South Sudan became the world's youngest nation on July 9, 2011, following a referendum to be independent from Sudan. But the excitement over its independence did not last long because fighting soon erupted on December 15, 2013 over disagreement between President Salvar Kiir and his former vice-president Riek Machar. Fr. Mathew Pagan, Vice chancellor (president) of the Catholic University of South Sudan was in Washington D.C. in June 2014 for talks with various partners, donor agencies and stakeholders involved in higher institutions of learning and especially those interested in the current stalemate in his country. He is from Malakal diocese that covers the states of the Upper Nile, Jonglei and Unity. This area is by far the most affected by the conflict. While in Washington, he granted the following interview to Africa Faith & Justice Network highlighting his analysis of the situation and the possible ways out of the crisis.

I am grateful for the opportunity you have given me as a citizen of South Sudan to talk about the prevailing situation in my country. At this stage, the stalemate in the peace talks is due to the fact that the parties to the conflict have not yet reached mature positions to strike a deal. In my view, the peace talks in such an atmosphere will probably be unproductive. The parties need time to fine-tune their positions. Building trust is even more essential in the mediation strategy for any substantial outcome to come by. As a result the mediation really should press both parties to concentrate on the implementation of the Cessation of Hostilities Agreement and facilitate the access to humanitarian assistance for the displaced people. The implementation matrix agreed upon by the Committee of both parties in January 2014 in Addis-Abba should be put into practice as planned. Let Inter-Government Authority on Development (IGAD) mediators steer and press for the enforcement of the cessation of hostilities. As to the constitutional dialogue, it can come at a later stage; the urgent issue right now is to save lives.
This conflict has many faces and causes. The reality on the ground is deeply complex because of the actors along with the long years of conflict. We have both distant and immediate, internal and external causes, covering anything from security issues to the inflated number of soldiers in the armed forces, from impunity to corrupt government officers, from the inadequate system of government to unpopular austerity measures, and then finally the dismissal of Vice President Riek Machar and the attempted coup d’état on December 15, 2013 that triggered the unrest.

From the long haul to self-determination on July 9, 2011, South Sudan fought lots of liberation wars that produced the complex situation it has found itself in now. The first showdown for self determination started in 1955 and led Sudan to assume its independence from The United Kingdom in 1956. However this freedom was short-lived simply because the North (predominantly Arabs and Muslims) quickly started discriminating against the southerners (Blacks and adherents of African Traditional Religions).

As a result, a protracted North-South conflict was fought for five decades and has had an enormous toll on the lives of the Southern Sudanese. Numerous peace agreements were signed but without any significant effect; for instance, the Addis Ababa peace Agreement of 1972 that President Jaafar Numeri unceremoniously cancelled in 1983. The South again took arms against the Khartoum Government till early 2005 when the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) was reached and which paved the way for the referendum of 2011 and eventually independence. Furthermore, the fragile situation is tributary to poverty and ethnic discrimination in job opportunities, the equitable sharing of national resources, the transitional constitution that grants a wide range of powers to the president. This didn’t encourage a democratic space and the rule of law.

Another important aspect is the fact that the federal government is incompetent at creating a conducive environment for national cohesion. The prolonged years of war have damaged the inter-ethnic relationships. Many grew up and lived most of their lives in physical violence and the perpetual anxiety of a brutal death. One had to learn the secrets of survival from early childhood sometimes by applying force or creating fear as a strategy for living.

These are the concrete realities the leadership of the new nation of South Sudan had to face. It has the daunting task to put in place the whole system of government from scratch. Unfortunately, it is a huge task that SPLM/SPLA (The Sudan People’s Liberation Movement/Sudan People’s Liberation Army) was not prepared for or did not have the necessary expertise to handle. We cannot expect this former rebel movement to turn into creditable managers overnight. The expectation was beyond the capacity of SPLM.

What are the parties to the conflict? What are their positions and interests?

The conflict basically opposes two contenders, equally leaders in the SPLA movement that formed the first government of the new and independent nation of South Sudan. President Salva Kiir and his former vice Riek Machar failed to agree on their political ambitions (power and wealth). At their last SPLM convention, tensions ran high, and personal ambitions took precedence over national unity and the rule of law. Their competition birthed the current rebellion.

Unfortunately it took an ethnic outlook between the Nuer and the Dinka, with soldiers and civil servants following suite. The mutinied soldiers formed a rebellion movement called SPLM In Opposition against SPLM in Government. They demanded the resignation of President Salva Kiir and the formation of a new government led by Riek Machar.

