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South Sudanese Leaders Should Use Vatican Visit to Recommit to Justice

Renew Support for the Hybrid Court to Address Past Crimes

By Nyagoah Tut Pur

This week, South Sudan's leaders – President Salva Kiir, his former vice president Riek Machar, and other signatories to the 2018 peace agreement – will visit the Vatican for a two-day “spiritual retreat.” The visit should provide an opportunity to build trust between the previously warring parties, but it is also a chance for the leaders to publicly recommit to human rights and the long overdue, AU Hybrid Court that would try conflict-related crimes.

Since South Sudan's war broke out in 2013, parties to the conflict have been responsible for grave abuses including killings, torture, recruitment of child soldiers, rape, and other forms of sexual violence and forced displacement. Millions of lives have been devastated with immeasurable suffering.

To date, there has been no accountability for these crimes, or any progress in establishing the court which was agreed to in 2015 by all sides in the conflict. Experience has shown that failure to address past crimes fuels future abuses. This has certainly held true for South Sudan as recent government insurgency campaigns in Yei and Wau have included killings, looting, and burning of civilian property. It's critical these crimes be addressed not only for national healing, but for the future stability of South Sudan.

The leaders should use the opportunity of the Vatican meeting to make a clear, public commitment to holding those responsible for these crimes to account, recognizing this is a key component of lasting peace. They should also ensure the South Sudanese public has the unfettered right to debate these issues, which means reigning in abusive national security service from targeting critics and activists for arrest and detention. One rights activist, Peter Biar Ajak, is

currently facing trumped up charges including of ‘treason’ and ‘publication of false news prejudicial to South Sudan.’

South Sudan’s leaders have committed to form a new government by May 12. With just over a month to go, a clear statement from the Vatican meeting could reaffirm a commitment to human rights and justice by the leaders and help create an environment where South Sudanese plan for the future of their country without fear.