61. Omar and Omens

In an AAP report following the visit of Sudan President Omar Al-Bashir to Juba, the capital of Southern Sudan, on Tuesday, 4th January, it stated:

"I personally will be sad if Sudan splits. But at the same time I will be happy if we have peace in Sudan between the two sides," Bashir said in a speech to senior southern officials broadcast live on state television. "I am going to celebrate your decision, even if your decision is secession." He had earlier been greeted by southern leader Salva Kiir on his arrival at Juba airport...Around 500 people gathered outside the airport, shouting slogans for separation such as "no to unity", and waving southern flags, but the atmosphere was festive.

I was one of the 500, but not intentionally. Fr Joseph took me to the airport just before 8:00am for a 9:30am flight to Juba. The route was lined with police and armed soldiers and several police queried us on our way to the airport. At one stage we were blocked and I got out of the vehicle and began to walk but shortly after, Fr Joseph, having charmed his way past yet another interrogating constable, picked me up again. I did walk the last three hundred metres only to find no-one was being admitted to the terminal and no flights were departing. So there we sat, or stood, about 150 people, until 11:30am. Flights resumed after President Omar Al-Bashir arrived and moved off in his escorted convoy. My flight took off just after 2:00pm.

Yes there were people chanting ‘no to unity’ and many were waving flags saying vote for secession. I was given one. Yes, there was a heavy security presence but, remarkably, the atmosphere was indeed ‘festive’, as the AAP report said, and optimistic. None of my fellow travellers at the airport expressed impatience. At present there are no signs of extra tension, neither in Juba, where I was, nor in Malakal where I am now.

In mass on Saturday, marking the attaining of the 101 Days of Prayer for Peace, Sudan Vice-President and President of the South, Salva Kiir, told the congregation: ‘Our President is coming and we should welcome him with courtesy’ - and that is exactly what happened. Al-Bashir said that he believes unity is the best choice for the southerners, but he insists he wants good relations with the south if it chooses independence. Last week, he pledged to ‘help build a secure, stable and brotherly state in the south if it votes for independence.’

Most here in Sudan would agree with State Department spokesman, Philip Crowley who said. ‘We believe the right signals are being sent both in the north and south in terms of the upcoming referendum and respecting the results.’

So rather than increasing tension, the developing mood is relaxed and ‘upbeat’. There is a an emerging confidence that both north and south do really want a lasting peace and will work collaboratively to build their joint futures, after the south secedes.

I am told some northerners living in the south have now exchanged homes with some southerners who were in the north. There are many shops which are shut yet many are still open. There is still fresh meat fruit and vegetables available in the market. I am delighted to find that here in Malakal, diesel is again available and there is no drastic shortage of food or supplies which I had thought to be a very likely occurrence.

There has been massive movement between north and south. Today I saw families sitting under trees with all their suitcases and belongings. In the middle of the stadium there are huge piles of household goods brought with families from the north. There are many logistical problems and lack of infrastructure to overcome in the weeks and months ahead and there is no doubt that some will endure great hardship, but as we approach the 9th of January, the beginning of the week of referendum voting, the omens look good, much better than I expected. With Omar, I pray, ‘Al hamdu lilah’. (Thank God). - Br Bill