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De-escalating Conflict, Confidence-Building and Conciliation

Juba, Southern Sudan, 30th March—1st April 2009

This consultation was facilitated by Concordis International as part of the Sudan Peace-Building Initiative financed by the European Commission, with the support of the Southern Sudan Peace Commission and the Standing Committee on Peace and Reconciliation in the Southern Sudanese Legislative Assembly. Seventeen participants attended in a personal capacity—these were invited from a number of Southern Sudanese governmental institutions mandated to contribute towards peace and security as well as from international organisations and local and international NGOs seeking to contribute to the resolution of conflicts and to peace and stability in Southern Sudan. The participants spoke under the Chatham House Rule in order to ensure a frank and open exchange of views on the potentially sensitive issues covered.

Concordis provided a series of expert presentations for participants, sharing principles and approaches relevant to the de-escalation of conflict and the establishment of sustainable peace and security. Participants recognised that the expert presentations provide a valuable resource, which can inform local strategies to de-escalate conflicts, build confidence and develop sustainable security in Southern Sudan.

Participants identified a multiplicity of causes of sustained and recurrent conflict in Southern Sudan that continue in spite of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement, and highlighted that the dynamic nature of conflict in Southern Sudan invariably means that new actors and conflicts emerge as others are settled or transformed. Participants noted a number of reasons why conflicts escalate, such as the existence of a lawless state, the destabilising activity of agents who benefit from conflict, and the mistrust and misunderstanding that can exist between different groups. Participants suggested that preventing conflicts from escalating requires dealing with a problem before it becomes worse, which depends on having a good understanding of the conflict and access to necessary information, alongside being adequately resourced and having an effective strategy for building confidence and security. Furthermore, preventing escalation requires the political will to take appropriate actions at both national and local levels.

Participants agreed that there is a need for greater and more effective co-ordination between actors seeking peace. Frustration was expressed about the nature and structure of the governmental institutions established under the CPA, and suggestions were made that the federal system should be changed to reduce the number of states, and extend power out to the county level. However, it was also noted that during the remaining years of the Interim Period, it would be more worthwhile to make the most of the existing institutions to manage current and emerging crises, and to address questions about the nature of the federal system after the 2011 referendum had determined the broader political dispensation. Further suggestions included a call to increase the resources available to the peace commission, and a call to establish a Ministry for Peace. The need to overcome obstacles to communication between different levels of government and between different institutions involved in peace-building was also highlighted.

Ultimately, participants acknowledged that much needs to be done to prevent the escalation of conflict in Southern Sudan. They agreed that effective coordination and strategic coherence between peace-building actors is necessary, if they are to be able to effectively de-escalate crises and prevent the recurrence of violence and instability. Participants also accepted that there is a need for agencies seeking to contribute to peace-building, especially those involved in policy-level processes, constantly to examine and verify whether the activities in which they are involved are of genuine significance to the people whom they aspire to serve and the conflicts that they aspire to address.

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