



United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS)

Media & Spokesperson Unit
Communications & Public Information Office

PRESS RELEASE

8 July 2014

SRSJ Johnson urges political leaders of South Sudan to place interests of nation above theirs

In her final action as the Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General for South Sudan, Hilde F. Johnson delivered the following remarks at a press encounter held in Juba International Airport this afternoon.

(text begins)

This is my last day as Special Representative of the UN Secretary General to South Sudan. I have today completed 3 years as SRSJ, and have come to the end of my period.

UNMISS has also received a totally different mandate from the Security Council than the one I was appointed to implement. With the new mandate, it is natural that I pass the torch to a new head of mission.

And it is only when you have weathered the storm, and you are in somewhat calmer waters, that a captain can dock and hand over to someone else. That is the case with me now.

This would have been a fantastic opportunity to talk about the achievements of the past three years, and not least our efforts during the past 7 months, saving thousands of lives and stemming the killings, a cycle of violence that we know could have had untold consequences. This is a major achievement.

But I will not do that.

Rather, I will use this opportunity to do something more important: to give a few messages to the people of South Sudan and to the leaders of this country and the ruling party, the SPLM.

I will talk about the need to save South Sudan from fighting. And more importantly, to save South Sudan from failing.

To the people of South Sudan I want to say:

You didn't deserve this crisis. The losses it has brought upon you on all fronts is heartbreaking. You have suffered through decades of civil war. When the Comprehensive Peace Agreement was signed, you thought peace was within reach. When the referendum and independence came, you were sure the war was over. Finally, at last, the suffering and the nightmares had come to an end.

And then, after two and a half years of independence, what started as a political crisis, took a violent turn, and resulted in a cycle of ethnic killings. Never before had you, or any of us, seen such

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killings and atrocities happen here, committed by South Sudanese against South Sudanese. Never before had we seen the cities of Bor, Malakal and Bentiu virtually destroyed by fighting, and for the latter two – changing hands 12 times. Thousands and thousands have been killed.

Never before have we seen you, South Sudanese citizens, be displaced with such speed and on such a scale in just a few days and weeks. Now, 1,5 million of you have fled your homes. Hundreds of thousands of these are refugees, in Kakuma and across the Ethiopian border, and even more shocking, in Sudan. Citizens of newly independent South Sudan fleeing for safety to Khartoum. Who would have ever thought this be possible – after independence?

And now, we are at risk of seeing the worst famine in the country's history. And it is not because the rains did not come. It is because of a manmade disaster. It is because of a manmade conflict. And if it comes, it will be a manmade famine.

And those who suffer the most now are you – the people, the women and children, the vulnerable; those on the move, in fear and despair; those of you who lost everything, those who lost their loved ones, those separated from their parents, those wading in mud in UNMISS bases, the millions who are hungry, and all those who are angry - feeling betrayed by your leaders.

But the responsibility does not rest with one leader or with one tribe or community. The whole leadership of the SPLM, whether in Government, in the bush, in Addis or Nairobi, they all have a collective responsibility for what happened and for what you are going through. They and only they can stop this senseless conflict and the violence against innocent civilians.

So let me now move to the leadership of the SPLM and SPLM in Opposition, to the leadership team and to all members of the party's Political Bureau.

I have known almost all of you for a very long time. From friends we hear the truth, we hear good things and bad things. But we usually get honest advice. As I now leave the country, I want to give you mine:

To the leadership of the SPLM, whichever faction you belong to:

You are all responsible for this crisis, collectively. What happened on December 15 and onwards could have been prevented. What preceded the crisis was very risky, and – as some of us warned that it could lead to ethnic violence.

But none of us predicted the explosion of violence, the 'hurricane' – the scale, the scope and the speed of killings. None of us predicted it would be that devastating. And all of this because of a crisis of leadership within the ruling party, the SPLM.

After decades of sacrifice and suffering you got your freedom, you got self determination and independence. And then you turn on each other, and wasted all the goodwill and opportunities you enjoyed.

My friends, my brothers, my sisters, why did you do it and why do you continue now? The ongoing conflict can be stopped by you - right at this moment.

The country has now been set back decades. The terrible destruction of towns and property is one thing, but the divisions and wounds are deeper than ever. The gulf between communities is abysmal, and the animosity is worse than we have ever seen at any point in South Sudanese history. The social fabric is being torn apart. The nation building project which was extremely hard from the very beginning, will now be more difficult than ever. It has been set back decades.

For us who have shared the struggle of the South Sudanese for peace and justice for all, this is very painful to witness.

As the people of South Sudan prepare to celebrate the third anniversary of their nation's independence tomorrow, they see a country that is now at grave risk, not only of fighting, but also of failing.

The leadership, across all factions of the SPLM, whether they are inside or out of government, released from detention or in the bush, are responsible for this. The achievement of decades of struggle can be lost.

Even if the fighting is stopped, it is the terms of the peace agreement that will decide whether South Sudan in fact will be saved, or whether it will slide down the slippery slope and fail.

