

NEAR VERBATIM TRANSCRIPT

MEDIA BRIEFING BY THE SPECIAL REPRESENTATIVE OF THE SECRETARY-GENERAL AND HEAD OF THE UNITED NATIONS MISSION IN SOUTH SUDAN, MR. DAVID SHEARER

Wednesday, 02 October 2019

Last week, I briefed the Security Council about the changes that we are seeing as a result of the signing of the peace agreement. I pointed out that the ceasefire has largely continued to hold. And thanks to that relative calm, nearly 600,000 displaced people have returned home in the past year.

Humanitarian access has improved. Food production has increased as people begin planting again.

Government and Opposition members are working closely together here in Juba. And there has been particularly strong momentum in peacebuilding at the grassroots level with more than 130 peace meetings held across the country.

Peace is still fragile, though. Critical issues of unifying armed forces and decisions about states and boundaries still need to be resolved.

UNMISS is providing technical assistance, including contracting an experienced retired general from Ethiopia to help parties determine the country's future security policy. And we continue to host many peace-building meetings around the country.

The statements of Security Council members – and from private discussions I held – showed a real level of consensus on South Sudan. Their message was very clear. South Sudan has the support of the international community. But tangible results are needed and needed now. Members spoke strongly about the need for the parties to fulfil their commitment to move to a transitional government on 12 November.

We know there are complex issues that may be outstanding. But there is no reason that these issues cannot be taken up by a transitional government meeting as a unified body of opposition and government in the coming six weeks.

It's also important, members noted, that the recent face-to-face meeting between President Salva Kiir and Dr. Riek Machar is repeated and becomes a regular feature.

The Security Council signalled its strong desire for the momentum of the peace process to be maintained. So much so, that they are travelling as a group to South Sudan towards the end of this month to see the situation first-hand and to put their weight behind the political process.

We look forward to supporting their trip.

On the issue of the protection of civilians, UNMISS drafted a report together with the humanitarian community here about the future of POC sites that the Secretary General submitted to the Security Council.

It is a complex issue. These sites were set up as a last resort to physically protect people in immediate fear for their lives.

In the past months, the security environment has improved. And that has motivated people to go home and rebuild their lives. About 20,000 have voluntarily left POC sites since the peace agreement was signed.

Many left of their own accord while others have asked for assistance from humanitarian agencies and UNMISS.

They tell us of their concerns of going home.

- Uncertainty about whether the peace process will continue.
- Insecurity in home areas, including criminality and intercommunal violence.
- And a lack of basic services in communities.

Ultimately it is the primary responsibility of the South Sudanese Government to establish the conditions needed for displaced families to return safely and live with dignity.

In particular, the government needs to do more to find land for people who want to leave POC sites.

Humanitarians have increased efforts to establish much-needed services such as water and education in places people are returning to, so they can begin to sustain themselves.

UNMISS will continue to physically protect people in our POC sites until they feel ready to leave. But we will also be stepping up the deployment of peacekeepers to remote communities for longer periods of time to provide a more protective presence for those people returning.

It means our peacekeepers being more mobile and robust, instead of keeping large numbers of troops on static duties around POC sites.

The change in approach will depend very much on the continued commitment of the parties to implement the peace agreement.

But we should remember that, if there is durable peace with a transitional government established, the need for POC sites will no longer exist.

UNMISS, as always, will be working alongside them and the people to help secure that peace.

Q & As

Q: Thank you for giving me this opportunity.

You did say that the peace is still fragile though because of the critical issues to do with unifying the armed forces and decisions have to be taken about the states and boundaries that are still to be resolved by the parties. What is the position of the United Nations, if you could narrow it to UNMISS, on the November deadline, given six weeks remain for the parties to form a unity government? And the president says that with or without the opposition parties, the unity government will be formed. Do you think that with the outstanding issues yet unresolved, it is appropriate to form the government?

SRSB Shearer: I think that we take the view very much that's been voiced by IGAD which is that the 12th of November should stand and that there should be no more extensions and we should be able to move on. And, as I mentioned here, there is a lot of work that needs to be completed by the pre-transitional period but there is no reason that a transitional government can not take up that unfinished business and continue it on. I think it is very important that we maintain the momentum of the peace process.

