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Statement on the Current Critical Situation of Abyei in South Sudan

Following a twenty-year-old civil war between the North and South of Sudan, since July 2011, Sudan and the newly formed South Sudan have undergone a difficult separation. However, disputes concerning the border demarcation and affiliation of the oil-rich area of Abyei have threatened to drag both states back to war.

The Abyei Area is an oil-rich region crisscrossing the borders of Sudan and South Sudan and is seen as a historical bridge between the two countries. This area of Sudan, about the size of Jamaica, is traditionally a territory of the Ngok Dinka chiefdoms, which the British transferred in 1905 from Bahr-al-Ghazal Province in southern Sudan to Kordofan Province in the North. Initially the struggle associated with this region was about land and pasture claimed by both the Ngok Dinka and the Misseriya communities. With the onset of the First Sudanese Civil War (1956–1972), these two communities took separate paths, with the Misseriya and the Ngok Dinka supporting the North and the southern Anyanya rebels, respectively. Most recently this local dispute exacerbated a wider political conflict between two warring groups which subsequently became Sudan and South Sudan. At the national level, however, the struggle has been about natural resources and the area's strategic location in times of war. Since independence, Sudan has been redrawing its borders to gain access to natural resources and to deprive the South of revenue. The discovery of commercial quantities of oil in Abyei has raised the stakes for control and exploitation.

Several attempts have been undertaken to resolve the Abyei conflicts. The World Council of Churches (WCC) and the All Africa Conference of Churches (AACC) brokered the Addis Ababa Peace Agreement of 1972, which ended the first Sudanese civil war and included a clause that provided for a referendum allowing Abyei to choose to remain in the North or join the autonomous South. This referendum was never held, leading to tensions and incidents of violence and the establishment of a Dinka unit in the Anyanya II rebellion of 1975. The 1995 Asmara Talks agreed to Abyei's determining whether to join the South or stay in Kordofan. In 2004, Abyei was accorded "special administrative status" by the Protocol on the Resolution of the Abyei Conflict (Abyei Protocol) in the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) that ended the Second Sudanese Civil War. In 2005, boundaries were established by the Abyei Borders Commission in yet another attempt to resolve the longstanding dispute. Disputes and violence that followed establishment of these boundaries led to a boundary revision by the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) in The Hague in 2009. This revision has since been endorsed by all parties to the dispute. As was the case in the 1972 Agreement, the CPA provided for a referendum that would allow Abyei to choose to remain in the North or join the autonomous South Sudan, a means of permanently resolving the dispute. Considering that the referendum has never been held, the sentiment of the people of this area that they have been let down seems justified.

The difficulties in holding the Abyei referendum have resulted particularly from the failure to implement fully the 2005 CPA, even though the accord was explicit about the time frame and the process of the referendum. Indeed, the Ngok Dinka of Abyei felt much more alienated when South

Sudan, alongside whom they had fought against the North, declared independence from Sudan in 2011. Frustrated and tired of waiting, the Ngok Dinka organized and registered voters for their own referendum, held 27 to 29 October 2013. The results showed that 99.9 percent of the voters want to be part of South Sudan. The challenge, however, is that the unilateral Ngok Dinka poll has no legal weight, especially because both Sudan and South Sudan have said they will not recognize the results. This also means the international community will not recognize the results.

The Ngok Dinka community has been compelled to countenance a unilateral referendum because all other options have been closed to them. The Abyei city has been destroyed three times in as many decades. The latest destruction took place on 21 May 2012, when Sudan Armed Forces (SAF) seized Abyei city and the National Congress Party of Sudan (NCP) dissolved the Abyei Administration. The conflict that erupted in the following days and weeks led to the killing of more than thirty civilians and displacement of more than 60,000. In June the UN established the Interim Security Force for Abyei (ISFA), composed of 1,400 Ethiopian troops. The assassination of the Paramount Chief of the Ngok Dinka in June 2013 was carried out in spite of the presence of the UN peace-keeping force. This convinced the Ngok Dinka that protection by the international community is not guaranteed. As a result, they decided on the unilateral referendum as a last resort.

The Abyei issue, more than any other unresolved conflict, constitutes the most likely source of violence between the Dinka and the Misseriya. Such violence would not be limited to those two communities; it may involve the two sovereign states, South Sudan and Sudan in a war between two nations. Should that happen, then all the democratic, political, and economic gains following the independence of South Sudan would be rolled back, with all the adverse implications for regional security.

The 10th Assembly of the World Council of Churches meeting in Busan, Republic of Korea, from 30 October to 8 November 2013, therefore:

- A. **Welcomes** the African Union (AU) statement of 21 October 2013, which expresses the AU's disquiet about Sudan's delay in implementing negotiated agreements and calls on the two countries to resume their discussion on the final status of Abyei;
- B. **Encourages** the AU to expedite the planned visit of its Peace and Security Council to Abyei to finalize the arrangements for the referendum;
- C. **Urges** the governments of South Sudan and Sudan, who are tasked with the responsibility of ensuring the decision to have the CPA-agreed referendum for Abyei, to ensure that such is implemented without further delay;
- D. **Commends** South Sudan for acceding to all the provisions in the AU-sponsored Agreement on the Abyei referendum. But without a corresponding assent by Sudan, the implementation is severely hampered; therefore we call on Sudan to accede to the said Agreement, so that the CPA-agreed Abyei referendum may be carried expeditiously;
- E. **Urges** the International Community, particularly the guarantors of the CPA, to re-engage the issue of Abyei as a matter of moral conscience in ensuring justice for the people of Abyei;
- F. **Urges** the United Nations, the African Union and the Troika (Norway, UK and US) to do what is right for the people of Abyei: to urge the Government of Sudan to implement the process for the referendum; and
- G. Recommends the churches and the international ecumenical community to re-engage the process for Abyei referendum and to give it the necessary moral and material support.

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