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AFRICA/SUDAN - "Despite the tensions, a festive atmosphere is lived on the eve of independence", says the Secretary general of the Archdiocese of Juba

Juba (Fides Service) - "The spirit of the population is high, there is excitement about the event. Feverish preparations are under way to fix streets and paint the buildings", says Fr. Martin Ochaya to Fides, Secretary general of the Archdiocese of Juba, the capital of southern Sudan, which on July 9 will officially announce its independence from the rest of the country. The independence of the new state was decided by popular referendum on January 9 (see Fides 31/1/2011, 2/8/2011). "The population has high hopes for the future, because it is believed that, thanks to independence, the situation will be different", says Fr. Martin. Even the Catholic Church, along with other religious communities, participated in the preparation of the event.
"Forty days before independence – explains Fr. Martin - we launched an initiative which provides pastoral moments of prayer and initiatives to foster reconciliation. Two days ago Reconciliation Day was held. It was an ecumenical initiative with several moments of prayer, listening to testimonies and confessions".
"The Holy Father Benedict XVI - continues the Secretary general of the Archdiocese of Juba - has sent, in addition to the Apostolic Nuncio in Sudan, His Exc. Mgr. Leo Boccardi, also Cardinal John Njue, Archbishop of Nairobi as his representative for the ceremony of independence. We are therefore committed to welcoming those who come to celebrate the independence of southern Sudan with us, as the representatives of Bishops of the whole region of Eastern Africa and Catholic Relief Services. The prayers of thanksgiving and petitions for clemency in all the parishes will continue even after independence, for the entire month of July".
On the possibility that the Abyei crisis (disputed territory between northern and southern Sudan) and South Kordofan (area which is in northern Sudan, but inhabited by Nuba people who do not accept to remain under the government of Khartoum) could affect the celebrations for the 'independence of Southern Sudan, Fr. Martin explains: "There is still tension, although in Abyei ceasefire is respected and the deployment of Ethiopian peacekeepers is expected. The population, who have escaped from the area, still lives in the open. But I do not think that there is a risk of renewed fighting in the immediate future. That of South Kordofan is another story. It still remains a serious problem but the southern Sudanese do not want this crisis to negatively condition the celebrations for their independence". (L.M.) (Agenzia Fides 07/06/2011)

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