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Open letter to the People of South Sudan

**From Archbishop Daniel Deng Bul,
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Chairperson of the Committee for National Healing, Peace and Reconciliation and
Principal of the National Platform for Peace and Reconciliation**

***God ... has committed to us the word of reconciliation ... be reconciled with God (2
Corinthians 5:19-20 NKJV)***

Dear brothers and sisters,

Peace from God be among you. I write this letter first and foremost as a concerned citizen of South Sudan. Secondly as a church leader to whom God has committed the ministry of bringing his people together to reason together. Thirdly as the Chairperson of the Committee for National Healing, Peace and Reconciliation, whom this nation through the wisdom of our dear President, has seen fit to trust me and fellow religious leaders with the leadership of this process of national healing and reconciliation. And lastly as one of the Principals of the National Platform for Peace and Reconciliation.

The plight of our people who have lost their loved ones and many others who continue to live as refugees in their own country saddens my heart. How to reverse this situation is the reason am writing this letter. Like you I am filled with a deep sadness that our people must once again endure the suffering of war when we were looking forward to enjoy the fruits of independence. Where did we lose the vision for a bright South Sudan, leading us down this road of death and destruction?

Where there is no vision, the people perish (Proverbs 29:18)

Recognizing the need to bring our people together to reason together, we started with a nationwide call for prayer last year. Our women, youth, civil society, political leaders, disciplined forces and all people of goodwill gathered in churches, mosques and other venues to pray for godly counsel. Did we celebrate too early that we were on the way to real reconciliation? Maybe not. But the events and consequences of December 15 2013 have called for a change of approach.

Together as one

In early January, as the fighting was raging and escalating, Hon. Chuol Rambang Chair of the South Sudan Peace and Reconciliation Commission, Hon. David Okwier, Chair of the Parliamentary Select Committee for Peace and Reconciliation and myself came together to discuss the worsening situation in our country. We recognized that we are all tasked to work for peace and reconciliation. Therefore we can no longer work separately. We wanted to show the

people of South Sudan that the mandated bodies can work together and that our differences make us stronger and more strategic.

We have to be neutral on this terrible and unnecessary war ravaging our beloved country. We are all affected. When one of us suffers, we all suffer. So we must confront the challenges facing our nation together because our strength is in our unity. Our voice is louder and our impact deeper when we act together.

Common Platform

Our common mandate to work for peace and reconciliation compelled us to act and create a channel for the collective voice of our people. This simple thought gave rise to what is now called the National Platform for Peace and Reconciliation. The aim is to provide opportunities for every South Sudanese air their views on how we can end this cycle of self-destruction, focus on our common interests as citizens and move forward as one people.

Different mandates, One Vision

While the wording of the mandate of each organization may be different, the vision remains the same. The Parliamentary Select Committee has a very important mandate to mobilize the political leadership for legislative framework for peace and reconciliation. The Commission has a unique role of assisting the executive arm of government through the line ministries to mainstream peace and reconciliation in their service to the people. The Committee for National Healing, Peace and Reconciliation has the strategic role of mobilizing the grassroots, civil society and faith-based organizations to come together through their long-established social networks and platforms to address the need for healing and reconciliation. The Church in particular has a God-given mandate to offer the ordinary people the opportunity to pray, consult and speak on the way they see the country going.

Healthy tension

None of these institutions can pretend to work effectively without involving or working with the government of the day for it is through the government that the people find their seat among the community of nations. Yet some people have mistaken this relationship to mean that our actions are controlled by the government. The Committee is as independent as each church works independent of the government. And so is the platform. This tension between independence from government control and cordial relationship with all players is the strength of the platform. We may see things from different angles but we are able to get the best from each other as a family. It is a healthy tension. It is our understanding of God's call for us to come together and reason together. Meaning that we all have different ways of looking at things but that these perspectives are not necessarily wrong.

Come now, and let us reason together, says the LORD (Isaiah 1:18 NKJV)

Why is it so important at this point to raise an independent voice for peace and reconciliation? The war is dividing and polarising the people and communities of our country. The middle ground is eroded. When you listen to one side you are criticized as biased towards one or the other. Each side wants you to be with them. And if you are not with them you are against them. Tribal allegiance is expected and people labeled accordingly. This makes it very difficult for people and leaders to stand in the middle and reach out to both sides equally. Motives are

questioned, actions are doubted and words are twisted. Reaching out to both sides requires courage and commitment to the ideal of a healed nation. This is why being independent and united is so important. Standing in the middle is necessary to reach both sides and to bridge the divide between people and political leaders, between divided communities. We serve the people and we serve our leaders. We are inspired by the courage of our people and guided by our belief in the Word of God. Independence does not mean you are against the government or the Opposition, against one or the other community. Independence for the Platform means we can listen to everyone equally, openly and inclusively to bring the voices of all the people together to advance peace and reconciliation.