So, we are of the view that it would be best if we were able to form a transitional government on the 12th of November, that the opposition comes into that transitional government and that

the progress is continued within a transitional government where everybody is sitting around the table and is able to move that on.

Q: The face-to-face meeting between the leaders President Salva Kiir and Dr. Riek Machar was held here in Juba and the outcome of this meeting remains unclear to every citizen of South Sudan. They are asking that the leaders come out with clear detail on what this meeting was about. The issues discussed were not clear and the people want clear details about this issue.

The president has also said that the [unity] government will be formed even if Dr. Riek Machar will not be a part of the government. If this deadline is postponed, what is the position of UNMISS on this issue.

Also, on the returns from the Protection of Civilians sites, we don't see huge numbers of returns from these PoCs because the people say they feel insecure because they say the two leaders continue fighting as fighting is still reported in other parts of South Sudan. Does this then mean real peace to the people of South Sudan? Thank you.

SRSB Shearer: Just on your first point, I think that the important thing about the face-to-face meeting that happened three weeks ago now was that it was a clear sign the two leaders were willing to come together and willing to work together in peace. You can talk about the details that came out of that but that symbol of them coming together – and I was in one of the meetings where the two of them were present - and I can say that the way, the approach between the two of them was very gracious and very accommodating. The president said some very positive things about Riek Machar and Riek Machar came up to him and shook his hand very warmly, and I understand that, even after that, they went off and had a couple of hours of private meetings between themselves. So, I think, overall, that the dynamics around that meeting were very good.

Secondly, I think there was a pretty clear feeling that the transitional government, if at all possible, should be formed on the 12th of November. And I understand that Riek Machar talked about leaving his Secretary-General of the SPLM-IO here in Juba to start working towards making that possible.

So, overall, I felt that the meeting was a very positive one ... but it was the first meeting. The thing that I am saying here is that it shouldn't just be one but should be ongoing meetings. Obviously ongoing meetings that would lead to the return of Dr Riek Machar back into Juba to form the transitional government and to be part of that transitional government.

On your point about people returning, yes, of course, people are reticent. They have gone through a tough time in the past, they are weary about going back to their homes when the peace agreement is not yet fully realised.

But, on the other hand, we can say that nearly 600,000 people have gone back to their homes, we have lost 10 percent of the population of the PoCs just in the last few months, and the more we can provide momentum in the peace process, the more that the peace process can be seen to be successful – and that includes the face-to-face meetings – then the more people, I think, will start to move back.

The important thing that we have to do as humanitarians and the international community is to provide some of the services for people returning. I have spoken to people inside PoC camps who talk about the fact that children are in school and if they went back to the villages there

are no schools for them to go to. And that is an important part of their decision-making to return. So, we have to do that.

Secondly, as I said in my opening remarks, we are looking at UNMISS and our peacekeepers to be more mobile and to be out in those areas where people are going to be returning to in order to provide that extra confidence so that people can leave PoC sites and go back to where they came from.

Q: I would like to request if you can give us more detail regarding the visit of the United Nations Security Council. Thank you.

SRSG Shearer: As I mentioned to you, I briefed the United Nations Security Council and then we had a briefing in a closed session. They relayed to me that they would like to come to South Sudan at the end of the month. I understand that there has been a news report of them coming on the 25th of October. From my understanding, that is around the time that they wanted to be here. I said to them that it was a very important time because it is two and a half weeks before the 12th of November. I think it would be excellent if both President Salva Kiir and Dr Riek Machar were here when they came so that both of them could meet with the Council and the Council could relay the same message to both of them here. I think that would present a very good front to the Council as well.

The visit is very much what they want to achieve and so they have sent us some requests of things they would like to do while they are here and, obviously, meeting with those two people is top on their list and we will work to make sure that the visit goes as smoothly as possible.

So, we are handling some of the logistics in terms of their request of things they would like to do when they come here.

Q: You mentioned that the international community is still ready to support South Sudan. Yet the parties have expressed lack of money, support from the international community. That they could not move ahead now due to lack of financial support. What support have you mentioned in the context of the implementation of the peace agreement financially to make sure that the cantonment sites are in place within this limited time.

You also talked about the number of states which my colleague has mentioned. Do you think it is the best way for South Sudan to form the government of national unity in November before they decide on the number of states? Thank you.

