

Growing concerns for the Diocese of Liwolo

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A remarkable feature of living in an age of tech is that world events that might otherwise have remained obscure now play out in real time on a mobile phone. So it was that on July 14th, when I had just arrived home from General Synod, the following message came to me on WhatsApp.

Dear Bishop. Good evening. Greetings from Liwolo. I just call to inform you there is imminent attack tonight of Liwolo in five fronts of Nyaigamuda, Goloko, Pure, Andejo by Ugandan troops, just ignoring colonial borders aggressively taking our land because of minerals. Pray for God to fight for us and protect the innocent civilians.

The message came from Bishop Joseph Aba, the Bishop of Liwolo in South Sudan whom I had met during the Lambeth Conference. Since that encounter the Diocese of Blackburn now has a formal link with the Diocese of Liwolo.

Joseph is the most remarkable and inspiring person I have ever met. The day after his Consecration in 2017, South Sudan crumbled into brutal civil war and his people were forced into refugee camps in northern Uganda. About two years ago he took the bold decision that it was time to return home, and he set a personal example by moving back to Liwolo and took a lead in the process of rebuilding churches and schools and restoring agriculture. Though the external circumstances of his life are unimaginably hard, he is alive with the joy of Christian living. His profound trust in the saving work of Jesus motivates everything he does and he has taught the Diocese of Blackburn so much about what it means to live out a radical trust in the Lord.

In more recent months Bishop Joseph has been expressing growing concerns about border incursions from Ugandan troops and the message that he sent on July 14th demonstrated how firmly grounded his fears have been. Lord David Alton was able to table an emergency question the day after Joseph contacted me and received the following answer from the office of the Minister for International Development and Africa:

Thank you for sharing these updates about the reports of recent clashes at the South Sudan/Uganda border. This is the latest in a series, particularly focused around Kajo Keiji. This arises from poorly demarcated colonial era borders, which Uganda and South Sudan have pledged to address in a joint committee. HMG's teams in the British Embassy Juba and the British High Commission Kampala are closely monitoring these incidents, and have engaged previously to support de-escalation.

Meanwhile, behind that clinical answer, a humanitarian crisis was breaking out in Liwolo. Bishop Joseph's next text read:

I write to share an urgent update. The community has been under severe distress throughout the night. Children, women, the sick, and the elderly have been fleeing in search of safety. Over a thousand people have reached the church compound. Our church and the surrounding institutions are now completely full. Many others could not find shelter and are sleeping under trees.

By later that same day, Joseph reported to me that 10,000 displaced persons, mostly women and children, had taken refuge in the compound of the Cathedral in Liwolo. They had a water supply, but no food, no tents, no blankets and no medical supplies. The photos and videos he sent were a chilling confirmation of these accounts.

And this is where Christian Aid comes in. In January we convened our link Bishops in the city of Nairobi, including Bishop Joseph. We met members of the Christian Aid South Sudan team and their local partners and learned about the work going on in the country. These strong community links mean essential aid is able to get to those most in need quickly and effectively. Organisations such as the South Sudanese Development and Relief Agency are able to provide cash assistance for families who have had to flee their homes with little or no belongings.

But whilst the immediate crisis is being addressed, there remain critical problems in South Sudan where government is ineffective and where cross border and internal conflict continues to mitigate against development. In desperate need, many people depend on the church and I remain seriously concerned about Bishop Joseph who is exhausting himself in his ministry to the poorest people in the planet.

The plight of South Sudan and neighbouring Sudan is largely forgotten in the global media. Other conflicts and other personalities command all the attention. Please pray for the beautiful people of South Sudan and for its precious church. I love Bishop Joseph because he has taught me the art of a joy, a joy found not in the external circumstances of one's life but from knowing Jesus as Lord. Material support seems a small thing to offer to those who bear witness to the joy of heaven itself.

Rt Rev. Philip North, Bishop of Blackburn