

H.E. Mr. Ahmed Ibrahim Eltahir, Speaker
H.E. Mr. Atim Garang, Deputy Speaker
Sudan National Assembly
Omdurman, Sudan

Sunday June 13 2010

Dear Speaker, Deputy Speaker, and Members of Sudan's National Assembly,

In the spirit of peace, justice, and equality between women and men of Sudan, we, activist and grassroots women in the Sisterhood for Peace, a diverse network of Sudanese women and women's organizations in the Diaspora and inside Sudan, in addition to other organizations and activists in Sudan and Diaspora, write to you concerning the unacceptable minimal representation of women in the South Sudan Referendum Commission; and the lack of assurances of a conducive environment that ensures the protection of and respect for human rights of women and girls during and after the referendum process.

We have come together to build sustainable peace and justice in Sudan while working to end discrimination and violence against women. Our aim is to ensure meaningful participation for Sudanese women in on-going and upcoming processes in Sudan. These include the Darfur peace process, popular consultations in Southern Kordofan and Blue Nile, the Southern Sudan and Abyei referenda, and in efforts toward democratic transformation in Sudan.

We are writing to you ahead of the anticipated debate and vote on the membership of the South Sudan Referendum Commission, nominations of which were tabled before the National Assembly on Monday, June 7, 2010. We are deeply concerned about the under-representation of women in the list of nominees for membership in the commission. We urge the National Assembly to take all necessary steps to ensure increased and equal representation of women in the Referendum Commission in line with United Nations Security Council resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security, and given provisions in the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) for 25% representation of women at all levels of the public sphere. We also believe the government of Sudan has so far failed to ensure a conducive environment that protects women's rights and where the women and men of Southern Sudan can express their fundamental right to self determination in line with provisions in the Constitution of Sudan and the South Sudan Referendum Act of 2009. We call upon the National Assembly, the Government of Sudan, the Government of Southern Sudan, and all stakeholders to ensure the following:

1) Fair Composition of the South Sudan Referendum Commission:

While we appreciate the sense of urgency in taking steps to ensure that voting happens in January 2011, and with due respect to the eminent nominees, we believe the Presidency, the National Assembly and other stakeholders should pay due attention to international standards and the needs of all Sudan's citizens, including women, in appointing members of the SSRC, including in terms of gender. In particular,

- i. At least four of the members of the commission should be women who are able to identify and address women-specific issues related to the referendum.
- ii. The Commission should include women and men who are known to the people of Northern and Southern Sudan to be 1) impartial, 2) of high moral standing, 3) committed to the right of the people of Southern Sudan to self determination, 4) committed to gender equality and 5) able to deliver on the complex responsibilities of the Commission.

- iii. The biographies of the members of the Commission and their credentials should be available to the public.
- iv. No member of any political party should be on the Commission. In particular, it has come to our attention that Mr. Tagelsir Mohamed Salih is a known member of the Democratic Unionist Party.

1) Adequate Preparations to Ensure A Conducive Environment that Protects the Rights of Women in the Referendum Process

As the South Sudan Referendum Act stipulates, the Government of Sudan, the Government of Southern Sudan, and other stakeholders should ensure that the women and men of Southern Sudan exercise their right to self-determination freely in an appropriate environment. We are concerned, however, that Security in Southern Sudan and in the border areas continues to deteriorate, and this affects women in particular given their vulnerability to gender-based violence. In addition, the National Congress Party continues to curtail freedom of expression and association in all parts of Sudan which may result in disenfranchisement of voters in the Referendum and in subsequent violence.

As such, the Government of Sudan, the Government of Southern Sudan, and the National Assembly should take all necessary steps to,

- i. Ensure appropriate security conditions for the preparation and organization of the free exercise of the right to self-determination, including for women.
- ii. Ensure freedom of expression for women and men in all parts of Sudan, and especially in the South, to publish their opinions on the referendum and on women's concerns in relation to self-determination.
- iii. Ensure freedom of assembly and movement of women and men of South Sudan in accordance with the provisions of the Constitution and the South Sudan Referendum Act.
- iv. Ascertain the presence of members of the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) and its partners and representatives of the United Nations, the European Union, the African Union and other international bodies as observers for the referendum.
- v. Ensure that civil society, especially women's organizations are involved in awareness-raising around the referendum, voter education and in ensuring a free ballot.
- vi. Ensure awareness and voter registration, including among women, and protect women's and men's right to vote by secret ballot and promulgate fair procedures for voters in need of assistance, including women.

We believe the government of Sudan and the international community should deliver on their commitments regarding the rights of the women and men of South Sudan to choose between an independent state or to remain in a united Sudan in a fair process, with meaningful participation for women at all levels. And while we appreciate the steps to include some women in the membership of the Commission, we believe at least four women should be members in the Commission. This is particularly important given that women in different parts of Sudan have suffered immensely from conflicts since 1955, and up to the on-going conflict in Darfur, and from the failure of successive governments in Sudan to ensure peace and just distribution of economic and political resources for all. Women have also played key roles in addressing the consequences of wars in our communities, in peace-building and in reconstruction after the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement in 2005. Importantly, an increasing number of women from all parts of Sudan now possess the skills to play an effective role in the on-going and upcoming processes, including the South Sudan Referendum process.

cc:

President Omer Al Bashir
President Salva Kiir
General Scott Gration
Ambassador Susan Rice
Mr. Haile Menkerios, UN Envoy to Sudan
European Union
African Union
African Commission on Human and People's Rights

Signed:*

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Additional signatures will follow.

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