

## Seven reasons for increasing optimism in South Sudan

*by Bill Firman*

It was reported three days ago that the SPLA has begun assessing areas to move the army 25 kilometres outside Juba as stipulated in the peace agreement signed last month. This is, indeed, an encouraging step.

A second reason for optimism is that the two major parties in the conflict have been making serious efforts to stop fighting. Yes, there are still occasional outbreaks of violence but there does seem to be a real effort to establish an effective ceasefire. Some days ago, for the first time in recent months, a WFP barge was permitted to cross the Nile carrying food to the suffering people of Wau Shilluk.

A third indicator that there is now a determination to implement the latest peace agreement is the withdrawal of Ugandan troops.

The fourth positive sign is that there continue to be talks, albeit moving very slowly, towards the formation of a transitional government. At the same time, there have also been various peace initiatives by the Churches making it clear that the will of the people is for a lasting peace.

The fifth indicator, it seems to me, which may surprise some, is the involvement of Russia. Russia recently played a key role at the UN Security Council in blocking a US initiative to impose financial sanctions on South Sudan's army chief of staff. Both the Sudanese and South Sudanese foreign ministers had asked Russia to oppose sanctions.

A sixth positive sign is the improved relationships within the UN camp in Malakal. There had been real tension and occasional fighting between the different ethnic groups within that camp but last Sunday - so Solidarity member, Father Mike Bassano reported - all groups came together in a new location for a joyful celebration of the mass. Healing will be a long slow process but this is a good start.

A seventh reason for optimism are the various reports from the leaders of the series of trauma healing workshops being organised by the Association of Religious in South Sudan. It is evident that the people are anxious for a time of healing, forgiveness and renewed optimism to take hold. The continued accompaniment of the people by committed religious, donor partners, many inspiring persons working with great dedication for NGOs and the UN, assures the people they are not abandoned.

No doubt the progress will be slow and even, at times, discouraging. Yet there are good signs and reasons to be optimistic that South Sudan is finally emerging from the senseless conflict that erupted in late 2013. The people want peace and restoration of normal living, poor as that may be. Surely, it is not much to ask.