A ten-minutes-input on

Peace-building among tribes in South Sudan

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I have been a witness to many international or civil wars but my experiences in the field of peace-<u>building</u> are limited to <u>traditional</u> fighting amongst communities in South Sudan. Fighting between or within ethnic groups remains one of the biggest problems in South Sudan even after independence. It is the major obstacle to peace, development and national unity.

Traditionally, tribal fighting had no political, ideological or military background, was not based on hatred and was not intended to subjugate other people. Such fighting occurred for practical and social reasons such as search for grazing land, need of water, cattle-raids, revenge for attacks or the need of young generations to display their courage and fighting skills. Fighting didn't last for a long time, rarely resulted in big loss of human lives and was either settled peacefully through compensation or militarily by a counter-raid.

The nature of tribal wars changed when modern firearms were introduced. As the King of the Anyuak tribe explained, "*All the bad things came with the foreigners: religion, clothes, money and guns*". Indeed, since the introduction of firearms, the number of victims of tribal conflicts has increased dramatically and conflicts get often out of the tribe's self-control. Nowadays, tribes are armed with automatic weapons which are provided by governments in order to disrupt another country's stability. Tribes have become the tools of other military powers and have lost their political sovereignty. Even politicians use tribes for achieving their personal goals. The tribes' traditional methods of ending a conflict in order to return to peace don't function anymore: too great is the number of victims to return to normality easily. Killed people are not compensated for anymore, the victims remain anonymous and the crimes are so horrific that they can't get pardoned. The army's intervention results in even more brutal killing.

Yet, <u>the biggest victim of war is culture</u>. Loss of culture has resulted in <u>the loss of respect for the human person</u>, for women and children, old and sick people. Politicians, NGOs and governments have always considered tribes to be a disturbance and nuisance. Their fighting was explained by the lack of education and a generally backward attitude. Tribes were - and still are - believed to be

remainders of archaic, primitive and barbarous times. One should get rid of them as quickly as possible, by ignoring them or if necessary by annihilating them. When it comes to tribes, educated people behave as if they were born colonialists. In a modern world, tribes should not exist anymore, not even be named. However, the problem is, as Nelson Mandela once said, that "*the African governments can't get rid of their people*". And indeed, to deny the tribes the right of existence does not help to make them submissive to a government which has failed to assist them in their permanent struggle for survival as human beings.

Whoever loves the wonderful people of South Sudan has to help the government to maintain peace in the country. A government should be proud and not be ashamed of its people. The tribes have been cursed by the introduction of automatic weapons. If they are not helped to get out of their ecologic, economic and political isolation, there will never be peace in the country. Cultural diversity is the biggest wealth of South Sudan. Peace amongst the tribes is a necessity for survival, for the tribes as well as for the nation.

But how to achieve peace amongst the more than sixty ethnic groups? The question was discussed by South Sudanese intellectuals in the year 2000. They came up with the proposal to create a forum where all ethnic communities could meet in order to learn about each other and discuss all their problems. They called it "*House of Nationalities*". It was crucial that the idea stemmed from the people concerned and was not imposed from outside. <u>Lasting peace has to be built from within.</u>

The peace-project found the support of the Swiss Government, and since I was familiar with South Sudanese cultures, I was asked to introduce the concept to military leaders, politicians, intellectuals, NGOs and church-leaders, to women and young people and of course to the chiefs themselves. I was all alone with the only support from the Swiss government in Berne. All NGOs and UN-organisations politely showed interest but refused to join; they had their own projects. Fortunately, I had acquired the reputation of being a friend of the people of South Sudan. The fact that I had helped 10'000 child-soldiers to escape to safety made me respected and trusted. Some friends in the Sudan helped me to organise conferences and workshops. Women- and youth-organisations came immediately out in strong support of the project. They understood that social change could only occur if the chiefs understood its necessity and agreed to it.

<u>Peace is not only a military matter, it concerns also social issues</u>. A tribe alone would resist and fear changes inside of society, but decisions taken by all chiefs would facilitate and encourage social development and maintain peace. <u>Even social peace must come from within and cannot be imposed from outside.</u>

The idea of a cultural forum spread quickly amongst the people. It became so popular that the leaders of the liberation-movement got afraid that their own military organisation could be defeated by an idea which had the direct support of the young, the women and the grassroots. Yet, the movement could not get stopped easily. In five of the ten states, I organised conferences which were attended by all chiefs of the region. The fact that I knew how to address the chiefs helped to convince them. <u>The key words were the dignity of all human beings and the respect due to all cultural identities</u>. The chiefs were extremely sensitive to the question of the survival of their identity and were ready to defend their spiritual values. Sometimes I used strong words, telling the chiefs that they were weak, coward, fearful, corrupted and irresponsible. I stirred up their mind by assuring them to get cursed by both their ancestors and their descendants because of their laziness. The chiefs liked this direct language and agreed to the critics.

When meeting, the chiefs discovered that they were all sharing a same identity, the identity of being human beings. They even accepted the argument that no culture had a higher value than another one and that all people had the same right to enjoy their traditions. It was agreed to create a committee in which all cultures were represented in an equal number. Meeting regularly was important; it increased the understanding of the other's problems. The committee's main task was to mediate whenever there was a conflict in the region, to enhance cultural co-operation and to dialogue with the authorities of the state. The argument that tribes should not wait for the army or NGOs to solve their conflicts was as convincing as the argument that development could only occur when there was peace and co-operation between the various ethnic groups. The idea to unite the tribes was not to challenge the authority of the government, it was to help the government to learn about the people's real problems, facilitate development and maintain peace.

When I left the Swiss Foreign Department, about 50% of the "House of Nationalities" project was completed. I can't explain why the plans to build a house uniting all cultural identities eventually was abandoned in spite of its

popularity and initial success. It was certainly a mistake to leave the project in the hands of the government of South Sudan which had no interest to strengthen the tribes and their cultures. A strong government was meant to rule, not to dialogue let alone to be questioned by so-called "primitive" people. Cultural diversity was considered to be a hinder to progress and prosperity.

But whatever the government and indeed NGOs were thinking, the tribes didn't cease to exist. They are still living somewhere out there in the swamps and the wilderness, without receiving assistance from anybody. They will have to continue to fight for their survival, by <u>all</u> means. But for how long will they keep the courage to believe in the dignity of the human person and the respect due to all cultural identities? Perhaps that the war for human dignity in South Sudan has just begun. Peace is just not possible without the respect due to all people.

The concern for the dignity of all people should therefore be at the core of peace-building and govern all our actions, *it must be guided by the heart as much as by the mind.* This is the lesson I could draw from my experiences in South Sudan.

<u>Peace has to grow on the tree of humanity</u>. This is my conviction.