South Sudan: ‘If you are safe, I am safe’

A brief introduction

It is too simplistic to depict the conflict in South Sudan as exclusively ethnic. Power-grabbing, corruption, poor governance and the lack of basic political freedoms are all to blame. But ethnic divisions have remained a constant feature of South Sudanese society for many decades now. It weakened their liberation struggle in the past and is a major factor in the current civil war in the country. The rich ethnic diversity of this beautiful country should be a cause for celebration, not the suffering that we see today.

‘If you are safe, I am safe’ addresses the main driver of violent civil conflict – people’s deep need for safety. Civil conflict — whatever its original political origins — is often driven by this need for safety as groups or leaders attempt to secure their safety through force directed against groups and leaders whom they feel threatened by.

The need to feel safe is a primary need – as great as the need for water, food and shelter. It includes not just physical safety, but also the safety of their economic (land), political (power), legal (rights and title) interests and of their identity (belonging and status). These ‘different’ aspects of safety often combine together, making it harder to resolve disputes or conflict.

When a group perceives that it is threatened, its response is to come together as a ‘group’ and to retreat from the group perceived as threatening it. The evidence is that once people see themselves as threatened by others it negatively affects how they think, how they feel and how they act towards those others; this, in turn, affects how those others perceive them, thus creating division between people and driving the level of threat between those people ever higher. It breaks down feelings of shared identity, reinforces the identity of sub-groups based on sect and ethnicity, it erodes trust between people and opens the way for violence too. All of this, because people are seeking to find security where it cannot be found: in and through their own sub-group.

In South Sudan, some politicians exploit ethnic divisions to further their ambitions. Some community leaders, notable figures and heads of families also play a major role it spreading divisive messages. Opposing communities believe different and conflicting facts and narratives about the past. We have competing histories of South Sudan where guilt is attributed to some communities while others are absolved from any blame. ‘If you are safe, I am safe’ provides a means by which communities could free themselves from the constraints of the past and reach out to others with the view to creating a new more peaceful future.

‘If you are safe, I am safe’ is a message-based strategy that aims to use people’s deep need for security and identity from being a cause of division and violent conflict into a driver of unity and stability. It does this first by setting out and communicating an alternative to tribal or sectarian-based security in order to win public and political support for it and at the same time to expose the inherent contradictions and failures of the sectarian or tribal approach to creating safety. In doing this it seeks to build on the continued strength of national identity, mutual interests and commonality. Second, it sets out a strategy to de-sectarianise the state and promote instead a state that defends the identity and interests of all, thus ending the alienation of important elements of the population and restoring a national identity that embraces all everyone.

‘If you are safe, I am safe’ also provides a language for peacemakers and a framework for rebuilding trust between political leaders without which a political settlement cannot be made. It is this potential for creating a new political environment that makes ‘If you are safe, I am safe’ so valuable at, local, national and regional levels.

Though implementation must be dependent upon local contexts, certain approaches probably apply to all situations. Firstly, the strategy is based on a clear concept and summed up in an easily communicated message — ‘If you are safe, I am safe’. This is meant to inform and shape the thinking of politicians, opinion-formers, civic leaders, heads of families, young and old. Second, it can be communicated by media and by word of mouth via civil society organisations and civil leaders, politicians — government and opposition — and by communities. Third, it can be communicated not just through words but through symbols and through deeds by actors at every level: neighbourhood/community, local, state and national government, and civil society. It involves everyone because it takes everyone to secure everyone.

If the SPLM, SPLM in Opposition, other political parties, the Church and civil society groups could adopt the ‘If you are safe, I am safe’ concept, it would mark a major shift towards unifying the South Sudanese again.

The concept of ‘If you are safe, I am safe’ works everywhere — and it will work in South Sudan too. When we both look after each other’s security, and threat levels fall, there is greater security for all and the space and incentives for extremism shrink whilst those for co-operation rise. This offers real hope of an end to insecurity and division and the return to stability and unity. So much else depends on this — jobs and prosperity, ending corruption, transforming public services and utilities, providing effective government and justice.

‘If you are safe, I am safe’ offers a future that is determined by mutual concern and respect, not conflict and instability. It does not require any South Sudanese to surrender his or her rights or give up struggling for what is right. On the contrary, it can help create a political atmosphere that is conducive to settling disputes effectively; after all, in conflict, the truth usually becomes distorted making the conflict, and dispute resolution, more intractable; precious young lives, scarce resources and valuable development opportunities are wasted. ‘If you are safe, I am safe’ empowers us to realise that our opponent feels the same helplessness that we feel, thus giving us a rare tool to find new ways of finding peace.

It is as simple as it is profound: ‘If you are safe, I am safe’.

*Roderick Crawford is the director of programmes at If You Are Safe I Am Safe. This piece was co-authored with Mawan Muortat.*