SRSG Shearer: On the support to cantonments, this is an issue for donor countries and not for the UN. We don't have resources given to us to provide support to the cantonments. What we have done, as I mentioned to you, is work with the government and the opposition on looking at ways in which the security forces will be amalgamated and what the future will be going forward. R-JMEC and CTSAMVM are doing some more hands-on support; we are providing more of a policy support. The resources for that, as I said, is very much up to the donor countries concerned. I know that certainly the African Union, Egypt, China and one or two other countries have provided direct support of resources in-kind, mainly tents and food etc. but you'd have to talk to them about their reasons for that support.

Just on the number of states, I think this is an important point that needs to be resolved but it doesn't need to wait for the transitional government to be formed. It can be done during the time of the transitional government. We don't have to hold back the 12th of November for that to be worked out. This is something that may even be better within a transitional, unified

government rather than the current situation. It is certainly a critical issue that needs to be resolved but it is not necessary to delay the transitional government for that to be worked out.

Q: How about the process of unifying the armed forces, because this is also seen as very critical before the unity government is formed? Are you also suggesting that this should be done during the transitional period or before?

In this address, you have not spoken about the holdout groups. UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres was cited as saying that the holdout groups, including Thomas Cirillo, are not party to this peace process. How do you make your own assessment since these holdout groups are not part of the peace process? Don't you think it would also have a negative impact in implementing the peace agreement?

SRSB Shearer: I think that the unification of forces is an ongoing process. It is going to take some time for that to happen. If you look at other peace agreements across the world that have occurred, it has taken often years for forces to be properly unified and brought into one army. While we are behind in terms of the programme that was envisaged when the peace agreement was signed a year ago about where we should be now, people were hoping that we would be more advanced than we are right now – and I think that is a fair criticism of what's happened – I don't think that it is necessary to continually delay the transitional government until certain progress has been made. I think it is very important that the momentum of the peace agreement continues; I think it is very important that we have a transitional government on the 12th of November, that there is no slowdown in the unification of forces process, the cantonment and the reorganisation of forces, likewise with the issue of resolving the states and boundaries issue. That can all continue in the transitional period – it doesn't need to be delayed – but we need to make sure that the momentum continues.

On your second point with regard to the non-signatories to the peace agreement. I think there is enough collective will to make sure that the peace agreement goes forward. They are a problem to the implementation, obviously – there has been fighting between NAS and both the government and IO forces in the south of the country and that has displaced people and is a worry to us. It hasn't threatened the peace agreement but nevertheless for the people who were affected by it in that area, it is a real problem. Likewise, with some of the fighting that occurred a couple of weeks ago in Bahr el Ghazal.

I would say it is better for the non-signatories to come into the process and have a part to play in the process than staying outside and being involved in violence. Violence can only, and in this country in particular, affect civilians. And the civilians bear the brunt of any violence. It would be better for them to be part of the process and to be moving forward together going into the transitional period.

Q: I would like to just add on what my colleagues have raised and particularly I would like to know what level of optimism does UNMISS have that the parties to the revitalised peace agreement are going to form a transitional government as scheduled?

Secondly, you talked of UNMISS' plan to hire a retired general from Ethiopia to help parities determine the country's security policy. Will this be before or after the unity government? How will his efforts or experiences add to the security arrangements that the country is embarking on?

SRSB Shearer: On your question about optimism, I am an optimist, I have to be, and I think everybody has to be.

I have to say that I have been the SRSB here for two and a half years. I have seen more progress in the past one year in terms of development and improvements on the ground than we have seen for the last three or four years before that. I have been talking to people who have been here longer and, obviously, talking to a lot of my South Sudanese colleagues. I think there is room for optimism. But it is going to depend on political will. Ultimately it is always going to depend on the willingness of the parties to compromise and the willingness of parties to be able to sit down and work through the peace agreement and form a government and, after the government – remember what the transitional government is here for, which is to provide a time for the holding of elections and it is important that we don't forget that and we keep in mind that elections are coming and it is the opportunity for leaders to be able to be voted in by South Sudanese into their positions rather than being appointed. Just on that, an area that the UN is looking at in terms of doing some very preliminary work to prepare for elections in three years' time because it is not a very long time when we have got to think about what needs to take place.

