

SOUTH SUDAN MISSION

South Sudan and Uganda

Official Language: **English**

1. Societal Setting

The Republic of South Sudan gained independence from Sudan in July 2011 as the outcome of a 2005 peace deal that ended Africa's longest-running civil war. An overwhelming majority of South Sudanese voted in a January 2011 referendum to secede and become Africa's newest country. Unlike the largely Muslim Sudan, South Sudan's ethnically diverse population follows traditional beliefs and Christianity. Its estimated 13-16 million people are mostly living in rural areas. Despite its independence, there have been continuous tensions with Sudan over oil revenues (which accounts for nearly all of government revenues) and land borders.

The young nation erupted into civil war at the end of 2013, stemming from a power struggle between the president and his deputy. Fighting between government troops and rebel factions erupted into a conflict that had killed thousands and prompted more than 2.2 million people to flee their homes by the time a tentative internationally-mediated peace agreement was signed in August 2015. A unity government established in April 2016 collapsed within a few months, causing renewed conflict. On 8th July 2016, a day before the celebration of the 5th anniversary



of the country's independence, once again fighting broke out between the soldiers loyal to the President (who is an ethnic Dinka) and the Vice President (who is Nuer). Since then the insecurity and war has spread to different parts of the country involving many other ethnic groups against the Dinka tribe.

In August 2017, the number of people fleeing across the border to Uganda passed one million, according to the UN's High Commission

on Refugees (UNHCR). Another million have fled into Ethiopia, Sudan and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Most are women and children escaping “barbaric violence”. Every day between two to three thousand new refugees continue to arrive at the various refugee reception centers in Uganda. People continue to flee war-torn South Sudan because of the hunger, famine and the continued raping of women and torture and killing of innocent civilians by both government soldiers and rebels. Most of the properties of the people were either stolen or looted, and that which could not be stolen or looted was destroyed. People in South Sudan suffered under the Arabs before independence and they continue to suffer at the hands of their own people.

2. Ecclesial Setting

It is estimated that 37.2% of the population is Catholic (including the current President). There is one archdiocese and six dioceses in the country. The bishops of South Sudan have spoken out against the continuing violence, calling all factions to end it, noting the killing, raping, looting, displacement, attacks on churches and destruction of property which continues. They have not been afraid to challenge the government, noting that much of the violence is perpetrated by government forces against civilians.

The Catholic Church is serving the most vulnerable even as the government and civil institutions have collapsed in the face of war and growing famine. Many consider the Church to

be the only institution trying to help those in the most remote areas of the country, especially through its agencies like Catholic Relief Services and Caritas, as well as with local personnel and structures. The Church is one of the few institutions in South Sudan that has the credibility, capacity, and presence to effectively address concerns affecting society at large.

Beginning the Mission

The SVD pioneers to start the South Sudan Mission were Fr. Bernard Ilunga Wa Ilunga from the Republic of Congo, Fr. Francis Joseph Naduviledath from India, and Bro. Vinsentius Knaofmone from Indonesia. After a week together in Nairobi, Kenya to get to know each other, Frs. Bernard and Francis landed on the South Sudanese soil on 30th March 2012 in the company of the then Superior General Antonio Pernia and General Councilor Estanislau Chindecasse. Bro. Vinsentius joined them later.

On 1st April 2012, the SVDs were officially and warmly welcomed into the Catholic Diocese of Yei during the Eucharistic celebration presided over by Bishop Erkolano Lado Tombe, the Bishop of the diocese of Yei. The SSpS had already started their services in the diocese of Yei in 2010.

Even though the SVDs were warmly welcomed, nothing was prepared for accommodating them in Lainya. They stayed with the SSpS in Yei for four months and then for three months in the

tukuls (simple huts made of mud walls and grass roofs) outside the sisters' convent.

SVD Residence & Holy Family Parish, Lainya

Six *tukuls* were constructed for the purpose of accommodating the confreres in Lainya which is 57 km. away from Yei. In November 2012, the confreres moved into Lainya. Fr. Francis was appointed as the parish priest, Fr. Bernard as the curate, with Bro. Vinsentius in charge of the youth of the newly created Holy Family Parish in Lainya.

Holy Family Parish in Lainya is situated in a place where the Episcopal Church of Sudan (ECS) has its stronghold. The parish has over 35

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chapels, managed by a zonal catechist for easy administration. Prior to the SVD taking up this parish, many of these chapels were visited once in two, three and even four years by a priest for the Eucharist or for the celebrations of the sacraments. Most of the village chapels were managed by the village catechists. Since Holy Family Parish in Lainya, along with the whole of South Sudan, falls under the Primary Evangelization Zone, the confreres started a program to empower the catechists and the chapel collaborators like the Catholic Action, the choir, the youth, etc. with leadership skills workshops, regular visits to the chapels for instructions, celebration of sacraments, etc.

People continued to suffer from the effect of so many years of war. In order to bring people out of their traumatic experiences, the confreres organized a number of 'Trauma Healing' workshops and exercises at the parish level as well as at the zonal level.

During the four years our confreres were in Lainya, through the hard work of the parishioners and the generosity of benefactors, many chapels were built with cement blocks and zinc roofs in Lainya as well as in some of the villages. With the support of donors and through the hard work of the youth of Lainya, a youth center was constructed in Lainya. Five bore holes were drilled and fixed with hand pumps with the help of benefactors and local people's support. As part of income generation for the women's groups in the parish, as well as in one of the chapels, two hand dug wells were completed for the purpose of 'dry season gardening'. Hundreds of students were provided with scholarships to continue with their education.