Working together

To start the journey for our healing, we have to come together and speak with one voice against this war that is tearing our nation and our people apart. The Platform is reaching out to all constituencies and groups. The role of women, youth, religious communities, traditional leaders, government and opposition and many more are recognized as equally essential if we want to build a broad coalition of people to stand up against the war and urge our leaders to find and implement solutions that stop the war and begin the healing and development we all need. The Scriptures have countless calls for us to be of the same mind and consider others better than ourselves.

Be of the same mind one toward another ... And let us consider one another to provoke to love and to good works (Romans 12:16; Hebrews 10:24 NKJV)

Looking across our borders, Rwanda, South Africa, Sierra Leone, Aceh, East Timor, and Nepal show that genuine openness for national reconciliation and not military solutions won the trust of the people and led to genuine peace.

The National Platform seeks to:

1. Reach the political leaders of our country for them to hear what the ordinary people are saying.
2. Network and build bridges for our people to speak with one voice for the end of the current conflict.
3. Facilitate understanding of the issues that divide our people. Only when we give people the opportunity to raise the issues, concerns and aspirations close to their hearts would we construct a long-term agenda for peace and reconciliation for the nation.

The National Platform is organizing a number of consultations across the country to reach out to the widest possible audience. Our people need to talk and dialogue with each other across the divides of ethnicity, gender, age and more. Our action plan calls for going to the people and ask them what it is they need for peace and what they can contribute towards it. But the Platform needs to do more. It wants to encourage independent actions from the widest possible spectrum of South Sudanese society. We have to show we have a common goal no matter what tribe we belong to, what part of the country we come from or what position we have in society. Our independent actions must find unity in our collective aspiration to end the war, heal our nation and build momentum for peace, security and development.

Actions and Plans

Over the past five months, the Platform carried concrete actions, which readily demonstrate that we are already a long way toward making our intention real. These actions include:

- Joint statement released on 9 January as the first joint action taken by the three institutions together;
- National Day of Prayer co-hosted with the South Sudan Council of Churches on 11 January;
- On-going meeting, with government, international and local communities to mobilize for anticipated grassroots involvement in the process.
- An international Roundtable with a wide range of diplomatic representatives, NGOs and local organisations on 5 February and 27 May;
- Consultation with religious leaders on 25 and 26 February arranged by the Committee for National Healing, Peace and Reconciliation;
- Informal consultations with women leaders arranged by the Committee for National Healing, Peace and Reconciliation.
- A three-month plan for birthing the Platform, develop relationships and working arrangements
- Launch of the Platform on 5th April. As expected, different people had different interpretations about the Platform. What stands out as expressed by people who filled in the short questionnaire are two key points:
 - a. Clear support for the idea of a Platform to bring together a unified voice and reconciliation;
 - b. Desire to participate and contribute from all sectors of South Sudan Society.

The Platform is building on this clear expressed desire from the people.

- Our representation to all political leaders is ongoing.
- We are starting consultations with key interest groups and civil society constituencies such as academia, youth women.
- We are reaching out to states and communities.
- We are supporting and encouraging collaborative actions such as the CEPO initiated walk on 9th of every month starting on 9 June 2014;
- Consultations between Dinka and Nuer pastors from all the different churches in Juba have been held three times with intention of widening the process to cover all communities in the greater Upper Nile Region. This process is ongoing.

Appeal

I encourage our Government and the SPLM/A-in-Opposition to follow through with their May 9 Agreement for the sake of the suffering people of South Sudan. I appeal to all our leaders to put aside their political differences for the sake of the innocent children and women languishing in displaced camps in the country and refugee in our neighbouring countries.

I plead with our people not to give in to divisions of any kind, whether ethnic, political or regional. We shall suffer the consequences.

I appeal to the International Community, the International Non-governmental organizations to come along and help our people at this time of great suffering. Your presence should be like a guiding star to our people.

I ask that our political leaders continue to recognize the value we bring as an independent Platform. We stand behind you and offer our prayers as you continue to search for a political solution through dialogue to the complexities you face. We ask from the people of South Sudan to speak with one voice for peace and reconciliation even as you may disagree on many other issues.

Prayer

Heavenly Father, we give you all the honour. Let your Holy Spirit guard and protect us as we strive for the peace, freedom and stability we have longed for in this land. Show us how to love one another as you have so commanded us. Unite us to each other and to yourself. Cancel all forms of tribalism, corruption, injustice, division and greed that may linger in the hearts of your children condemning us to live in darkness and confusion. Grant us your grace and blessing in abundance as we build this new nation of South Sudan for your glory in accordance with your holy will. Amen

