

The creation Saturday of a national unity government in Sudan will signal the end of Africa's longest-running civil war and the success of two years of negotiations between the central government and the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM) led by John Garang. "This peace agreement will change Sudan forever. Sudan will never be the same again, because this peace agreement will engulf the country in a democratic and fundamental transformation," Mr. Garang said at the signing of the accord in Kenya in January. He is expected to be sworn in as first vice president at a ceremony this weekend in Khartoum, making him the first southerner to hold this position since Sudan's independence from British rule in 1956

The current fundamentalist government emphasized the ethnic and religious differences of Sudan's populations. The National Islamic Front took power in 1989 after a military coup overthrew the democratically elected government. Since then, it carried out human-rights violations that provoked worldwide outrage. In an effort to repair its image and start over with a clean slate, the government in Khartoum has undertaken major steps to win the trust of the United States, which was a major critic of Sudan for the past 15 years. Now, Washington and Khartoum have improved relations and Sudan has undertaken an intelligence partnership with the United States to combat terrorism.

Ambassador Michael E. Ranneberger, principal deputy assistant secretary of the State Department's Bureau of African Affairs, said in an interview at his office last week that the visit to Washington early this year of Salah Gosh, chief of Sudan's security services, was not a secret.

"Mr. Gosh met with top CIA and State Department officials because we wanted to use that opportunity to deliver a message to him to end the violence in Darfur," Mr. Ranneberger said. "The Sudanese government showed very good cooperation in our war against terrorism, and we want to continue doing that as we have mutual interest."

"July 9 will be a milestone in our modern history," Ambassador Khidir Haroun Ahmed, head of Sudan's mission in Washington, said in an interview at his office last week. "It is the first time in Sudan's history to bring the entire country on the right track and it could serve as a model for other countries of the region."

The peace agreement specifies a transition period of six years, after which the people of southern Sudan are to decide by referendum whether to remain part of Sudan or to separate from it.

Mr. Ahmed accused Mr. Garang of igniting the revolt in Sudan's western Darfur province. He said Mr. Garang told National Public Radio that the SPLM in southern Sudan has relations with the Sudan Liberation Movement (SLM) in Darfur, and "it is not a coincidence that the two rebel groups have similar names."

Mr. Ahmed said Mr. Garang's aim was to help the Darfur rebels start a rebellion to weaken the government and compel it to make compromises in the peace agreement.

Ezekiel Lol Gatkuoth, the SPLM representative in North America, called that connection baseless.

"The position of the SPLM toward the people of Darfur has always been clear," he said. "The SPLM stands in solidarity with the people of Darfur and with all the marginalized people of Sudan."

Mr. Gatkuoth also denied that the Sudanese government had made any concessions in the peace accord. "If you study the agreement, you can see that [Khartoum] didn't make any compromise but the SPLM did. One example is sharing the oil in the south with the north

50/50," he said.

The United Nations faces major challenges in addressing the needs of Sudanese war victims. Security Council Resolution 1590 mandates the agency to support the peace process between north and south Sudan and provide humanitarian assistance to the most vulnerable groups.

"Besides its support to the north-south peace deal, the U.N., also in SCR 1590, is mandated to provide assistance to the African Union," said George Somerwill, public information chief with the U.N. Advance Mission in Sudan

Political observers are optimistic that Sudan is flourishing and witnessing a new era of openness, political stability, democratic transformation and growth, although it still suffers from intolerance to political opponents, press censorship and prevailing corruption.

A major development on the Sudanese political stage is the signing of a peace accord in Cairo between the Sudanese government and National Democratic Alliance (NDA). A delegation from the NDA will participate in the National Constitutional Review Commission (NCRC). However, major political parties under the umbrella of NDA have voiced concern about their proportion of power and parliamentary share.

The United States has signaled a shift in policy toward Sudan. The Bush administration apparently had hoped the north-south accord would allow it to lift sanctions and open investment avenues for U.S. oil companies in Sudan's recently developed oil wealth. Also, the newly emerging U.S. intelligence partnership with Sudan in its global war on terrorism is gaining significance in relations between Washington and Khartoum

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