



## **AFRICA/SUDAN - The independence of southern Sudan is at risk due to the tragedy of millions of displaced people from the north, denounces Sudanese Bishop**

Khartoum (Agenzia Fides) - "Following the euphoria of independence now they must deal with the harsh reality of the thousands and thousands of southern Sudanese who have returned to the south and who have nothing. There are no schools or hospitals or houses and even drinking water is lacking," Bishop Macram Max Gassis of El Obeid tells Fides. Southern Sudan is preparing to vote on 9 January in a referendum for independence, a result that, according to expectations, is a certainty.

"The movement to return already began some time ago," explains Bishop Gassis. "Two weeks ago I was in the County of Twic in Northern Bahr El Ghazal, where I was told by local authorities, 50,000 southern Sudanese have already returned. These people are unloaded from trucks in the middle of nowhere. They do not even have a decent bed to sleep in. There is only one distribution point for water. Mosquito nets, food and medicine are lacking."

"If one considers that just in the area of Khartoum, the capital of the united Sudan, there are about 4,000,000 southern Sudanese who may return to the south, one quickly realises that we are facing a potential humanitarian tragedy," adds the Bishop of El Obeid.

The referendum is expected by the Inclusive Peace Agreement (CPI) signed in Nairobi (Kenya) in 2005 by the central Government of Sudan and the Sudanese People's Liberation Movement (SPLM), ending a war that lasted more than 20 years.

"The outcome of the referendum seems discounted because the government in Khartoum has done nothing to make the option of maintaining the unity of Sudan in the south attractive, in an autonomous regime. The CPI had planned for a period of five years before its referendum to allow the central government to adopt a policy aimed at convincing people in the south to preserve the unitary State. In fact the opposite has occurred. It has not adopted a policy that recognizes the needs of the diverse populations that make up this Country, which is multi-confessional, but continuing instead to insist on the application of Sharia," says Bishop Gassis.

In the case of secession by the south, Bishop Gassis expresses his concern about the fate of the Church in northern Sudan. "What will become of the Church in the north, once Sudan is divided into a Christian and animist southern State, and into a largely Muslim northern State? I am afraid that the Catholics who remain, along with the Coptic Orthodox, risk being treated as "protected" under the strictest interpretation of Sharia law, and therefore risk becoming second class citizens, or worse, becoming victims of real persecution," concludes the Bishop of El Obeid. (LM) (08/01/2011)