

## Introduction & Background

The Liliir Conference marked an important step in the progressive people-to-peoples' movement for peace and reconciliation among southern Sudanese ethnic groups. Its achievements must be understood in the context of earlier peace initiatives conducted between various local groups, the most significant being the Wunlit conference in March 1999 between the Dinka and the Nuer, who reside on the west bank of the river Nile. Since then, other notable achievements of the growing peace process have occurred at the local level.

Under the facilitation of the New Sudan Council of Churches, the peace process is characterised by being people-led and people-focused, i.e. an encounter between the traditional and civil representatives of the participating ethnic groups independent from the political and military domain. This is perceived to be a critical element to the process: that it remains as free as possible from the interference of opportunistic political forces which, if unchecked, is capable of manipulating proceedings for self-seeking gains.

Encouraged by the significance and powerful spirit generated at Wunlit (which concentrated on the dominant Nilotic groups west of the Nile), the peace process advanced to other areas and a momentum grew among people east of the river to convene a second major conference to address their particular concerns.

The challenges facing the Liliir conference were complex given the diversity of the ethnic groups that reside in the region; the arrangement of its divided political landscape; and the intense mistrust and conflict that has arisen as a result. Throughout Sudan's civil war, the traditional hostilities between many of these groups have often been appropriated by warring parties for their political and military ends, sometimes with devastating effects for the ethnic groups concerned.

While the Liliir conference was attended by a large number of ethnic groups, it was unable to assemble a full representation from the region. This was partly because of the distance and logistics involved and partly because some participating delegates were obstructed from attending (by their military commanders). The delegates deeply regretted that 10 Gawaar chiefs, and 6 Lou chiefs (both Nuer), while transiting to the conference, were detained in Lankien and were unable to attend. Finally, the conference didn't have adequate time (and resources) to conduct the number and range of more localised encounters and reconciliations necessary to bring about a comprehensive, region-wide settlement. Once the rain season intensifies in Sudan (from the month of May), transport and logistics become prohibitive for over 4 months.

However, at the bequest of the people themselves, a significant and sufficient number of groups declared their interest to meet in the spirit of the (now 1 year old) Wunlit conference, and capture the desire of the people to talk of peace and reconciliation. These groups were the Anyuak from Akobo and Pochalla; the Bor and the Padang Dinka; the Jie and Kachipo groups from the Boma area; the Lou and some Gawaar Nuer from Ayod, Waat and Akobo; and finally the Murle from Boma.