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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Leaders in Sudanese Community Gather to End Conflict in War-Torn Country

KANSAS CITY, MISSOURI – Key players in the Sudanese community have collaborated with the help of Kansas-based nonprofit Sudan Sunrise to find lasting solutions to the endemic violence that has plagued Sudan for the last fifty years. Composed predominantly of Sudanese participants, the July 2-4 Conference on Sudanese Reconciliation represented regions that have decimated one another's populations in conflicts spread across Africa's largest nation over the last half century. Participants gathered in Kansas City last week at the Heartland Presbyterian Retreat Center in Parkville for a dialogue on the historic events that have led Sudan to its current state, including the Darfurian genocide, and discussed the ideologies and political tactics that continue to support hostilities in various territories across the country.

In a momentous statement, delegates from across the US as well as Sudan vowed to acknowledge their brutal past and recognize diversity for the greater good of the Sudanese people. The diverse composition of the conference marked a crucial turn in relations between the ethnic groups of Sudan. "This is a picture of the real Sudan. The interpretation of the New Sudan we have been striving to achieve. People view Sudan in the context of North versus South, Muslim versus Christian. But the same oppression and marginalization has been happening to groups across the country from the South to the

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North, and from the East to the West. We see another looming conflict starting in Nubia. Eastern Sudan and Abyei are other time-bombs”, Angelos Agok, a counselor at Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Services and former freedom fighter for the Sudanese People’s Liberation Movement. The group also set forth a vision for the future of Sudan, urging justice, freedom, democracy, and equal rights for all Sudanese citizens. One of the conference’s major objectives was to accept the ethnic, religious, and racial differences between the various groups in Sudan and recognize that the government has used these to foster hostilities. “In our situation, if you want to bring people together, you have to start with grassroots and create a sense of unity. We must begin the reconciliation with community leaders and bring it back to the people,” stated conference participants. The conference in Kansas City presented this opportunity to leaders in reconciliation efforts both in the US and Sudan.

Presidents and chairmen of activist organizations in the US, church leaders, distinguished authors, Christians, Muslims, and members of indigenous faiths, field coordinators, Darfurians, Nubians, and Southern Sudanese were among the many seeking solutions to this fifty-year old conflict. One of the tangible efforts being made by this revolutionary organization of people is educational support provided by southern Sudanese in Darfurian refugee camps. Despite years of violence inflicted upon the southern Sudanese by Darfurians who were used by the Northern Islamic government during the first and second civil wars, the conference participants fully support forgiveness and endorse collaboration between the two groups and beyond. The Rev. Tom Prichard, Executive Director of Sudan Sunrise, asked how many of the southern Sudanese attending the conference would be willing to enter a Darfurian refugee camp as an educator. Tellingly, each individual raised his hand. The Rev. Prichard verbalized the organization’s hopes in facilitating the event: “This is the way to break the cycle of violence in Sudan. This is true heroism.”

One of the major topics of discussion throughout the conference directed attention to the pattern of violence that has been inflicted upon numerous groups in Sudan, one that is in full force in Darfur. “The conflict in Sudan is a creation of the successive governments since independence. It is a creation of those who are not concerned about the interest of

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our nation. Those who want to rule us in the name of religion and race – those who want to Islamize and arabize our nation”, said Agok. Many of the participants maintained that the methods for marginalization have persisted throughout regime changes since British colonization ended. One member explained that “the government uses the Sudanese people against other Sudanese. They pit North against South, South against North, and all against Darfur. They manipulate us so that they can maintain domination through chaos. They use religion, race, whatever it takes to breed hatred.” Each participant in the conference had a story to recount their individual encounters with this pervasive marginalization. Separated into five distinct districts, the Sudanese government required its own citizens to have visas to travel from one district to another, thus minimizing communication and any chance for solidarity amongst the various Sudanese populations. Violence was concentrated in southern Sudan (home to many conference delegates) during the first and second civil wars. Targeted during one of the government’s attempts toward Arabization in 1983, it is estimated that over 200,000 Southern Sudanese and Nuba women and children were taken into slavery, including Francis Bok, author of *Escape from Slavery: The True Story of My Ten Years in Captivity* and anti-slave activist. Taken into slavery in Darfur at age 7, Bok challenged the international community to take action against the policies that continue to tolerate slavery and the conflicts that lead to it. “For ten years, I laid awake at night, wondering who would come to free me. I saw *Hotel Rwanda* when I was seven years old. I saw people’s heads cut off. I saw people lying on the ground, as if to relax, but they were dead,” he said.

