

The Secretary-General's Panel on the Referenda in the Sudan

In July 2010, the ruling National Congress Party (NCP) and the Sudan Peoples' Liberation Movement (SPLM) requested that the UN have a monitoring role in the referenda on independence for South Sudan and on whether the resource-rich border region of Abyei would be a part of the north or the south, as called for in the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA). Debates within the UN weighed the relative merits and constraints of mounting a monitoring role. Ultimately, a decision was made to appoint an independent panel that would help enhance the credibility of the referenda and make an assessment of the credibility of the process. The Panel was supported by field officers in all ten states in the South and field officers based in Khartoum traveling to all states in the north, including Darfur. The Panel's support offices were located in Khartoum, Juba and Abyei.

The AU also mandated special envoy Thabo Mbeki to oversee the voter registration for the January 2011 referenda. As the leader of the African Union High-level Implementation Panel, Mbeki also took the lead on discussions on Abyei with President Bashir and the SPLM leadership. Ultimately, despite Mbeki's efforts, the GoS and the South could not reach agreement on the modalities to hold a referendum in Abyei.

On 21 September 2010, the Secretary-General announced that former Tanzanian President Benjamin Mkapa would lead the UN referenda panel with former Portuguese Foreign Minister Antonio Monteiro and former Nepalese Election Commission Chairman Bhojraj Pokharel. The Panel and its staff received administrative support from UNMIS and backstopping by the Electoral Assistance Division in the Department of Political Affairs in New York.

The Panel, which visited northern and southern Sudan a total of five times,¹ was successful in carrying out its good offices role on behalf of Secretary-General to strengthen confidence in the process, and to encourage the parties and relevant authorities to resolve any significant problems or disputes as they emerged. Despite some issues regarding the referendum process, the Panel was never seriously tested by the parties and was able to carry out its mission of monitoring the process and providing a confidence-building role. The Panel concluded that the referendum on independence for the South was, as a whole, free, fair and credible - a finding echoed by other international and national observers.

1 Including three visits during the preparation and registration phases (from 10-15 October, 13-22 November, and 18-22 December 2010), and two visits during the polling, counting, aggregation, transmission and announcement of results phases (from 5-21 January and 5-7 February 2011).