

**REMARKS BY SPECIAL REPRESENTATIVE OF THE SECRETARY-
GENERAL AND HEAD OF UNMISS, MR NICHOLAS HAYSOM**

Juba Conference Room, Tomping, Juba

10am, Thursday, 23rd November 2023

Near Verbatim

Good morning and welcome to this UNMISS Press Conference. It's our periodic opportunity to update you and to catch up and to hear your concerns. I especially welcome everyone joining us live on Radio Miraya.

I've just returned to Juba from a series of diplomatic engagements in Ethiopia, Djibouti, Kenya, and South Africa in its capacity as chair of the C5 Group of countries appointed by the African Union to deal with South Sudan. During these visits, my goal was to encourage regional support and international partnerships for South Sudan ahead of its first post-independence elections scheduled for, as you are aware, December next year, 2024.

Let me share that I had constructive engagements with the Secretary-General's Special Envoy for the Horn of Africa, with principals from the neighbouring Member States, with the African Union and with IGAD. And at the African Union Peace and Security Council, I urged South Sudan's partners to work with a shared sense of purpose, commitment, and unified messaging so as to maximise our leverage in the interests of South Sudan.

I use this opportunity to call upon IGAD to convene a discussion on South Sudan and assist the Parties to resolve the outstanding contentious hurdles standing in the way of the implementation of the peace process and to enable all Member States to align their support accordingly.

The feedback I received during my visit is clear: while there remains much international goodwill towards South Sudan, partners are looking to its leaders and more broadly to its political class to translate this moment of truth into a vision of shared peace and prosperity for all.

Closing this gap requires the collective imagination, and a spirit of practical compromise, amongst all the parties to the Revitalized Peace Agreement.

In that regard, UNMISS welcomes the reconstitution of the National Elections Commission (NEC), the Political Parties Council (PPC), and the National Constitutional Review Commission, (NCRC).

But announcements and appointments are not enough – these bodies need to be resourced and operationalized urgently so as to execute their mandates. I encourage the government to address concerns about gender and political representation, given that the credibility of these institutions, rests on the trust and confidence of the public that they serve.

Let me underscore that elections are not a one-day event, but a process that incorporates deliberate and thoughtful decisions before, during and after the polls. All these processes must have the full buy-in and support of the South Sudanese, and especially in the case of a country emerging from divisive conflict. This is a whole-of-society effort, which requires mutually reinforcing participation of political parties, civil society, faith-based leaders, security institutions and the transitional leadership. These processes are dependent on an open, political and civic space for all. In fact, this is the difference between a nation-building moment, which the elections could represent, or a catastrophe.

Today, the honest assessment of many observers and stakeholders is that the current political and civic operating space does not offer a level playing field. Therefore, it's imperative for the parties to agree on a code-of-conduct around free, fair, and transparent competition. UNMISS cautions against the temptation towards unilateral actions that undermine the trust that is needed amongst all stakeholders.

Similarly, political parties must be able to register and campaign without intimidation and fear. South Sudan needs the active participation of civil society, so that then civil society can support civic education, and function as monitors and observers of a credible process. The media must be able to report freely, accurately, in a balanced way, without censorship, or threats.

Looking ahead, it would be impossible to envisage free, fair, and credible elections in December 2024, UNLESS, all South Sudanese parties, leaders, and stakeholders grab the bull by the horns, and agree on a critical mass of decisions by the first quarter of 2024. At the end of this year, the Secretary-General will be reporting to the Security Council on progress towards peaceful elections—the criteria for which should reflect the will and consensus of the South Sudanese themselves, and not a set of externally driven conditions—that is, externally driven by the UN. These are conditions agreed to by the South Sudanese themselves.

The costs of inaction are clear. South Sudan remains in a state of humanitarian emergency and conditions are expected to deteriorate in 2024 due to funding shortages, and I can share that UN agencies and other humanitarian partners are overwhelmed and struggling to respond to people in need. Moreover, the increasing impact of climate change is felt by the poorest and most vulnerable South Sudanese.