In late 2013 two new missionaries arrived in the SSD Mission for their first assignments: Fr. Andrzej Dzida from Poland and Fr. Praful Kispotta from India. In order to accommodate them two additional *tukuls* were built.

The Fire and the War

On 11 March 2015, at around 2 am while the confreres were fast asleep, they were awakened with the sound of burning grass on their roofs and the light that emanated from a fire. At the

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time of the fire outbreak, Fr. Francis and Bro. Vinsentius were out of the country. The *tukuls* of these two confreres and the other *tukuls* were not torched, only those in which confreres were sleeping were torched. Although our confreres did not sustain any serious physical injuries it was a scary experience for them. After the fire, two of our confreres, Frs. Ilunga Wa Ilunga and Kispotta Praful left the SSD Mission for good. The source of the fire remains a mystery.

Towards the end of 2015 two new missionaries were assigned to the SSD Mission: Fr. Clemens Romy Suri Roja from Indonesia and Fr. Wojciech Pawlowski from Poland. They arrived after taking English language courses.

In July 2016, the violence that had erupted between the factions came closer to our confreres. Fighting broke out in Lainya between the rebels and soldiers loyal to the government, and within a few days the whole place was deserted. Most of the people sought refuge in the SVD mission in Lainya with some of their personal belongings, but within days they left the mission and went into the bush, leaving behind some of their belongings inside our youth center. The confreres decided to remain in Lainya as long as it was possible. On 25th July 2016 a militia group (a hundred plus) that was sent to clear the road from Juba to Yei landed in the mission compound and without any provocation they shot two of the men who were staying in the youth center; one of them died on the spot and the other one was very critically injured. An hour later, another group of soldiers (a couple of hundred) came and forceful-

ly stayed in the mission compound and around the confreres' *tukuls* for four days. It was a very frightening experience for the confreres, and on 29th July 2016 with the help of God and through the intervention of many people, they were evacuated to Yei, and then from Yei to Juba, the national capital on 2nd August 2016 and the same evening to Nairobi, Kenya.

South Sudan Refugees in Uganda

In the first part of September 2016, the Apostolic Nuncio in Uganda, Archbishop Michael Blume, SVD visited the Generalate in Rome and asked the generalate administration a question - What are the missionaries who were evacuated out of South Sudan doing and what is the response of the SVDs towards the plight of the South Sudanese refugees who are in Uganda?

Those in Final Vows

MINISTRY	Personnel	2018 (%)	2012 (%)	2005 (%)
Other Apostolates (refugees)	2	33.3	25.0	30.8
Studies/Orientation	3	50.0	0	0
Retired/Sick	1	16.7	0	0

In September 2016 Fr. Superior General asked Francis to study about the possibility of SVDs taking up work in Uganda among the South Sudanese refugees. Subsequently, Fr. Francis and

Fr. Joseph Kallanchira (AFRAM Zonal Coordinator) visited the various refugee settlements in Uganda from 24th to 30th October 2016 in the company of the Apostolic Nuncio in Uganda, Michael Blume. The report of the exploratory team was very positive and they recommended to Fr. General and his Council that the SSD team members are ready to work among the refugees in Uganda. Fr. Francis left for Entebbe, Uganda on 22nd November 2016 and Bro. Vincentius joined him after four months. Presently, Fr. Francis and Bro. Vincentius are the only confreres working among the refugees who are in the *Bidi-Bidi* refugee settlements in the district of Yumbe, in Uganda.

MEMBERSHIP	2018
Clerics	5
Brothers (final vows)	1
Total	6

Another confrere, Fr. Lawrence Llona from the Philippines, landed in Kampala on 14th July 2017 to join the SVD team. Unfortunately he was involved in a serious vehicle accident on 15th July 2017. He survived the accident, but returned to the Philippines for better rest and recuperation.

Two of the SSD missionaries who were evacuated from Lainya are studying the classical Arabic language in Cairo, Egypt with the idea of retur-

ning to South Sudan when peace is back in the country. One of our confreres is improving his English language in Indonesia with the idea of going back to South Sudan or to join the ministry among people in the refugee settlements.

The *Bidi-Bidi* refugee settlement covers 250 square kilometers of the Eastern half of the District of Yumbe, stretching southward from the South Sudanese border and spilling over into the Moyo district along the western bank of the Kochi River. The settlement has a population of more than 274,000. It is considered to be the largest refugee settlement in the world today. *Bidi-Bidi* was a small village before becoming a refugee settlement which was opened in 2016.

Fr. Francis is the only priest serving the spiritual needs of all these people in the *Bidi-Bidi* settlement, busily celebrating the Eucharist and the sacraments in the numerous chapels that are built in the various blocks / villages by the refugees themselves. He also spends a lot of time interacting with them, listening to them, giving them hope and at times a bit of trauma healing.

The local Church is very much appreciative of what the SVD is doing in the various refugee settlements. The Bishop of Arua Diocese has created a vicariate and has appointed an Episcopal Vicar for the refugees and migrants to coordinate the various activities undertaken by the Church personnel.

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The Future

Every day between two to three thousand new refugees continue to arrive at the various refugee reception centers in Uganda. After the initial setbacks in the refugee settlements, people are slowly getting used to the situation. Though they lack many things in life, they enjoy basic freedom. They can sleep peacefully without the

sound of gunfire. They get their food ration and their children can get the much needed basic education and medical services.

As long as the South Sudanese refugees are here in the various refugee settlements in Uganda, the Divine Word Missionaries under the SSD Mission could remain here to care for the pastoral-spiritual needs of the people.