

UPF-Australia will communicate with its international Ambassador for Peace networks to foster dialogue and cooperation among the South Sudanese diaspora.

Appreciation

UGUNS extends its thanks and appreciation to the people and government of Australia for having provided humanitarian support to the people of South Sudan.

May the people of the Union of Greater Upper Nile States realize peace and be united in solidarity for peace to come to South Sudan.

May God bless the Union of Greater Upper Nile States! May God bless South Sudan!