And the conflict in Sudan itself, to the north of us has added to this complexity. To date, more than 373,000 people – returnees and refugees – have fled to South Sudan.

In these difficult times when humanitarian assistance is increasingly challenging, aid workers remain on the frontlines of providing life-saving support to the most vulnerable people in South Sudan, including children. Yet South Sudan remains one of the deadliest environments for humanitarians to operate in. And I condemn in the strongest terms, attacks against aid workers in South Sudan—which only prevents assistance from reaching those in need. I note the responsibility of the government at all levels to protect humanitarian personnel and assets. And I share in that responsibility and commit the UN to do what we can do to ensure there is access to humanitarian aid.

This leads me to the overall security situation. And clashes continue in parts of the country, with 77 per cent of casualties between July and September attributed to community-based militias and civil defense groups.

Most recently we've been concerned by reports of violence in the Abyei Administrative Area and Warrap State, which has claimed at our count at least 75 lives in the last two weeks. Leaders of these communities need to recognize that repeated cycles of retaliatory violence are not going to solve their problems, and they need to use peaceful means to resolve the issues which divide them. I call upon the government to investigate these attacks and killings, and to do what is necessary to reduce tensions between the affected communities.

UNMISS will continue to deploy our Blue Helmets, within our capacity and resources, for the protection of citizen and in support of state authorities in discharging their duties to the population. But we cannot be everywhere all at once.

And that's why it is critical for the government to finalize the Transitional Security Arrangements. Security, stability, and the protection of human rights are non-negotiable tenets in the social contract between a government and its citizens. It is in this regard we are encouraged by the recent deployment of 750 personnel of the Necessary Unified Forces (NUF) to Tonja in Upper Nile. They are part of the 52,000 graduates from Phase I of the training and deployment of the NUF. UNMISS was pleased to provide aviation support for this deployment.

We believe that Phase Two of these deployments, with an eventual total number of 83,000 graduates deployed across the country, will go a long way to enhancing confidence in the government and providing security for the elections.

Meanwhile, UNMISS remains concerned that military defections threaten and undermine the much-needed trust between the parties. One of the critical lessons from the conflict in Sudan is that a country should have a single and unified security apparatus.

Listeners,

Please allow me to convey some concrete recommendations of the Trilateral Mechanism – that's the mechanism which brings together the United Nations, IGAD and the African Union:

- *We urge the government to allocate the necessary funds for the swift operationalization of key institutions, and we encourage dialogue amongst all leaders to address pending technical, legal and operational decisions that are needed for the elections to take place on time.*
- *In that regard, we've presented 10 priority issues for the consideration of the Government and relevant parties to assist them to frame the discussion on these critical issues. We strongly support action in this endeavour.*

Let me recall that the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement the CPA in 2005 marked the end of one long struggle, and it appears the start of another. Children born in that fateful year are now 18 years old – the legal voting age in South Sudan. And yet, these new citizens do not know when, where, or how they will be able to exercise their birthright, and whether they will be able to do so in safety. This presents a tough hill to climb, but it is not insurmountable. Let's work together to honor the sacrifices of your founding mothers and fathers, who envisaged a peaceful, prosperous and democratic future for all. UNMISS remains with you in this journey.

Thank you for listening. I will now take your questions.

QUESTION & ANSWER SESSION WITH MEDIA

Question 1: Summer FM

My name is Brother Cesar Wilson. I am from Summer FM. There has been mixed reactions from the citizens and some government institution calling for the conduct of population census before 2024 polls for the achievement of free and fair election transparency. Yet recently the government spokesperson Michael Makuei disputed that population census is not a key condition for the conduct of 2024 election.

So, what does the United Nations say about this?

Answer: SRSG Nicholas Haysom

The census. Well, first and foremost, we believe whether there should be a census or not is a South Sudanese decision. And it's a decision which should be taken in the light of what is the purpose of the census. In general, censuses count the population. They don't, necessarily, unless they're designed to do so, evaluate exactly who's living where. But they do give you important planning information. And this country will have to assess whether it wishes to undertake the exercise. We're informed by the experts. That's the South Sudanese experts that it will take 11 months to conduct a proper and professional census and so there may be a trade off in what kind of information is required.

