



## **PRESS RELEASE**

**Press conference by Mr Nicholas Haysom, Special Representative of The Secretary-General and Head of UNMISS,  
13 February 2024**

***[Near Verbatim]***

Welcome and thank you for joining this press conference. Thank you also to listeners tuning in on Radio Miraya. Today is World Radio Day, so I want to pay tribute to our Miraya staff and radio stations across the country for providing an invaluable service in bringing important news and information to the people of South Sudan, wherever they live.

South Sudan is at a crossroad. This country can now choose a path that gives people the opportunity to participate in peaceful and credible elections. And there are strong indications that South Sudanese want elections. Around 90% of people interviewed in an UNMISS Perception Survey said that elections are important to them, and they intend to vote. Civil society and academics are also advocating for this outcome.

UNMISS's view has always been that elections can be held in December, but only if the country's leaders take urgent action to overcome key obstacles.

My previous remarks regarding the capacity of the country to host elections related directly to the conditions that within applicable and the failure to properly stand up the institutions which are necessary and which we now see being established.

As we pause here decisions are needed on the type of elections to be held. Consensus must be reached on a realistic electoral calendar, taking into account operational, logistical, legal, and security issues. Transitional Security Arrangements must be finalized, an electoral security plan must be agreed, and the Necessary Unified Forces deployed to provide a secure environment.

Intervention is needed at the highest level to resolve tensions in northern Unity between the SPPDF and SPLA-IO as well as the intercommunal violence in pockets of the country, and in the fragile situation interface between Dinka Twic, Ngok Dinka, and Nuer communities in Warrap and Abyei. This conflict is causing real harm to communities as well as inhibiting an environment of open political competition, which would be a vital part of a healthy democracy.

While UNMISS is doing all it can to mitigate the effects of violence in Warrap. Our sister mission, UNISFA, is doing the same in Abyei, where two peacekeepers were killed recently while protecting and rescuing injured civilians. UNISFA is also sheltering 2000 displaced people in its bases because of the volatility of the situation.

It is encouraging to see meetings on this issue between President Kiir and First Vice President Machar, and the key stakeholders gathering for high-level dialogues in Juba this week. Solutions are urgently needed.

Another issue the UN family is intensively engaging on, in coordination with the South Sudanese government, is the issue of refugees and returnees fleeing the violence in Sudan.

The impact of this conflict is being felt across the Horn of Africa and requires our full engagement to mitigate its humanitarian consequences and even to end the war. It also highlights the grave danger of multiple armies occupying the same geographic space and places a premium on the need to fully implement transitional security arrangements here in South Sudan. This is why UNMISS is actively assisting the Joint Defense Board by providing logistical support, transport to training centres, and assisting with security sector reform wherever asked.

Progress on the political front is also being made, including the swearing-in of the National Elections Commission, the National Constitutional Review Commission, and the Political Parties Council as you are all aware. Registration of political parties has begun, although it's disconcerting to see how high the costs are associated with this process. But we note the need to ensure a level political playing field where there is healthy competition and choices for all voters. It is also important that senior public servants refrain from associating themselves with political parties in order to protect the neutrality of their important institutions.

UNMISS is supporting these institutions by helping to create workplans and budgets, developing a Political Parties Code of Conduct, and preparing for the reconstitution of State Elections Committees. We acknowledge the significant recent decision of the Cabinet to allocate resources to these bodies but also eagerly await the actual disbursement of the money as concrete evidence of the parties' political will to progress this work.

We welcome the Presidency's recent engagement with key civil society actors on election preparations. This helps ensure inclusivity, strengthens the understanding of diverse views on the direction the country should take, and supports constructive compromises on critical provisions of the peace agreement.

It is easy to list problems. It's harder to find solutions and take action to implement the decisions made. UNMISS is dedicating significant time and resources to encouraging the parties to make good on their promises relating to election preparations, and with good reason. If the elections are not held with close observance of the peace agreement, it will come under attack for not being adhered to. And if that agreement, the peace agreement itself ultimately fails, it will undermine peace and stability, and risk a return to widespread violence.

When we stress the importance of properly implementing election preparations, these are not measures being imposed by the UN or the international community. These are the obligations that the parties agreed to themselves, and with each other, their internal South Sudanese promises that we are simply helping to identify and to realise.

Moving to other challenges, I previously touched on our work to project safety and security for all South, Sudanese and especially to ensure the reach of our peacekeepers and peacemakers to trouble spots across the country and to ensure that we are initiating peace dialogues where possible.

