

SJU grad an expert observer on world's newest country

By Michael Hemmesch

As the world watched a historic vote in January to create a new country in Sudan, a recent Saint John's University graduate helped make sense of events for international policy makers, as well as national and international news outlets, because of his expertise in the region and work for peace.

Zach Vertin, a 2005 SJU graduate from Breckenridge, Minn., currently serves as a Sudan analyst for the International Crisis Group (ICG), an independent, non-profit, non-governmental organization committed to preventing and resolving deadly conflict. ICG conducts in-country research and analysis, and advises foreign ministries and organizations, such as the United Nations, European Union and World Bank.

In his current role, Vertin examines political dynamics and peace and security issues across Sudan, including: north-south relations and the Comprehensive Peace Agreement; political, economic and security relations with the region; inter-communal violence and state response; and the process of self-determination of South Sudan. Vertin assumed this role in 2009, and splits time between Nairobi and Sudan.

Vertin, a philosophy major, was quoted in many national and international outlets in recent months as the South Sudanese people voted overwhelmingly in favor for the southern region to secede from the north to form the world's newest country.

"Thousands have turned out to vote, standing in long queues outside polling stations," said Vertin in a January interview with the *Haaretz* Newspaper in Israel. "Many are dressed in their Sunday best, some camped out the night before so as to be among the first to vote. Many mothers brought babies along to share in the historic moment."

Vertin also had published a January *Huffington Post* column where he described the challenges that lie ahead for the people



Vertin with former President Bill Clinton at a recent International Crisis Group event.

of Southern Sudan. The two main issues, in his mind, are laying the foundations for a constructive relationship with the North and the need to open political space amid a changing political environment. "This week's vote was not the finish line but the critical first step on the path to an independent and democratic state," Vertin wrote.

Vertin's interest in foreign policy and conflict prevention began during his time in college. While at SJU, he studied abroad in South Africa, focusing on post-apartheid politics.

One of Vertin's philosophy professors, Fr. Rene McGraw, OSB, recalls the intensity he brought to classroom discussions about power and violence and non-violent resistance. "Three people sat together in that class — challenging, asking probing questions, looking at the use and misuse of violence and examining the way that groups can exercise power over opposing groups."

Prior to joining ICG, Vertin spent time doing research and advocacy work with the Kenya Human Rights Commission, and

with an innovative social services agency in New York City.

From 2006-09, Vertin worked as UN analyst in ICG's advocacy office in New York. In this role, he worked on policy issues across the UN system, with a special focus on UN Security Council dynamics and African issues on the council's agenda.

Vertin quickly made a name for himself and impressed others with his writing and analytic skills. He was accepted into a number of fine graduate programs, but seized the opportunity to gain field experience, especially in a volatile area, by pursuing the position in Sudan.

As Vertin progressed in his work in Sudan, he began to be recognized as a leading voice in the understanding of the dynamics occurring in the region.

"Through the four years he was here at SJU, that philosophical underpinning and his native analytic and writing ability were sharpened through a whole series of courses," McGraw said. "In addition, he carries with him, both from his family and from Saint John's, a strong commitment to ethical action and community."