Because the problems did not start on December 15. South Sudan has been afflicted by three diseases since 2005: (i) the cancer of corruption – with the oil becoming a curse rather than a blessing, (ii) rule by the gun and not by the law, with impunity among security forces and services, and (iii) rule by a self-serving elite, - for the elite, and much less for the people.

And these diseases have been contagious throughout the interim period and after independence. These diseases have not only affected the population negatively, they also have the capacity to make South Sudan so sick that the country can fail. Corruption, for one, is like cancer. It spreads quickly and can reach every cell in the body. And then it becomes extremely difficult to stop.

All three diseases have to be contained if South Sudan is to be saved; if South Sudan is to be the country the freedom fighters dreamt of and fought for; if South Sudan is to be the country for the people – the many, and not only the few. This is also necessary to avoid South Sudan from becoming a failed state. These crippling diseases must be cured.

The IGAD peace talks should therefore not only be about finding ways to stop the fighting. This is about more fundamental issues. South Sudan as a country is at stake. That is also why South Sudanese from all walks of life should have a say in the peace process.

The peace negotiations should not be about finding band aid-solutions that allow things to continue in the same way, with only minor changes. It is most tempting, of course, because the cost is less politically and implies less sacrifice. It is less painful in the short term. But it is more costly and it will cause more pain in the long run. Why? Because band-aid solutions don't cure any diseases; sometimes they make things worse, much worse.

As a friend of all South Sudanese, my message is this:

South Sudan today needs much more than band aid solutions. South Sudan needs a cure for the diseases of the past. South Sudan needs fundamental reforms and a complete overhaul of key state institutions. This can only happen through real leadership and changes in critical areas, in security sector reform, in financial management and anti-corruption. South Sudan needs transparency, and reforms in the justice sector. And not least, South Sudan needs accountability and an end to impunity for the atrocities and violations committed during this crisis.

Crises also come with opportunity. For South Sudan, this crisis is an opportunity to cure the country and its system from the contagion of the past, to right the wrongs and to set things straight. From this crisis, South Sudan can make a fresh start.

In my various conversations with Government and armed opposition leaders, they all agree that the country desperately needs reform and that very serious changes have to take place. They should now make it happen, and turn their words into deeds.

By August 10, the parties have promised to agree on the formation of a transitional government of national unity. I hope they will agree to put a team in charge that can deliver on such a reform agenda. This is not up to IGAD, this is up to the SPLM leadership - on all sides of this conflict.

This means stopping the blame game, the finger pointing. And it means putting the country and its people first, and not any personal interest.

If the country and the people are the priority, it is not that difficult to find solutions. If there are further delays, and the blame games go on, whether from those wanting to remain in office or those wanting to get back in, we can draw only one conclusion; that this is only about a scramble for power.

There will be claims that there are different reasons. We will hear other explanations, but – please - don't believe them. If they do not come to an agreement, it is because this - in the end - is only about them, and not about you, the people of South Sudan, or the country.

The SPLM-leadership, whether they are in office, in Addis or Nairobi, or in the bush, are now facing their greatest test ever. The test of solving this crisis, of saving their country. And it will come to the crunch in the next few weeks.

The SPLM is at risk of failing. Of failing the people; failing the country and failing the struggle.

The most important thing now, is that South Sudan is saved. Not only saved from fighting, but also saved from failing.

In the end, this is also the test of honouring the sacrifice of the freedom fighters – who died for the birth of this country. And it is when things are seen with their eyes that one will get the best guidance on what to do.

As I leave South Sudan, I want everyone to understand that irrespective of its leadership, the United Nations and UNMISS are here to stay and will continue to support the people of South Sudan.

And as I depart from this terminal, I want to tell all South Sudanese that you will always remain in my heart. I will continue to mobilize support for the suffering people of South Sudan, and to be a strong advocate of your case.

As a saying goes, if you have been drinking the waters of the Nile, you will always return. I hope to return to South Sudan in a while.

And I hope to meet a leadership that has passed their greatest test, a leadership that has not failed its people.

I hope to meet a South Sudan that is at peace with itself and its neighbours.

I hope to meet a South Sudan that has managed to win the battle over the three diseases, corruption, rule of the gun and rule for the elite. And I hope to meet a healthy and thriving country.

I hope to see a country that is building bridges, and overcoming differences.

I hope that the slogan I saw on a T-shirt in the streets in Juba, will be everyone's commitment: 'South Sudan is my tribe.'

I hope to meet a nation that is honouring the sacrifice of the freedom fighters.

I hope to meet a South Sudan that will make all of you, and all of us proud.

Let me end by quoting Nelson Mandela:’

“I am fundamentally an optimist.... Part of being optimistic is keeping one's head pointed toward the sun, one's feet moving forward. There were many dark moments when my faith in humanity was sorely tested, but I would not and could not give myself up to despair....”

To all South Sudanese, and to all of us who care about this country, we will not give ourselves up to despair.

Let us all keep our heads pointed toward the sun, and our feet moving forward.

You will get there, in the end.

Thank you, good bye and good luck.

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