

Hundreds of Southern Sudanese flock to Seattle to vote on secession

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From a small storefront in Seattle's Chinatown International District, Southern Sudanese nationals are making history.

From throughout the region — from Vancouver, B.C., and Oregon — hundreds have been coming to this cramped little hall to register to vote next month on a referendum to determine the fate of their homeland. In Sudan and in eight countries worldwide, including the United States, Sudanese from the mostly Christian and animist South will decide whether to secede from the Muslim-controlled North to form their own independent country. The Southern Sudan Referendum is part of a 2005 peace agreement that ended more than two decades of civil war between the Khartoum-based government and rebel groups in the south. An estimated 2.4 million people died as a result, and hundreds of thousands sought refuge around the world, including an estimated 1,500 who came to Washington State. For this population, trust doesn't come easy, and even in this storefront, away from the specter of conflict, there are strict controls to avoid even the appearance of corruption. A Seattle police officer — his time paid for by an international overseeing group — guards the place from his car. Inside, independent observers from various national and global organizations monitor the ongoing registration process, which will run through Dec. 22. The vote, scheduled for Jan. 9 through 15, is widely expected to be for secession — separating Southern Sudan from the rule of President Omar Hassan al-Bashir. Size of Texas For Gatluak Biliew, 27, of Kent, voting for independence is an easy decision. The tough part, he said, is what comes next: Dividing up the country's resources between the North and South, as the agreement requires, is sure to bring new fighting. At age 7, Biliew said, he left his family and went into the bush, taking up arms to fight for the rights of his people. "Things aren't good," said Biliew, who came to the United States as a refugee in 2004 and works on a fishing vessel in Alaska. "We just want our independence — we want freedom to do our own thing," he said. "With independence we can have better schools, hospitals. Right now we have nothing." With a population of about 8 million, Southern Sudan is about the size of Texas, covering the bottom third of Africa's largest nation. Although it sits atop rich oil fields, the region is staggeringly poor, and Biliew acknowledges independence won't necessarily bring an easy fix. Estimates put the number of Southern Sudanese in the United States anywhere between 25,000 and 150,000 — depending on whom you ask. Another 4,000 or so in Vancouver, B.C., may choose to vote in Seattle rather than travel to Calgary, Alberta, one of two voting centers in Canada, local organizers say. The International Organization for Migration (IOM) is assisting the Southern Sudan Referendum Commission (SSRC) to conduct registration and voting in eight countries outside Sudan. At least 60 percent of the people who registered around the world must vote for the results to be valid, said Ivy Pendleton, spokeswoman for the IOM. Seattle was not one of the original U.S. registration and voting sites, and at three original locations — Washington, D.C., Phoenix and Omaha — the registration period has ended. Registration began last Monday in Seattle and in four other U.S. cities — Chicago, Dallas, Nashville and Boston — following widespread concerns that more cities needed to be added so that more people could vote. Proof of ancestry The registration process is an elaborate system designed to stave off any allegation of corruption. Only Southern Sudanese who are 18 or older may register now, and then return to the same location to vote in January. Registrants must be prepared to prove their ancestry — presenting official documents from their government, or refugee papers from the United Nations. Lacking those, they will have to prove their identity to someone known as a "community identifier" by answering a series of questions about their tribe and tribal leaders and the villages they or their relatives are from. Identifiers — "elders" from one of the 60-plus Southern Sudanese tribes — listen for accents and look for tribal marks to confirm their identities. Those unable to prove they are Southern Sudanese may appeal to a committee that then will make further inquiries — even calling people back in Sudan if they have to. Successful registrants are given a voter card to bring when they return to vote. And before they leave the registration center, they will dip their index finger in indelible ink, the proof they need when they return that they are successfully registered. "Credibility is huge," one of the workers said. For Martha Malath, the ability to vote on this referendum isn't just patriotic, but personal. The 21-year-old came to the United States as a refugee in 2006 and is now enrolled at Green River Community College, pursuing a degree in air-traffic control. Once she graduates, she said, she plans to return to what she hopes will be an independent Southern Sudan to use what she learned in the United States and become a role model to other young people. Independence, she said, would give Southern Sudan an identity. "People will now know we have a home." Lornet Turnbull: 206-464-2420 or lturnbull@seattletimes.com