Today, I want to touch on some to update you on UNMISS's work, to rehabilitate critical infrastructure across the country. This year our engineers plan to repair more than 2000 kilometres of roads, in places like Warrap, Western and Eastern Equatoria, Jonglei, Lakes, and Upper Nile.

Infrastructure projects are the responsibility of the government properly, but UNMISS is coordinating with national and state authorities to support their efforts to improve security, boost trade and economic growth, as well as facilitating the delivery of humanitarian aid, and to connect communities to each other for peace building purposes. We provide equipment, technical expertise and labour. The government and local authorities provide access and the appropriate raw materials.

Road work during the dry season can cause challenges, including disturbing dust. We regret any inconvenience that may have been caused in Rumbek. But we have a short window to get these repairs done before the rainy season. Any short-term pain is far outweighed by the long-term benefits for local authorities, law enforcement, traders, business owners, and communities.

Our engineering work truly has saved lives. In Bentiu, we are defending 300,000 people surrounded by 5,400 square kilometres of stagnant flood waters by maintaining and reinforcing massive dikes and berms. This work is a joint effort with local communities, humanitarian partners, and communities.

We are also improving lives through Quick Impact projects. This year, UNMISS will build or rehabilitate 14 schools, deliver eight clean water projects, five primary health centres, seven projects supporting women's health, protection, and income generation, and eight projects supporting public administration and enhancing civic space. We are also strengthening the justice system to prevent criminality and improve accountability by constructing 23 facilities, including courts, prisons, police stations and training centres. We continue to provide mobile courts as a way of taking justice to the people, which is a unique South Sudanese model. One of these courts is currently underway in Koch, for the first time ever.

I've taken the time to list these initiatives to demonstrate just how deep our commitment is to supporting the people and leaders of South Sudan across the full spectrum of politics and peace building as well as improving security and the living experience of the communities that we serve.

Thank you for listening and I'm happy to take any questions.

\*\*\*END

#### **QUESTION & ANSWER SESSION WITH MEDIA**

**Reporter 1:** I have two questions. Towards the end of last year, we have seen intensive fighting between the Abyei and the Twic of Warrap State. We have also seen violence in several parts of the country, and there's also been clashes between the SPLM and the SPLM-IO in Unity State of recent. Are you worried that these clashes might disrupt the conduct of the elections?

Last week Friday, the Cabinet approved the elections budget. Are you worried of underfunding for the elections and effective use of the funds?

**SRSB Haysom:** We have been deeply concerned about what we call the flashpoints and trouble spots that we have seen emerge, the intercommunal violence, sometimes called 'subnational violence' and we have pointed out that these hotspots, these flashes of violence threaten the possibility of elections. They

undermine the environment within which elections can be held and significantly increase the possibility that elections would lead to a resumption or trigger fresh outbreak of violence. We have made those comments publicly and in our written statements and we will continue to do so.

But I note that we are not the only ones that are making these observations. I have seen even government ministers, I have seen officials, I have seen party political representatives also comment on the dangers that are posed by this intercommunal violence. Which really highlights the need for all players, but also the government to intervene, where it is able to, to try and mitigate the impact of the violence. The violence itself is threatening, but it also has consequences in the tensions it generates between communities and the ability to have political interactions, campaigning in different areas. It squeezes the political and civic space within which our civil society brothers and sisters are operating. So, the observation that you make is an accurate one and it's a source of concern which we have raised, and I think the government is aware. In fact, if I'm not mistaken, even the President has referred to the need to reduce this violence and suppress it if we are going to have elections on time.

In regard to the decision by the Cabinet to provide funding for elections, we are quite frankly delighted. We have been asking for this for some time. We've been asking for the stand up of the Election Commission, the Political Parties Council, and the Constitution Review Commission since early last year. So firstly, we were pleased to see that the appointments have been made but we have also pointed out that merely making the appointments doesn't mean we have functioning institutions. The institutions need resources and, in particular, we've noted also with other donors, that the situation applied to these commissions is dire. They don't have electricity, and equipment and staff, and for that to happen, they need to be operationalized. And to be operationalized, they have to receive the money. So, while we are delighted the money has been allocated, we are still looking forward to seeing the delivery of the money. We've noted in the past, there frequently is a gap between the decision to allocate the money and the money actually being given so that it can help the bodies function.

**Reporter 2:** Thank you for your briefing. I just have two questions. One is on the conduct of the election and the possibility of the country having free and fair elections in the December. We have seen commendable progress in implementation of some of the road map tasks that are necessary for the conduct of election. We have seen reconstitution of the election-related institution, but still funding remains a challenge. In UNMISS' analysis of the current environment, is it possible for the country to call free and fair elections by the December, given the pending tasks that are still outstanding?

