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South Sudan wakes up to nation building

By Katrina Manson in Juba



A man waves South Sudan's national flag as he celebrates the nation's independence in Juba, the capital

As a child soldier who used to balance his Kalashnikov on a stand to shoot it because he was too small to handle it any other way, John Paul Matick never thought he would turn out to be a member of South Sudan's fledgling civil service.

But as head of payroll in oil-producing Unity state in the remote north of South Sudan, the world's newest country, the 31-year-old now spends his days hunting out ghost workers and checking salary grades. "Now I have high authority beyond a weapon. If I find a ghost name I say 'Hallelujah'," he says.

South Sudan spent the weekend celebrating its independence from the northern Khartoum government after decades of civil war and more than 2m deaths. But it is waking up on Monday to the hard task of nation building.

The world's newest country is also one of its least developed. More than 80 per cent of the population lives in huts and just 1 per cent has a bank account. The country's national archives are housed in a roadside tent.

One of the biggest tasks confronting the new government is building a functioning government bureaucracy from scratch that can meet the high expectations of its citizens. Especially when half the civil service posts it will need to operate are yet to be filled.

"The expectations of the people are higher than what the economy can provide," says Elijah Malok, president of the Bank of Southern Sudan.

South Sudan must form its bureaucracy from a nation of warriors, trained and experienced in combat but with little background in office work, or strangers who have come home as exiles to lead the country. The nation's top politicians and civil servants are former rebels. President Salva Kiir Mayardit previously headed the army while Mr Malok's last job was as an army general.

Concerns remain that South Sudan is a failed state in the making. But ever since the signing of a 2005 peace deal the state-in-waiting has focused on little other than nation building. Donor-funded consultants from the UK, US, Kenya and beyond have helped to establish digital records and budget controls. The government was unused to managing oil revenues that make up 98 per cent of income, five times that of donor aid in 2009.

"Public service management is happening," says Charlie Goldsmith, South Sudan co-ordinator for Booz & Company, which has helped institute electronic payroll systems. The 2011 budget forecasts spending \$485m on salaries for 141,729 public servants.

Mr Kiir said he welcomed further technical assistance in his independence speech.

Such assistance has sometimes been "negative", however, when "trying to introduce systems that exceeded local capacity to manage them", according to a 2010 paper from the Overseas Development Institute. It found officials who were "fiercely resistant to the concept of budget ceilings" and that many departments overspent or submitted handwritten budgets.

Better approaches make use of the basics, sometimes drawing on colonial inheritance: The new electronic payroll is directly based on a 1923 British colonial form.

Technology also has its role. Mr Matick overcomes weak communications by sending data to the capital via a laptop with wireless internet access.

But the challenges remain fundamental.

The government has set up a statistics division that attempts to record everything from inflation to household surveys, but investors still caution against believing anyone professing an accurate statistic about the south.

The new country's borders also remain unclear. North and South Sudan have so far failed to agree over five sections of the volatile frontier and the disputed territory of Abyei, which borders Unity state. That means that Mr Matick remains unclear about just how far his remit stretches.

“The border is my problem as well. I don’t know how far I’m paying,” he says.

Still, his mission is clear, he says. “My dad [fought for South Sudan] with weapons. If I can do it with wits and pen, serve my country honestly [and] fix the payroll, there’s nothing more than that.”

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