



United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS)

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NEAR VERBATIM TRANSCRIPT

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Near Verbatim Transcript of
**Media Briefing by the Special Representative of the Secretary-General of the United Nations
and Head of the United Nations Mission in South Sudan**
Mr. David Shearer
Juba Conference Room
UNMISS Topping Site – Juba - 14 September 2017

Opening Remarks:

Good morning and thanks for joining me at this briefing.

I'd like to focus on two main issues today...the upcoming annual General Debate of the United Nations General Assembly at UN headquarters in New York which I will be attending;

I'd like to give you details about two key events taking place in New York which concern South Sudan;

I also want to update you on our Protection of Civilians or POC sites.

Early next week, I am leaving for New York to attend the General Debate of the 72nd Session of the United Nations General Assembly.

The General Assembly is made up of the 193 Member States of the UN. South Sudan, is as you, know the 193rd and newest Member State.

The General Debate is the annual get-together of the leaders of those Member States.

There are additional meetings on the sidelines, including two on South Sudan which I will attend. For your information, Radio Miraya will be reporting on these events.

The first meeting on Wednesday, the 20th, will assess the current humanitarian situation in the country.

The objective of this meeting is to draw attention to the humanitarian crisis in South Sudan and to mobilize international support to meet urgent humanitarian needs.

The UN Humanitarian Office, OCHA, has just released its latest statistics on the crisis ... which I'd like to highlight to give you a sense of the scale of the challenges faced.

The number of people displaced in South Sudan rose to nearly four million during the first half of this year. That includes 1.9 million who have been internally displaced and two million who have fled to neighbouring countries – one million in Uganda alone.

This displacement follows conflict in Jonglei and Upper Nile, and insecurity in the Equatorias.

The total number of people in real need of aid in South Sudan has risen to 7.6 million.

To reach these people – with food, health care and education support – of course, costs a lot of money.

The current humanitarian response plan is budgeted at US\$1.64 billion. So far 66% of that funding has been received.

A large number of dedicated NGO personnel, many of whom have been working in South Sudan for many years, deliver this assistance on the ground.

UNMISS, as you know, has a key role to play ... indeed it's part of our mandate ... to support the work of our humanitarian partners, when needed.

That can mean assisting with security for road convoys for the delivery of relief aid or providing a protective environment in crisis hotspots where humanitarian staff are working.

I am sure the event in New York will also highlight the importance of ending impunity for attacks against civilians and humanitarian workers.

Only last week a driver for the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) was killed when a relief convoy in opposition-held territory was attacked in Western Equatoria. That brings to 18, the number of aid workers who have been killed in South Sudan in 2017.

The second event I will attend in New York is a High-Level meeting on South Sudan which is being convened by the United Nations, with co-facilitation by the African Union and IGAD.

This meeting will consider the revitalization of the political process in South Sudan.

What is likely to come out of the meeting?

I'm expecting a solidarity of purpose from the UN, AU and IGAD – for those organizations to agree a stated commitment to reach a political settlement and support the revitalization of the peace process.

I anticipate that discussions will centre on plans for the upcoming IGAD-led High-Level Revitalization Forum.....the important role it can play to update the Peace Agreement and the steps needed to create the conditions for national elections in South Sudan.

The National Dialogue will also be discussed.

The position of the UN is that that the National Dialogue is – and should be – a South Sudan-led process. The UN has provided financial, logistical support and is bringing experts from around the world to train and advise when we have been requested.

I have made it clear to the Steering Committee we will continue our support so long as the National Dialogue continues to be transparent and genuinely inclusive – true to the principles they have stated.

So, the UN sees the National Dialogue as a positive step in the overall pursuit of peace – as well as an opportunity to inject new life into the 2015 peace agreement.

We hope it can contribute to peace, reconciliation and nation-building.

However, for the National Dialogue to enable free discussion and bring all parties together, a cessation of hostilities is required.

This is particularly the case in the coming weeks as the Steering Committee moves out to the regions of South Sudan. It is difficult to see how it can effectively do its job, if fighting is going on all around.

I'd like to say a few words about UNMISS's role in the protection of civilians.

Around 11,000 internally displaced people left UNMISS POC sites around the country since the beginning of the year. That is good news, but UNMISS still continues to shelter some 213,000 people.

We know that the vast majority of those people want to return home, so UNMISS and our humanitarian partners are always looking at opportunities to support their voluntary return.

It's important to remember that it is primarily the responsibility of the government to protect its civilians. However, there are some areas where security is improving and people are voluntarily returning home to restart their lives.

We have some good examples of effective collaboration, especially in cases where UNMISS has increased its peacekeeping patrols.

Yesterday I was in Wau.

More active patrolling by National Security and the police in Wau has substantially improved security. I spoke to the governor and security agencies of this potential cooperation to accelerate return.

We also need to ensure that humanitarian services are boosted outside the POCs and that the IDPs themselves are ready to return home.

The POC sites were originally created because there was a need, and I'm convinced that we have saved thousands, if not tens of thousands of lives, by providing that sanctuary.