Secondly, last year the Government requested for UNMISS' help in its efforts to organise the upcoming elections. What has UNMISS done in that regard? Thank you.

**SRSg Haysom:** Thank you very much for those questions. Of course, your question goes to the heart of the matter: Will it be possible to have conditions for free, fair, and credible elections by December?

We largely set out the requirements for free, fair, and credible elections in two categories. Firstly, the institutions which are necessary to administer the elections. Which is to say people's ballots don't arrive on voting day – they will say it is deliberate, I'm being excluded.

So, technically, we have to organise good elections and it has to arrive, they have to counted transparently; the administration that administers the elections has to be trusted. There are those technical arrangements which have to be put in place. They haven't been put in place. To help the

parties try and expedite decision-making, we gave the Government 10 questions which we said had to be answered for them to have a proper understanding of what the elections would implicate. Will refugees vote? If so, how? How many days will the elections take place? Will the elections be at the national level and the parliamentary level ... or both? So, these are important decisions which will give some shape to the elections, and we have asked government to finalise - not just governments, all the political parties and civil society to participate in a debate so that we can answer those questions. If we cannot answer those questions, I don't think we can organise the elections. So, there is some urgency in tackling those issues.

Then there is another set of questions that relate to the political environment in which the election is held. It doesn't relate to the bricks and mortar and the motor vehicles and so on but is the political environment sufficient for open political contest, which is fair, in which people more or less have equal access to the resources to campaign and to reach their constituencies, in which there is a code of political conduct code – and that is very important. It is a mechanism whereby all parties come together and decide what is the behaviour which is legitimate political behaviour during an election? Can I stop your party from campaigning in my area? What can I do if your people don't let me campaign? The parties are now, with the help of UNMISS, engaging as well as our colleagues in the African Union and the IGAD, in an exercise to draft a new Code of Political Conduct. At the end of the day, it would be a code of conduct that would be endorsed, and the ownership would fall to the Political Parties' Council, and we would imagine that accepting the code of conduct will be an important part of registering to be a political party. So that's another area where we would want to see some progress.

Thirdly, there is the more general question of whether there is sufficient political and civic space. It has been specifically mentioned in the ARCSS agreement and the revitalised agreement that there has to be political and civic space. And many of the parties have raised that question. There are some who argue that the political and civic space is too narrow or narrowing. And there are others who argue there is sufficient political space, and they will refer to the wide range of media which is available and commenting on the elections. We have raised the issue directly with government when we meet them with our interlocutors and also other parties. Point has been made by some of the political parties. Some of the dangers to political and civic space come from the political parties themselves who don't allow open debates in their parties or don't allow open debate in their areas. So, it's an important question and we think it has to be part of the overall remedy, the overall answer that we can offer the people of South Sudan in regard to the conditions under which an election can be considered credible, free, and fair. So, that is important.

You asked me generally what UNMISS is doing. We have been doing a lot. We have been working with all of the commissions, helping them with plans, with budgeting, with establishing what they need to do as first steps, and we will continue to do that. We are fully engaged in helping all aspects of the Constitution. We also work with the government taskforce, which is convened in association with the UN, AU, and IGAD to look at the challenges facing the elections in order to also provide and find ways to provide assistance and expertise on constitutional issues and on electoral design issues for the players. We give you an assurance that we will continue to do what we can within our resources to help the elections take place.

But you know you can't even organise or order the ballots or the ballot boxes until you know how many voting stations you will have and you can't do that until you know what kind of elections you're going to. We have been emphasising that decisions don't cost money. You don't have to put off decision-making because we haven't got the resources yet to make decisions. The parties can come together immediately

and work on these questions, and I understand they are. I understand from Minister Lomuro that he's intending to ask the three commissions to answer the 10 questions that we had set out. We know that we are working with the political parties and the Political Parties Forum, on a format to answer these questions. We are also engaging with civil society. We have a quarterly engagement with over 100 civil society organisations to look at the whole civil society complaint. And civil society will have an important role to play in the elections because they will be the front line of the monitoring mechanism, ensuring and guaranteeing transparency in the elections. So civil society must also come to the table. This is going to be a whole of country effort.

**Reporter 3:** The conflict in Sudan continues. Its effects have now reached South Sudan. What kind of effort or coordination is your office doing, together with your office in Sudan towards the peace process?

Secondly, over nine months after the outbreak of the war in Sudan, can you describe the extent of the effects on South Sudan from that war?

