

South Sudan's President Salva Kiir on Friday appointed rebel leader Riek Machar as vice president, paving way for the formation of a unity government that seeks to end six years of war.

"I President Salva Kiir Mayardit, president of South Sudan, do hereby issue a decree for the appointment of Dr. Riek Machar Teny as first vice president of South Sudan with immediate effect," said a statement read on state television.

The presidential decree also dissolved all institutions at national and state levels," Information Minister Michael Makuei told AFP.

"This is a major step forward if indeed they form the government as they say"

Five vice-presidents

The decree was read on state television, South Sudan Broadcasting Corporation, appointing Machar as the first of five vice-presidents in a bloated cabinet to accommodate various warring parties.

But consensus has only been reached on three of the four others, including current first vice president Taban Deng Gai, a former Machar ally who defected.

James Wani Igga from Kiir's ruling party, and Rebecca Nyandeng, a former minister and Kiir ally-turned-critic are the other named vice-presidents as part of the long-awaited unity government..

The swearing-in ceremony will take place on Saturday, Makuei said. Kiir had initially said his longtime rival would be sworn-in on Friday, after they had reached the unity deal

"The vice presidents will take oath tomorrow and thereafter we will continue to process the appointments of the cabinet and appointment of the governors of the 10 states and three chief administrators of the three administrative areas," Makuei told AFP.

Meeting the deadline

Saturday is the third deadline for the formation of the unity government which was agreed upon in a September 2018 peace deal, but pushed back as crucial issues remained unresolved.

Key among these were the delineation of state boundaries, formation of a unified national army and security arrangements for Machar, who has been living in exile since 2016.

A last-minute deal on the number of states was achieved, although little progress has been made on the other issues.

The leaders have come under increased pressure in recent weeks both from regional heads of state and main donor, the United States, to form the government.

A compromise by Kiir to cut to 10 the number of states, which he increased unilaterally to 32 after independence, was seen as key in moving towards the creation of the government.

However, the opposition remains reticent about an additional three “administrative areas” pushed through by Kiir.

Machar spokesman Manawa Peter Gatkuoth said the two men would “continue to solve the problem” after the government is formed.

Dare to hope?

“This is a major step forward if indeed they form the government as they say,” Alan Boswell, a South Sudan expert with the International Crisis Group (ICG) told AFP.

“Kiir’s compromise on the issue of the state paved the way for the two sides to finally move forward, even if the parties have much more to work through in the coming weeks, months, and years.”

Machar was sacked as vice-president in 2013 and later accused of plotting a coup against Kiir, kickstarting a civil war characterized by violence, rape and UN warnings of ethnic cleansing.

A 2015 peace deal brought Machar back as vice-president and he returned to Juba with heavy security.

When that deal fell apart in July 2016, the capital was plunged into a brutal battle between their rival armies and Machar was forced to flee on foot.

The ensuing war drew in new parts of the country and other local grievances and

disputes came to the fore.

Several heads of state are expected to attend Saturday's inauguration, although no names have been confirmed.