



# United Nations

22 November 2010

## **Opening remarks to press conference by Benjamin Mkapa, chair of Secretary-General's Panel on the Referenda in the Sudan**

Thank you all very much for coming. We have just wrapped up our second visit to Sudan, and it has taken place at a critical time – the start of voter registration for the referendum on the future of Southern Sudan.

Over the past 10 days we have visited nine voter registration sites in four states, and travelled across the country, from Khartoum to Juba, Wau, Kadugli, Abyei and Wad Medani, and back again, meeting with senior Government officials, referendum authorities, religious leaders, NGOs, political parties, the diplomatic community and many regular citizens.

The visit has been an encouraging one for us. We have seen lines of people standing patiently in the heat, waiting to register so they can cast their votes on the 9<sup>th</sup> of January; we have spoken with observers, both Sudanese and international, as they have solemnly carried out their duties; and we have met countless people, in the north and the south, who have told us that whatever the outcome of the vote, they are confident that everyone can live together peacefully.

But the voter registration process has highlighted some issues of concern as well.

In the North, turnout remains extremely low. Many Southern Sudanese appear uninterested or unwilling to register. There seems to be multiple reasons for this:

Lack of public information about the process. It is vital that everyone – the governments in Khartoum and Juba, the Southern Sudan Referendum Commission, the media and civil society – plays their part to ensure that the public knows enough about the process so they can uphold their rights.

Long distances between registration centres and the homes of some Southerners. This is obviously an inhibiting factor for people to come forward and register.

A campaign by some Southern leaders, we are told, to encourage people not to register and vote outside Southern Sudan.

And finally there is uncertainty on the Southerners' future status in the North. It is important that clarity on the post-referendum status of Southerners in the North and Northerners in the South is reached as soon as possible. Leaders in both the North and the South will also have to make more efforts to reassure people that their safety, property and rights are protected.

The rhetoric by all parties must also be toned down – I repeat, the rhetoric by all parties must also be toned down - something we warned about during our last visit to Sudan. Only then will the

public feel secure enough to turn out to register and to vote, without repercussions, wherever they live.

Outside the country, we received some disturbing reports of intimidation and threats against both International Organization for Migration (IOM) workers staffing the voter registration centres and Southern Sudanese attempting to register. We urge the parties to help ensure that everyone who wants to register can do so without fear.

And then there is Abyei, where the process for the other referendum scheduled for the 9<sup>th</sup> of January is not yet off the ground. A referendum commission has still not been established, and relations between the Dinka and the Misseriya remain tense.

We hope that negotiations beginning today under the auspices of the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) and the African Union High-Level Implementation Panel (AUHIP) will resolve some of the issues separating the parties, and we urge all sides in Abyei not to lose faith and to remember that their problems can be only resolved through peaceful dialogue.

I want to stress that the two referenda are part of a Sudanese-owned process, and they are the culmination of the landmark Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA), which ended two decades of war in this country. The primary responsibility for their success must lie with the Sudanese themselves.

There are fewer than 50 days before the vote is due to be held, and many important steps in the process remain – including the publication of a preliminary voter list from 6th to 13th December, when all people who registered should go back to those centres to check if their names are displayed correctly, and then the appeal process, when any objections to names on that list can be made.

We will return to Sudan next month to reassess the situation. In the meantime, along with our field reporting officers across the country, we will continue to monitor developments and press all sides to do their utmost to ensure that both referenda can be successful.