So, I am optimistic. I am optimistic because when I go out around the country, I talk to so many people who say enough fighting; we have to move forward. And if just some of that ... some of that enthusiasm for peace that I see in *tukuls* and under trees, wherever I meet and have these peace meetings, if some of that comes to Juba, then I believe that peace is around the corner.

So, I am optimistic. And I will continue to be optimistic and that is the message, largely, that I delivered to the Security Council last week.

On the issue of this General that we have brought in, the General is very experienced and has been doing this sort of work about security sector reform both in his own country and around the world and he has got lots of experience on that.

His job is very much to think about "Okay we've got cantonment, but after cantonment what happens? How big will the security forces be? Whereabouts are they going to be deployed? What sort of forces are they going to be?" ... all the bigger questions that we think will help the overall unification of forces. We are not trying to impose any solutions, it is very much trying to work with the government and IO on a way forward.

What we often find in this situation is that many of the same issues that are coming up in South Sudan have been experienced by other countries right across the world both in Africa and beyond and, part of our job as the UN, is to look at some of these other areas and, if there is expertise and there is good practice that's been done elsewhere and it has worked and is useful, then for us it is important that we bring some of that expertise in here so that we are not constantly reinventing the wheel but are using the experience from things that have happened in other places.

Q: *Let me just touch on the issue of cantonment. The IO are complaining that, according to the agreement, the forces of the government and the opposition must come together in the cantonment areas, but government forces do not want to be part of that cantonment and are yet to go to the cantonment sites. What is your take about that?*

SRSB Shearer: There are 25 cantonment sites for IO and ten for the government. For the large part, the government cantonment are their barracks. So, they would pull into barracks and the IO have gone into cantonments.

The cantonment sites are variable in terms of the numbers that have gone there and the support and the resources that they have received. In some places, they have had a lot of resources, there have been registration forms sent to these places so that they can register. In other places, it is less organised and less well-equipped. And there is an issue if you have several hundred armed forces in a cantonment site that doesn't have food, for example, the obvious thing that is going to happen is that they are going to go to the other villages surrounding them and ask for food, demand food. So there is a protection issue that we are concerned about if these cantonment sites don't get the resources that they need.

To be fair on the government and others who are working on this, it has been difficult in the rainy season. It is not easy to move food etc. around when the roads are closed. We have provided a limited amount of support on a case by case basis where there has been a real problem. But on the large part, the government using aircraft, the river and trucking materials is working in many places but there are still places where the IO complaints are well-founded that the supplies that they were promised haven't turned up.

Q: This has to do with UNMISS and PoC affairs. Leaders of the communities living in the PoC have said that some of them were arrested and detained for hours and they are saying that this has not been fair to them. We don't understand the genesis of this problem so maybe you can highlight on what has happened exactly.

SRSB Shearer: Just to be clear about the PoC sites. People who are living within the PoC sites are under our protection. If people go out of the PoC sites and commit a crime, we are obliged legally and morally – if the people then come back into the PoC site and expect us to protect them – we will arrest them and hand them over to the authorities. That is how it is explained to everybody and we will continue to do that. The PoC site will not be and will never be a place where criminals or alleged criminals can hide. If anybody commits a crime and then goes into the PoC, we will go in and arrest them. We will hand them over to the authorities, to the South Sudanese police, we will follow their progress through the legal system and it is only right that we do that.

In the case of what happened recently, without going into the long details about it, two people committed a crime, they came into the PoC. We asked them to be handed over to us. Instead they were helped to escape, and we arrested the people who helped them to escape. Our feeling very much is if you are aiding and abetting criminal acts and criminals, then you are committing a crime yourself. That would be the process that we would follow, and we would be hard-line on that. We would never tolerate the PoCs as being a place where criminal activity can occur and where people who committed crime can find refuge. They will find refuge nowhere in a PoC. And if anybody tries to support them, as far as we are concerned, they commit a crime as well and we will arrest them too and likewise we will hand them over to police.

Anybody we hand over, I should say, we work very closely with the police and we will monitor their progress through the justice system and make sure that they get a fair trial, etc. etc. but we won't tolerate criminal activity in the PoC.

Thank you everybody.

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