

December 20, 2016



SOUTH SUDAN - Christmas is coming and we all have various expectations for a 'happy time'. The world over, including in South Sudan, atheists, agnostics and many adherents to other non-Christian faiths, as well as Christians, celebrate Christmas holidays, just as here we also celebrate all the Muslim feasts. One item of which we do have an oversupply in South Sudan is public holidays! The end of Ramadan, Eid al-Fitr, may last up to three days but often it seems to be celebrated for more like a week! Christmas in South Sudan, nonetheless, is still one of the most special times but many will celebrate with very little this year.

Too many people here look very hungry and are very hungry. They are lucky if they enjoy one meal a day. They are living a year of fasting, not just a month as in Ramadan. I have learned a new cross-language gesture: putting fingers together and raising them to one's mouth indicates hunger, 'Please help me to get some food'. It is bad enough in the capital, Juba, but in country areas it is worse. One of the things that happen when lawlessness increases is that road travel becomes unsafe. Vehicles are stopped and all goods of value, including food, are stolen. The lucky ones are those who escape physical harm. So it is hard for traders to bring food in, markets and shops have little to sell, and the prices are inflated of what little there is for sale.

Industrially, the people are powerless. One report during the past week, dated December 14, stated:

A high court in Bor town in South Sudan's Jonglei State has sentenced over 30 teachers to one month imprisonment and a fine of 1,000 SSP for protesting against unpaid salaries.... For their part, several teachers criticized the decision taken by the court, claiming the ruling was influenced by the state governor and his minister of education.

The salaries of most teachers are less than 1,000 SSP (about \$12) per month.

In late May, the media reported:

Authorities in Western Lakes.... have arrested at least four health workers who reportedly demanded to be paid for their work. Salaries for most health workers have not been paid for three months..... University professors at five public universities and junior doctors at Juba Teaching Hospital in the capital Juba are also on strike over nonpayment of salaries for the last three months.

The unlucky have no work; the lucky ones have jobs. The luckier ones get paid for their work; the very lucky ones receive pay increases to compensate for the devaluation of the local currency. Our income is mostly in dollars from donor partners. So we get more local pounds (SSP) for the dollar and can pass on more pounds to our workers, without breaking our budget – provided we can access enough cash!

One parish priest mentioned to me last week that he wants to pay his teachers for Christmas but now the banks are limiting the amount one can withdraw to 5,000 SSP per day – just over \$60 per time. The limit was recently slashed from 50,000 to 5,000. I do not understand the logic. The limit for dollar withdrawals is still \$200 per day (and one is charged \$10 for each withdrawal) – a miserable sum if you run a large business. Thus, many people are making multiple trips to the bank in which the queues are longer and longer and more and more time is wasted. So local businesses are now demanding to be paid in cash, not by cheque.

Of course, most people here do not have bank accounts. They have nothing to deposit. Their major problem is that they live in fear that what little they do have will be stolen from them. I personally know three individuals who have been robbed in the past week. Their insecure tukuls make soft targets for 'lower level' criminals, those desperately stealing to survive - 'good thieves' perhaps. One Catholic school had nineteen computers stolen last week – the victim of professional thieves who thwart security precautions to profit from their trade – 'the bad thieves'.

For all of this, the Christmas liturgies will be over-crowded and celebrations will be buoyant. The people have learned to be grateful for what little they have, including the gift of life itself. South Sudanese know what it is like to be born in a stable, to endure suffering but to enjoy celebrating together.

- Br Bill