Bear in mind, from an electoral perspective, the only concern is that the parties should have trust and faith in the figures they are given for population distribution. And that is so that the elections can be fraud free.

The census can still be taken and there can be fraud, so it needs, the question of the census needs to be placed in the larger context of how is the election going to work so that people will trust the result. And this, the census can make a contribution to that. Then it's making a contribution to stability. If it's not, well then it will complicate the amount of time and the arrangements that will be required to hold the election.

To repeat, this is a decision for the South Sudanese to take and we would want to encourage the political parties, in particular the stakeholders and the signatories to the Peace Agreement to come together to decide whether they want to hold elections by 2024. And if they do, what arrangements they are going to make to ensure they can cross the finish finishing line by December next year.

Question 2: BBC World Service

My name is Nicola Mandil, I report for BBC World Service. My first question would be on Abyei. I know you are UN mission in South Sudan, but you are one UN family. I'm sure you have concrete information from your colleagues in UNISFA about the situation in Abyei. We have been reading that South Sudan People's Defence Force was involved in the clashes in Abyei, they attack civilians in Abyei.

It would be good for us to hear from UN whether South Sudan People's Defence Force were involved or not, and we also understand a Ghanaian soldier was killed in the clashes, but we understand also the UN is not giving any concrete information regarding the incident in Abyei. Just maybe give us the real picture of the situation in Abyei. Thank you.

Answer: SRSNG Nicholas Haysom

Alright, well I first of all have to just to show you that this is not an area in which we're involved and the information I have comes from UNISFA. UNISFA have quite clearly indicated that none of their peacekeepers was killed, and they have gone public on that. And I have no reason to doubt their word at this stage.

Secondly, was the SSPDF involved? I have noted that the SSPDF have denied they were involved, and I don't have any contrary information. In my view this is something that the government should investigate. And if the SSPDF were involved, given that the SSPDF should not be in the box, it would require some investigation as to why that took place. If it turns out that they were not involved, then that issue falls away. I'm unable at this point to certify they were involved, or they weren't involved.

Question 3: BBC World Service

Mr. SRSNG, during the last press conference in this room you told us that from the look of the things South Sudan is not prepared for elections. Are you still holding the same position that the country is not prepared, or you think now things have changed?

Answer: SRSNG Nicholas Haysom

No, I've been honest in this assessment that the country is not ready for elections as we stand, and I'm fortified that across the political spectrum, people agree with me. I haven't met anyone who says the country is ready for elections right now.

But remember, the question is not whether the country is ready for elections in November 2023. The critical question is will it be ready for elections in December 2024? And I think the answer to that is really that the institutions which would make the management of the elections, effective and persuasive, to the people of South Sudan, would have to be in place for those elections to essentially be respected by the people of South Sudan. And why do we say that? Because we don't want elections that will lead to a resumption of violence, so we want people to accept the election.

So, that will require that the technical conditions need to be in place. If there's going to be voter registration, it needs to have taken place. If there needs to be agreement on voter registration that needs to take place. If there needs to be an agreement on whether refugees will vote. But remember, at each stage the peace agreement requires the parties to be in agreement. It's not whether the UN agrees or the UN decides, it's the question of whether the signatories are in agreement within those arrangements so we need to emphasise that the technical arrangements need to be in place and they're not in place as we speak, but also the political conditions have to be present.

And I mentioned in my speech the importance of an environment in which all South Sudanese believe they can truly and honestly exercise their right to choose a government and to raise the issues that they want raised in the

interests of a stable and prosperous South Sudan. In my view, we will be able, and I think there's no shortage of experts to say which institutions have to be in place before elections can be held - by when they have to be in a place is the critical condition. Clearly, it would have to be sometime next year and sometime in advance of the elections so that the preparations can take place.

I should share with you that the overall academic view based on research on elections in countries where there has been previous violence is not good, except in the circumstances where there is proper and adequate preparation for those elections. So, what we're doing is placing a premium on completing the preparations necessary for an elections which are going to satisfy the people of South Sudan.

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