When the conflict broke out on December 15, 2014, in Juba, the forces of the President targeted innocent Nuer in their residential areas and killed many of them. Being a Nuer was synonymous of a rebel. Similarly, Riek Machar, instead of calling for restraint, mobilized the Nuer to revenge. He called upon them to take up arms and overthrow the Dinka government in Juba who are killing the Nuer. The Nuer heeded his call, and fought back the Dinka. Many innocent Dinka perished as a result of it.
**Which states are the most affected and how is the humanitarian situation on the ground?**

*Fr Mathew*  
The *conflict-affected states* are Jonglei, Unity and Upper Nile where the displaced people in the camps are in dire need of food supply. The civil war forced many farmers out of their homes, disrupted their livelihoods. Women, children and elderly people are all stranded in the camps without proper sanitation. This year, many farmers will not be able to plant maize and this will further complicate the already precarious situation of vulnerable populations. If the parties to the conflict do not give peace a chance, then South Sudan will undoubtedly face a major humanitarian crisis. The early warning signs show that South Sudan is at the brink of a disaster and the international community must act now and very faster before the situation gets out of proportion.

**Which constructive role have your regional neighbors played in bringing together the various parties to peace talks?**

*Fr Mathew*  
Most of our regional neighbors have been supportive and part of the solution; from the onset, Ethiopia played a constructive role and continues to adjudicate the mediation process. The leaders of IGAD (Intergovernmental Authority on Development) visited Juba the very first week of the conflict to urge the government and rebels to hold talks and broker a peace agreement for the benefit of all. They mounted pressure on Salva Kiir and Riek Machar to implement the Addis-Ababa Peace Accord agreed upon in January 2014.

Countries like Uganda went further by providing military hardware and even personnel to support the Juba government. Their intervention proved very helpful in protecting Juba from falling into the hands of the “White Army”. The position of our northern neighbor (Khartoum government) hasn’t been clear and continues to take sides. The African Union did condemn in the strongest terms the current stalemate in the country and formed a committee to investigate war crimes and human rights violations.

**Which conflict management strategies have been used so far and why have they failed to broker a long term peace agreement?**

*Fr Mathew*  
This conflict brought to the fore some of the issues our country is grappling with, for instance power imbalances, the parliament, weak institutions, the rule of law and much more. When the conflict broke out, President Kiir refused to negotiate or compromise on any of the points Riek Machar demanded. But through the pressure of the IGAD, the EU and especially the United States, Kiir and Machar were compelled to give up elements of their positions in order to establish an acceptable, if not agreeable solution. The Addis-Ababa talks aimed at finding a creative solution acceptable to both parties. A final agreement was reached for the cessation of hostilities. The mediation strategy sought to bring all the parties together to face one another and voice their grievances, find a common ground and the best way forward. The failure in the implementation of the road map is attributed to the lack of trust, openness and maybe the greed of our politicians. It is very clear that both parties have no commitment to honor the compromise solutions.

**Who are the rebels of the “White Army” and Who arms them and why?**

*Fr Mathew*  
The “White Army Fighters” is a militant group formed by the Nuer people of central and eastern Greater Upper Nile as early as 1991. It is an offshoot of the schism within the Sudan People’s Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A) for the purpose of defending Nuer cattle herds from neighboring groups and fighting the Sudanese government.

They are so named because of the Nuer practice of smearing their skins with white ashes for protection against insects. They are more than twenty-five thousands. They joined the ranks of the rebel army of the former Vice President Riek Machar and burned down the towns of Bor, Bentiu and Malachal. They committed many atrocities on their way to Juba. Most of them are uneducated and easily manipulated by the political system. They acquire their guns through their own means. Some even go as far as Ethiopia to buy...
guns. They are marginalized and not in touch with the new political landscape of South Sudan. In my view, they should be part of the peace process.

**In this context, what could be the contribution of church leaders in creating a conducive environment for a true national reconciliation?**

*Fr Mathew*  
As a Church, we are still going through a process of self-examination, at the level of the bishops’ conference down to the various dioceses. It is good to know what went wrong so that the measures that will be put into place may serve the general interest of all and promote peace and reconciliation among the peoples of South Sudan. The Church played a significant role in the referendum campaign and remains an important force for good to be reckoned with. The Church will continue advocating for the implementation of the Addis-Ababa Agreement or any other forum that will support an inclusive negotiation process. We are committed to a national healing and reconciliation process at the grassroots all over the country.

**As someone involved in the higher level training, what are your dreams for the future of South Sudan and what do you expect from the American people?**

*Fr Mathew*  
The Catholic University of South Sudan wants to train future leaders by instilling in them the respect for human dignity, the values of unity, commitment and responsibility in society. This will ultimately contribute to solve our problems. We want to cultivate peace in the workplaces, nurture the values of coexistence, social cohesion and mutual acceptance.

We will integrate into our curriculum courses on Peace building and conflict management. At the relational level, we will encourage the students to build trust and confidence among themselves both in class and in extra-curricular activities. At the cultural level, we will promote cultural diversity, the dialogue of cultures and the change of attitudes. Students with proven technical skills will be promoted to lead in the public or private sector.

To the American people, we express our gratitude for their continual solidarity toward our people. Your support made a big difference in our long journey to freedom. We still need your valuable contribution to help us solve our internal conflict by pressing the two parties to implement the cessation of hostilities and humanitarian assistance Agreement. The other area where we need support and consistent expertise is in the field of education. The needs are overwhelming and more pronounced at the tertiary level.