It is worth restating that our mandate requires us to protect civilians; this includes not just those living in POC sites but also the almost two million displaced people around the country and those people who are still living at home.

UNMISS patrols are continuing to push further into the countryside extending the peacekeeping presence to places like Yei, where I hope to have by the end of this month a consistent and ongoing presence, and other hotspots.

I'd like to finish there and I'm happy to take questions.

Questions & Answers

MBC: My question is that last week the US Government issues sanctions against some leaders in South Sudan. Do you think this can move the peace process in South Sudan ahead?

SRSB Shearer: Thank you. The sanctions, as you said, were initiated and carried out by the United States as a Member State of the UN, it is not the UN's policy. And, really, you will have to direct your question to the US on that note, not the UN. Member States of the United Nations are obviously free to do what they like but we don't comment on the actions of Member States.

Sankei Shimbun: Do you think there is a probability for a big fighting inside Juba like last summer in future?

SRSB: I think definitely the possibility of a recurrence of what happened in July last year is very limited. The situation is completely changed from what it was one year ago.

Al-Maugif: My question is on Aburoc. I hear there is fighting around Aburoc and people are being displaced. Do you have any details on that?

SRSB: In Aburoc, the only detail I have is that we had to withdraw, unfortunately, a number of aid workers early this week because of the fighting. We are still unclear about exactly what's happening on the ground in terms of whether the fighting is ongoing or likely to carry on. What we really do hope is that both the fighting parties pull back because there are a number of people, a number of civilians, in Aburoc. Obviously, the civilians that the humanitarian organisations had been helping. I have been there and visited that area and the overwhelming number of them are women and children and older people. So, I would like the warring parties to pull back and allow those people to the safe sanctuary that they deserve and they need.

Bloomberg: We have seen of recent these talks about elections coming up. About a week ago, the Government said that they are ready to hold the elections at the end of this Transitional Period next year whether there is crisis in the country or not because so many people have had elections even in crisis. As the UN, how do you look at this? What advice could you give? Can the elections be credible with crisis still in the country?

SRSB: In June, I spoke at the Heads of State meeting for IGAD and we said that it is important that elections are held where free and fair elections can take place for them to be credible elections and for them to be able to contribute to resolving the conflict here. I think if we had premature elections

before all the procedures are put in place and before there was real peace, then that would be a problem. I think it is important that we work through the peace process, that we have good conditions on the ground to enable an election to take place that can be seen as free and fair and people can have confidence in.

Reuters: You talked about your visit to Wau yesterday and you said the security has improved in Wau. We understand yesterday that there was an ambush between Wau and Tonj and it is reported that several people have been killed in that ambush. Are you aware of that incident?

SRS: I only know the very barest of details, I am sorry. My trip yesterday was to the Wau town and the immediate environs around Wau town. And, as I said, it was really to focus on the Protection of Civilians sites there and look at ways in which we can improve the security so that people can return to their homes within Wau town. I visited for example the village of Lokoloko inside of Wau. Certainly there are people who have started to go back to that area. It is only two or three kilometres away from the PoC. Many people are going there during the day time and then coming back to the PoC at night. The focus of our visit was really to see how we could improve the security further so that people feel confident enough to stay out at night, return to their cultivation and start leading normal lives as well. That was really the focus of what we were trying to do. We really would like to make Wau, as much as we can learn from what's happening there, and make it an example that we can use in other parts of the country where we have Protection of Civilians sites.

Juba Monitor: You said this year about 11,000 civilians from the PoCs have gone back to their homes. I want to know from which PoCs specifically. Why have they decided to go back? Is it improvement in the security or that conditions in the PoC sites are terrible for them ... what are the reasons?

SRS: The areas where they have gone back is in Wau – that's about 6,000 have gone back in Wau. A number have left Malakal PoC and the numbers have gone down as well. There have been around 20,000 people who have left Bentiu but, unfortunately, a number of people have come into Bentiu as well from other places. So there are two things happening here. There is a net decrease but there are people leaving and others coming in. What we are trying to do is to be more consistent so that people are leaving rather than other people are coming in.

The second part of your question, "why", is the important part. In nearly all cases, it has been an increase in security that has been the driver which has allowed people to move out and back to their homes. There is no doubt people are there for protection more than anything else. Secondly, I think it has coincided to some degree with the planting season. People have wanted to get back to their homes in order to be able to begin cultivating and planting, so that's been a driver as well.

I think, and let's not play around here, PoCs are not a nice place to live in quite frankly. I have not met a person in a PoC that does not want to go back to their homes. Everybody would like to go back. While we provide the basic subsistent services in the PoC, there is nothing like being at home and being able to live in safety in your own home.

VoA: I have two questions. One is on the humanitarian situation. You did say that insecurity in the Equatorias is still ongoing. I am just wondering how is the situation in the Upper Nile region. You did say that earlier this week some of the aid workers are being relocated from Aburoc. How many are they? Is the situation worrying?

