

There may be hope for Sudan

BY JOHN SIEBERT

An alarm is being raised that Sudan may be on the brink of returning to full scale war. At least two triggers for instability and a return to violent confrontation are coming into view — the first nationwide elections since 1986 are to take place in April, and a referendum on secession in southern Sudan is scheduled for next January.

However, a case can also be made that Sudan is finally settling into a more seasoned political process that will permanently turn the corner on what, since independence in 1956, has been almost continuous internal strife.

The comprehensive peace agreement signed in January 2005 between the National Congress party controlling the Government of Sudan in Khartoum and the Sudan People's Liberation Army/Movement in southern Sudan, was greeted internationally with great expectations. The agreement's implementation over a six-year interim period, however, has shown it to be not comprehensive, not able to solidify the peace, and far too lengthy and complex to implement all of its provisions.

Beyond stopping the main north-south military confrontation, there remain other parts of Sudan enmeshed in conflict. The most prominent is Darfur, where since 2003 more than 200,000 people have died and two million people have been displaced. Allegations of war crimes and crimes against humanity reach as high as Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir and others who have been indicted by the International Criminal Court.

The peace agreement has turned out to be more like an elaborate cease-fire arrangement. The repressive and unelected Bashir regime has turned out to be adept at side-stepping its commitments under the agreement on issues such as oil revenue sharing with southern Sudan, settling on agreed borders in certain sensitive areas, and co-operation on redeployment of troops away from the south.

The post-agreement semi-autonomous southern Sudan dominated by the people's army has also largely failed to deliver on the promise of peace and security that its citizens rightly longed for after 2005. In 2009, violence in the rural areas of the south between cattle raiding pastoralist groups has surpassed the death and displacement figures experienced in Darfur over the same period. Roads, schools and medical services have been painfully slow to materialize outside of urban centres such as the de facto capital of Juba. Corruption allegations against the people's liberation army's government have not been refuted or prosecuted.

In light of these problems, there is reason for optimism. Viewed from a slightly different perspective — and accept in this veil of tears the reality of all of Sudan's perplexing challenges — several things become apparent with the peace agreement.

In the first place, it is a cease-fire document with processes and milestones over the six-year interim period to 2011 for the restoration of politics in a land habituated to war. If war is politics by other means, as the saying goes, then to escape war is to return to politics by means of politics.

The constant bickering between north and south political leaders now certainly points to potential crises. But it also points to the restoration of politics, Sudanese-style. It isn't pretty, but even the politics we know, politics as practised in Canada and elsewhere, has its dark sides. What's important is that politics is now being conducted in Sudan between north and south without guns.

Another cue that the potential for a north-south war has taken a back seat I take from a personal encounter I had in September 2006 with the current president of the government of southern Sudan, Salva Kiir. I was part of a small non-government delegation making a courtesy call on what had to be a difficult morning.

Thirty-five civilians had been killed in five separate, coordinated incidents in the area around Juba the night before. Speculation on the identity of the perpetrators centred on the Lord's Resistance Army, then participating in peace talks hosted in Juba, or agents of Khartoum. Either way, the generals waiting in the president's ante-room were not there to discuss the weather. In this, as in so many incidents before and since, the response from the people's army leadership was that they would not be easily provoked into a military response that would upset the peace-agreement apple cart.

Another factor that leads me to believe that a north-south war has effectively receded from Sudan's horizon is the military build-up of the people's army since 2005. I am speculating on what only solid military intelligence could verify, but considering the assistance southern Sudan's fighting forces have received, primarily from Kenya and the U.S., they have been significantly upgraded with tanks and heavy artillery that will give Khartoum significant pause before contemplating even limited military incursions into oil-rich or disputed areas in the south. The cost of this military buildup has been significant and is regrettable in that financial resources have been diverted from economic development and providing more localized security.

Events may prove my optimism about peace in Sudan to be misplaced over the next year. Pessimistic Sudan observers will then have grounds to say I should not have been crying lamb about Sudan's prospects. Time will tell.