



# THE SUDD INSTITUTE

RESEARCH FOR A PEACEFUL, JUST AND PROSPEROUS SOUTH SUDAN

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## Weekly Review

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### **The Significance of US Ambassador to the United Nations, Nikki Haley's Visits to South Sudan**

*The Sudd Institute*

On October 25<sup>th</sup>, 2017, the United States Ambassador to the United Nations, Nikki Haley, visited Juba, South Sudan, as part of the first most high-profile tour of Africa by a senior US official since Donald J. Trump became President of the United States of America. The visit covered Ethiopia, South Sudan, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. The visit was highly anticipated because it is thought as offering the first opportunity for the Trump Administration to finally define Washington's foreign policy towards Africa for the days ahead. Unfortunately, the visit was marked by a little more than a plethora of sound bites, unworkable promises made by the visiting Ambassador and expectations on the part of the South Sudanese, especially those who are opposed or critical of the government.

This weekly review tries to make sense of Ambassador Haley's visit. The main questions that have since been asked by the analysts, journalists and ordinary citizens alike, have included what the visit means in terms of Juba-Washington relationship going forward, whether or not the encounter will make a difference and what that "difference" would be. On the whole, Ambassador Haley's trip to South Sudan came at a moment of desire to test whether the so-called international community still has any leverage to pressure the South Sudanese authorities for change in the country's unenviable humanitarian situation, economic crisis, and endemic political violence. It seems that those with a concern for South Sudan were waiting to see whether the country's leadership would beg for the US assistance with regards to war and peace or would remain defiant and unwilling to show signs of weakness.

On the eve of her visit to the region, Ambassador Haley had prefaced her trip with a statement about South Sudan, published by CNN, entitled "This is why the President is Sending me to Africa." In that statement, she described the civil war that erupted in South Sudan in 2013 as "one of the most horrific civil conflicts of our time. Now the promise of South Sudan's hard-fought independence is slipping away." She spoke unequivocally about the failures of the Juba regime, especially on the dire humanitarian situation, the plight of refugees in the neighboring countries and of the internally displaced persons.

She talked of human rights abuses and laid the blame for all this suffering squarely at the doorsteps of the country's leaders, especially President Salva Kiir Mayardit. The Ambassador mentioned the huge monetary contribution the United States has made to South Sudan's development and humanitarian efforts in the past decade, to the tune of \$11b, all of which she declared had not gone to the best use it was intended for, stating that South Sudan was at a crossroads and something had to be done, though she did not spell out clearly what that something might look like.

The strong language contained in some of these pre-visit statements had really raised a lot of hope for both the suffering civilians and the opposition groups, that may be the time had finally come, when the US was going to pressure the government of South Sudan into some sort of forced political transition. Some commentators had also contributed to these hopes by offering analyses that suggested perhaps this visit was going to mark the beginning of an internationally sponsored move to bring about change.<sup>1</sup> But when the visit to Juba happened and the talks were held with the country's leaders, the results were both short of the promises people had assumed the visit would provide and the Ambassador's remarks were woefully contradictory. On the promises, the Ambassador expressed heartbreak and outrage about the stories of horrific atrocities she heard during her visit to a refugee camp in Gambella, Western Ethiopia, stressing that "the time for talking had passed and now is the time for action," which some people have read to mean anything from a UN Security Council resolution to further economic sanctions to a US unilateral action against Juba. Some euphoric anti-government activists declared that it was now time for the "kleptocracy," in the words of one commentator, to beware of the fire about to descend on them from the US. But in closer examination of all that was said prior to the visit and after, nothing could be more nebulous about the US position regarding South Sudan. Any celebration about an impending US involvement in South Sudan in any manner that goes beyond the humanitarian action is pure political naivety.

On the contradictions, Ambassador Haley spoke of having delivered a straight message to President Kiir, something to the effect of the US no longer standing by and watch the President of South Sudan humiliate his people, deny aid to the victims of his war, concentrate power and resources in the hands of tribal kinsmen, etc. But at the press remarks she made following the meeting, Ms. Haley moderated her voice and spoke of how President Kiir had patiently listened to everything she said, not denying anything she had described and sounded like a man who can be persuaded to do better for his country. There was no more talk of "time for real action was now." In a sense, the ambassador had ill prepared about South Sudan's political culture, how to deal with its politicians and demonstrated such embarrassingly little knowledge of the country's history, and yet she set herself up to speak as if she knew what she was talking about. One hoped that the Ambassador would reference the ongoing peace initiatives, such as the revitalization of the 2015 pact process. Instead of being seen as drawing from a measured/sober policy

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<sup>1</sup> See Payton Knopf "Nikki Haley's visit to South Sudan can be the beginning of its civil war's end." Fox News, October 26, 2017. <http://www.foxnews.com/opinion/2017/10/25/nikki-haleys-visit-to-south-sudan-can-be-beginning-its-civil-wars-end.html>

menu, the Ambassador's foreboding remarks seem to have only been sensational. But such is to be expected, as the Ambassador's rendition, combative and ballsy as it appeared, follows that of her boss, President Trump. To this effect, startling as Trump's style of leadership is, it might be dangerous to dismiss Ambassador Haley's earlier warning.