The last question is on the Regional Protection Force (RPF). You did not mention this time round anything about the RPF. When are we expecting the 4,000 men and women in Juba and how many have arrived so far?

SRS: On your first point, yes there is insecurity, as you said, in the Upper Nile and, as we talked about before, in Aburoc. There have been clashes there in the last few days. Around about 30 humanitarian workers have been withdrawn and were flown out on Monday.

Down in the Equatorias, we are still seeing ongoing fighting. Unfortunately, most often that affects civilians. The ICRC driver that was killed a few days ago was another tragedy. It happened in opposition-held territory and what I understand is that the ICRC will suspend its operations there for the time being. So the ongoing violence there has continued.

That is a real concern to us. Where there is violence, there is displacement and where there is displacement, people require humanitarian assistance because they get separated from their animals, their crops and all the things they need in order to survive on by themselves.

On the RPF, the current numbers are approximately 650 in the country. They consist of the Rwandan Company that came in about six weeks ago, the Nepalese Company and a Bangladeshi Engineering Company. They will be joined eventually by an Ethiopian Advance Company which is coming sometime in October, and then the balance of the Rwandan Battalion will arrive and then following that, the balance of the Ethiopian Battalion. Some of the other components are a bit further we're a little less sure about when they might come.

What the Bangladeshis have been doing in particular over the last few weeks, I will as well just highlight, that it is an engineering company as I said, they have just conducted a survey of the Juba-Yei road. There are a number of problems on that road including a bridge that has broken and they are looking at ways they can improve that road. The Rwandan Company has conducted a patrol down to Nimule. We are increasing the number of UNMISS patrols between Nimule and Juba so that transport, trucks and buses can move more safely along that road. As I said, as we have more forces, we are able to project out more. So more patrols on the Nimule-Juba road, an increase in number on the Juba-Bor road, an increase in number of patrols and movement and including improvement of the road between Juba and Yei and, as I said before, a pretty much permanent presence in Yei where there is issues of conflict as you asked in your first question.

So they have not been sitting around doing nothing but have actually been very busy. And the other thing the Bangladeshi Company will be doing over the next few days is to improve the roads in and around Juba which have become very bad over the rainy season and improve and develop the site that has been allocated for the RPF which is south of the UN House. That is some of the progress to date.

Eye Radio: I just have a follow-up question on the RPF. You said next month the Ethiopian Battalion will arrive. How many are expected to arrive?

Secondly, a follow-up question on Wau. You said the UN, together with the state government in Wau, is working on the modalities to relocate 40,000 IDPs back to their homes. Can you give us more details on that?

SRSG: What normally happens with the way the RPF or any of the battalions that are here work is that a small group that comes in first to look at the situation on the ground, then a company comes in which is one-quarter or one-third of the strength of the battalion, and then the battalion follows. Right now, we are in the situation of having a company of the Rwandans that is here, a company of Ethiopians will come in to sort of set up the bases, and then the remainder of the battalion, probably three-quarters of the troops, come up after that. That is how it works.

On Wau, to be clear, the people in the PoCs was about 40,000 and it dropped down to about 33,000 now. Nobody is pushing them out ... they will leave voluntarily. I think the conditions need to be in place for them to feel that it is safe and it is important for them to feel that.

As I said, both the National Security and the Police have made quite big efforts to improve the security on the ground in Wau which I congratulate them on. It is not perfect by any means but it is much better than when I visited a few months ago. What we have talked about with the Governor is our patrols joining or patrolling in the same places with the local forces there like the National Security to provide additional confidence for people to come back. Again, it is not like pushing or anything like that but simply being able to start to create the conditions. And when we have more people in a community – there is a feeling of greater safety in numbers – and I think that will attract

other people to come out as well and we can get a greater degree of normality in place. So it's a combination of the security being provided by Government forces, security from UNMISS, helped by humanitarians providing services outside the PoCs, helped by the IDPs themselves being in discussions as well so they are not just at the end of the line but they are actually involved in that as well.

I think if we can get those four parties working together, then we have got a very good possibility of encouraging people to go home.

VoA: Just a follow up on the situation in Aburoc. Any idea like how many civilians the aid workers have been serving there and what kind of basic challenges have the aid workers been handling there? The thirty aid workers you did say being relocated, do they belong to UNMISS or to different organisations?

SRSG: I do not have the exact numbers of how many people remained in Aburoc during the rainy season. The last report I had was around about 11,000. It may have gone down slightly since then.

It started in May at around nearly 30,000. Some people have gone back to homes and some people have gone to Sudan. The numbers have gone down.

Effectively what they were providing was food aid through food drops, some medical support, particularly the lifesaving interventions of organisations like MSF who, I think because of their presence, averted many people from contracting cholera and am sure saved many, many lives.

The people who were pulled out, my understanding is they were largely international NGOs. Not exclusively, but they were largely international staff who were there on the ground. There were no UNMISS people there on the ground. After we initially went in to Aburoc to provide a sort of a secure environment, UN agencies came in after that. Now for a couple of months we have pulled out. We have been visiting from time to time but we have not had a permanent presence there.

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