**SRSB Haysom:** Thank you for those questions which are essentially on the impact of the Sudan conflict on South Sudan.

Nearly 550,000 people have now come into South Sudan from Sudan, and we expect that number will continue to grow. Quite frankly, when the conflict started, nobody expected that that it would continue and continue with such little impact on the part of the international community to bring it to an end. So, what had originally been thought would be a much lesser impact just continues to grow and as it grows, it's putting increasing stress on our communities. You will bear in mind that most or certainly the early returnees were South Sudanese. The understanding was that they would be absorbed by the communities from where they had come. We had put considerable amounts of effort and money – both the international community generally and UNMISS specifically and, notably, the UN agencies, funds, and programmes - in helping move people from Renk where there's been tremendous congestion to try and get them down to villages and communities downstream.

But you know, the longer the conflict continues, the more stress, the less able communities are to absorb newcomers. And you know it's happening at a time in which the humanitarian food aid pot is growing smaller. And so, we are beginning to see signs of tension between the newcomers and the host communities which are looking after them. We have been appealing to the international humanitarian community to assist us in being able to deal with the congestion that is happening all along the northern border with Sudan, pointing out that if we can't deal with it, then what is essentially a humanitarian challenge - feeding people, looking after them as they come into the country - is going to become a security problem if it starts to manifest as fighting between the communities. On the broader level of the spillover of the conflict into South Sudan, we have seen little evidence, but we are conscious of the problem.

We have heard indications that there may be recruitment taking place - recruitment by those parties involved in Sudan recruiting young men and boys from South Sudan to increase their forces. We are worried that the firearms are going to start drifting into South Sudan. These are not issues that we in UNMISS can readily deal with - we don't maintain the border, we don't maintain customs - but we would be keen to alert communities and the authorities, if we can, play a helpful role to minimise what could be potentially very disruptive spillover of the conflict, particularly if some of the warring parties in Sudan start to try and link with groups and parties in South Sudan, particularly as the elections get closer.

**Reporter 4:** South Sudan is pushing for election, which is this year. Last week, UNMISS reported about ammunitions being imported to South Sudan. What is this showing to the people of South Sudan if the country is preparing to go for election? How is UNMISS looking at it if such a thing is happening right now?

**SRSg Haysom:** What I would say is the country can be immediately reassured that in UNMISS you have an honest partner who found that ammunition and promptly sealed it off, isolated it, and called the authorities, which is an indication that UNMISS has no evil intent in regard to this incident. We have commenced an investigation as to how the ammunition came in.

UNMISS can import ammunition. The problem is that this came in without the permits being filled and we have now commenced an investigation both in regard to those who brought the ammunition in as well as the carrier which flew the ammunition in, as to the exact circumstances. But the country can rest assured that this incident only came to light because UNMISS promptly and openly declared it.

**Reporter 5:** How is UNMISS raising the issue of attacks on humanitarian convoys to the relevant government institutions in order to ensure much needed assistance reach the affected populations?

**SRSg Haysom:** We in UNMISS as the protective force, have as one of our objectives to secure the delivery of humanity aid to South Sudanese. We take that very seriously and it requires us to work in lockstep with the agencies, funds and programmes which actually deliver the food. UNMISS itself does not have food to deliver. Its task is to provide escorts for the convoys that are delivering the food. We continue to do that, and we have never declined to protect a convoy that has requested protection. You may know that the agencies, funds, and programmes throughout the world will not accept to work under the banner of the domestic armed force, and so they naturally turn to UNMISS as the only force that is capable of protecting them. But we have to have a request from the agency, fund, and programme before we provide that escort. We don't impose an escort on an agency fund, or programme. There was such an incident as, you know, recently – was it four or five days ago - and our escort confronted the attackers. Gunfire was exchanged and the attackers left.

We are worried that as the humanitarian situation worsens, the number of attacks on convoys, either to secure food aid or to steal the food aid, or to attack the places where food is being prepositioned, will impact on our ability to help the most vulnerable South Sudanese. And we would want to agree with the comment that attacking and robbing humanitarian aid is like cutting off your own foot. It's not going to help. People need to respect the delivery of humanitarian aid. It's carefully allocated to the most vulnerable, those who are likely to encounter real famine, hunger, and, potentially, death if they are deprived of food. So, we would point out that the international community takes a very strong view against those who rob humanitarian aid, and, not to mention, attack humanitarian workers who, as you are aware, are mostly South Sudanese but performing humanitarian functions here. There has been a disturbing trend of killing and fatalities amongst humanitarian workers and we want to appeal. We've had full support from the government. I have no specific finger to point at the government. They have offered support to the extent that we needed.

Thank you.

\*\*\*END

**Contact:** UNMISS Spokesperson at [unmiss-spokesperson@un.org](mailto:unmiss-spokesperson@un.org)