South Sudanese themselves have reacted to the Ambassador's visit in a variety of ways, demonstrating exactly the kind of political culture we are talking about: a mix of reliance on potential foreign intervention to bring about political change, divisive sectarian politics and lack of knowledge about the grand game that is international relations. Having watched the social media platforms, listened to radio coverage, and followed online discussion groups, these reactions could be associated with two main groups of people. First are those in government who knew what the Ambassador was going to say and had decided not to engage in confrontation over her threats and rebuke. It seems they had coached one another to let the Trump official blow her horns, in the classic tradition of the current US government, and then go home, ending the story. At the end of the meeting, Nhial Deng Nhial, Presidential Advisor on Political and Foreign Affairs, made a press statement and said that the government had agreed with everything their visitor had stated and that the meeting was cordial and had many areas of mutual concerns. The second are those in the opposition to the government, who thought this visit could be the beginning of international action against Kiir's regime, but no promises of any action to rectify the situation were offered in the end, leaving the opposition groups, the IDPs in UN camps and refugees in the neighboring countries somewhat deflated. Instead of the expectation that perhaps the Trump administration was going to finally do something more concrete regarding South Sudan's stalemate, it turned out to be mere words and meaningless threats. It may well be that something will still come of this, but perhaps only a few are holding their breath.

The real question remains: what could the United States realistically do about the situation in South Sudan? It is apparent that most US analysts would recommend tougher and confrontational measures in order to beat President Kiir's government to submission. This means preventing the government from acquiring weapons through an arm embargo, restricting it from accessing financial services and confiscating any financial assets that belong to government officials. The this is of course informed by the idea that the whole war game is about greed and so cutting the financial streams might force a change of behavior. Other US analysts have simply concluded that the current political configuration in South Sudan cannot be salvaged and so it is better for the UN and the African Union to establish an international administration in the country for a given period.

These views are of course informed by frustrations and deep emotions emanating from the suffering of the ordinary citizens who bear the burden of this conflict. However, these are impractical proposals and could create more crisis than the world is trying to solve. First, it is utterly naïve to conclude that the whole affair boils down to people trying to make money. This may be true to an extent and so is grievance. In light of this, a political solution is desired. Second, a project like the arm embargo weakens the state further,

potentially leading to a complete collapse of the system, an experience Somalia is currently recovering from. Thirdly, recent experience during the negotiation of the current Peace Agreement shows that combative and antagonistic international pressure can force the parties to append their signatures on the paper, but it does not necessarily produce implementation compliance. It is therefore obvious that coercive diplomacy does not often work. Finally, attempts to establish an international administration in South Sudan is a non-starter for many South Sudanese. It is simple—South Sudanese fought to become independent for nearly six decades and they would do anything in their power to resist any attempt to reestablish a colonial administration.

What the Trump Administration could actually do in this situation is to put more diplomatic and financial resources into the revitalization of the Agreement on the Resolution of Conflict in South Sudan (ARCSS) and ensure that the parties fully implement the cessation of hostilities provision. Incentives to the parties for complying might actually go a long way in getting the cooperation needed. These incentives could be given through constructive engagement that accounts for both the fears of the parties as well as their weight of responsibility to end the crisis in the country.

What then has this visit really achieved for all concerned? 1) First, it returned the limelight to the crisis in South Sudan from other hot global issues, at least for a day, and that is a good thing. 2) It deflated the euphoria of anti-government elements who had hoped the visit would tell off Salva Kiir and company and threaten them with a forced political transition. 3) The situation in South Sudan and what actions will turn the situation around were left no clearer than before the high-profile official visited. Sadly, despite the self-congratulatory posture for “birthing” South Sudan and being the biggest donor to the relief of humanitarian crises, what the US will do to contribute to a solution of South Sudan’s crises is not evident. 4) The status quo will prevail for now. This is a visit that could have accomplished far more had the Trump administration used it to really study and understand South Sudan’s political culture, engage with South Sudanese at various levels and had abandoned the language of reprimand, in the interest of an effective diplomacy. Lastly, it seems evident from the trip that the Trump Administration has no clear policy on South Sudan and so it is difficult to discern how this visit and its implications could be sustained in the future.

In conclusion, what leverage does the US have against South Sudan government in view of suspended direct aid to the government? Does humanitarian aid count as US assistance to the government? There is a fundamental difference in the way Juba, Washington, or any other foreign capital, views the value of humanitarian aid as potential carrot to inspire action. The international donor community sees the massive humanitarian input as enough to sway the government to act in a certain way. But the government in Juba sees humanitarian contributions in two ways, either as resources going to opposition and should be shared or as something that goes to waste through all the NGO work that is not coordinated with local government. Withdrawing humanitarian aid, thus, does not seem an effective nudging model. Notably, however, a few can predict what Trump’s Washington may do to stamp South Sudan’s obstinate violence.

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**About Sudd Institute**

The Sudd Institute is an independent research organization that conducts and facilitates policy relevant research and training to inform public policy and practice, to create opportunities for discussion and debate, and to improve analytical capacity in South Sudan. The Sudd Institute's intention is to significantly improve the quality, impact, and accountability of local, national, and international policy- and decision-making in South Sudan in order to promote a more peaceful, just and prosperous society.