Nonetheless, the objective of the conference was not violent defeat of Omar Al-Bashir’s government. Conversely, members of the delegation focused on acknowledgement of a bloody past and progression from it. “I am not fighting anymore. We were tools of the Sudanese government in the war in the south. We never had any intention to kill anyone in Sudan, we were military personnel following instructions. But from now on, we vow not to be killing tools in any part of Sudan,” said Dr. Abdelgabar Adam, President of Darfur Human Rights Organization of the USA. Discussion centered on maintaining the cultural distinctions that make up the diverse Sudanese population,

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hinging on the cultural erasure that is the goal of genocide. “Genocide stops language. Genocide stops culture, and music, and community,” said one participant.

Despite the atrocities experienced by each member of the Sudanese community, the participants of the conference were uniformly resolute about reconciliation. “This event is priceless. Today we can unite in the common goal of encouraging the efforts of the SPLM, and encouraging the implementation of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement signed between the north and south,” said one member.

The group discussed the changing nature of violence in the Darfur region of Sudan, and its implications to the peace process. The current state of violence in Sudan includes banditry, proliferation of small warlord groups, and smaller tribes used by the government to turn against other tribes. Dialogue focused on the interdependency of the regional conflicts currently taking place. Many participants expressed their concern that if the conflict in Darfur isn’t solved, the Comprehensive Peace Agreement in the south would be in jeopardy. Breakout groups identified numerous strategies to deal with the underlying causes of violence in Sudan. Solutions outlined included an external education system separate from the government, shared sources of water using donkeys to access other villages, as well as grassroots efforts to spread the message of reconciliation and respect.

In spite of the optimism present at the conference, delegates admitted the immense task ahead of them. “We can live peacefully, but we are nowhere near our goal. I hope for this document to be something that we can maintain and use to spread the message further. Talk to your local leaders, and the people in your communities. We mustn’t sit back and wait. We have to continue on,” Bok said.

The Statement from the Conference on Sudanese Reconciliation follows in its entirety and can be viewed online at www.sudansunrise.org, along with a video reading by conference participants.

Statement from Conference on Sudanese Reconciliation July 3, 2007

We the Sudanese attending the Conference on Reconciliation held in Kansas City, Missouri, July 2-4, 2007, hereby declare our vision for the future of our beloved Sudan. We understand that we have all endured great hardships in the past and currently face great challenges with regard to the future of our country; however, we vow to no longer be used

as tools by the minority clique regimes in Khartoum to divide and rule the country. We hereby vow to recognize and put behind our grievances and differences for the greater good of a complete Sudan. We envision a just, free and democratic New Sudan where all people are equal citizens, particularly those who have been marginalized; where each Sudanese from the North to the South, and from the East to the West, will have freedom, liberty and justice in a democratic New Sudan.

Specific considerations:

- We condemn the recent killing of innocent demonstrators in Nubia and call for a halt of the construction of the Kajbar Dam.
- We condemn the continued genocide against our brothers and sisters in Darfur.
- We support and encourage the efforts of the Government of South Sudan and the SPLM, the US government, and the international community to bring together Darfurians, and to bring an end to the oppression of the people of Darfur.
- We want to be sure the Asmara peace agreement does address the basic issues of the armed struggle of the Beja people to bring enduring peace. We call on the international community to ensure inclusion of all people in the Beja region.
- We strongly encourage the full implementation of the CPA.
- We endorse education as a tool for reconciliation which may include: cultural awareness, awareness regarding the problem of the marginalized, development of the national languages, leadership training and using the influence of traditional leaders to spread awareness and encourage reconciliation.

We give special thanks to the Senior Advisor to Andrew Natsios, Dr. Sharon Morris, for her invaluable participation in our conversation and to Sudan Sunrise for hosting our conference.

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Silvestro Akara Bakhiet
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