



Near-verbatim transcript of the Press Conference
By the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict,
Radhika Coomaraswamy
16 March 2012
UNMISS Tomping Site, Juba

DSRSG Liz Grande: I am honoured and delighted to introduce to you today Madame Radhika Coomaraswamy who is the Undersecretary-General holding the position of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict.

Mde. Coomaraswamy was appointed by the Secretary-General in one of the important and sensitive roles within the United Nations as the Special Representative for Children Associated with Armed Conflict.

The Special Representative has been here in South Sudan for the past week; she has had very important meetings which she will be sharing with us. It is an honour and privilege to introduce to the Diplomatic Corps, earlier this week, Madame Coomaraswamy, and now to the press corps.

Special Representative ...

SRSR Radhika Coomaraswamy: Thank you very much, DSRSG Grande.

Let me just say that I am the Special Representative of the Secretary-General of the UN Secretary-General on Children and Armed Conflict and, in that role, I am supposed to be the independent moral voice on this issue, particularly dealing with child rights violations in conflict.

I want to begin by first thanking UNMISS as well as UNICEF for organising this visit – especially their Child Protection teams who have done a great job in a difficult kind of environment. Thank you so much.

The purpose of my visit was to sign the Action Plan as well as to make a first-hand assessment of some of the problems facing children in conflict-related issues. I met with President Salva Kiir, officials from the ministries of defence, gender and women's affairs, the DDR Commission, NGOs as well as some of the children in the camps that we visited in Renk.

Besides Juba I have gone to Renk. I was supposed to go to Jonglei but due to the disarmament process and some of the security and other concerns around that, the visit was cancelled. So I did not go to Jonglei but I got a full briefing on it from UN actors and NGOs.

With regard to the Action Plan, as you know, there is a United Nations Security Council process that deal with children and armed conflict. It is the first and perhaps the most important theme that the Security Council of the United Nations deals with and one part of this is that they ask the Secretary-General every year to give a list of parties that recruit and use children as child soldiers. They also ask for lists on other child violations like sexual violations, attacks on schools or killing and maiming but the one that is relevant here at the moment is really the recruitment and use of children as child soldiers. The problem with the list is that if you are a violator that's been persistent, there is a possibility of sanctions against this party.

The purpose of this visit was because the SPLA has been on this list since 2006 and it is very important that we de-list them as soon as possible. Now that they are a national army, it becomes extremely important. The structure of the Action Plan, therefore, is first there is an identification and release of children, second there is a UN verification process to make sure that there are no children, and thirdly there is a reintegration priorities and benchmarks also set. These are the three aspects of the Action Plan.

I must say that the SPLA did sign a similar one in 2009 when they were a movement and not an army and since 2005 about 3,000 children have been demobilised from the SPLA. What we are dealing with, therefore, is really the last remaining remnants of this and we estimate that in the local divisions of the SPLA and in the integrated militias, they are the ones who have more children. We estimate that there would be about 2,000 children that would be released as a result of this Action Plan.

Let me say that we are looking forward to their release. The reintegration of these children also remains very important. UNICEF, with the help of the DDR Commission and the Ministry of Gender and Social Welfare, will deal with these children, provide them with programmes. What we are planning for is actually 4,000 children – 2,000 of these children will be child soldiers but UNICEF's policy is to also give services to 2,000 other children from the same communities so that they do not feel that the child soldiers are privileged. So we work with the communities and provide these services to both the child soldiers and other children of the community.

We also feel that as a result of this, if the reintegration is to be successful, the social infrastructure must also be developed. Children have to go back to something once they come out of the army. So it is really important that education is a priority. This is one of the arguments that I made to the President as well as to the ministers that even if there is an austerity budget, education should be a priority of that budget. Given the fact that only 4% of all South Sudanese go to secondary school, it is really crucial that there is a major investment in education.

I also went to Renk because, as you know, one of the concerns of the humanitarian community here is the children returning from Sudan to South Sudan. As you know, there was agreement recently on the status of nationals in these two countries where there is an agreement to respect property and other rights. Maybe there would not be such a large exodus but we don't know.

Anyway, we went to Renk. There were spontaneous makeshift camps set up there with basic minimum services and we will of course need resources for these children because of course that remains a high priority. It is important that donors and other realise that this might become a humanitarian emergency if it is not watched carefully.

As regards to Pibor and also the situation in Jonglei State, let me just say that we at the UN are concerned at the killing of children, because the violence there also affects children, but also on the issue of child abduction. It is our sense that this factor is really fuelling the violence and giving it a little edge, making it more difficult to resolve this situation. We want to ensure that in the future there would be no impunity for those who abduct, but also we want to ensure that any reconciliation process may have to have return of women and children. And when this is done, it must be done with the principle of the best interest of the child in mind and not on any other criteria.

With regard to the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), this is an area of deep concern to me as well as to the international community. The activity of the LRA has gone down here but the AU will be deploying forces, as you know, in Yambio and other places. We would like to ensure that we have a standard operating procedures with as we have with the Uganda People's Defence Forces (UPDF) on what to do when children are found, the handing over of children to UN agencies and tracing of them back to their families. This is also something that is really important.

Let me say, in conclusion, that I have had a very good visit and I must say that we hope the government will make these commitments with regards children. Already the Child's Act has been passed. We now need maybe a commission to implement that Act or make sure that that Act is implemented. We also need the government to ratify the Convention on the Rights of the Child as well as its optional protocols.

Let me just say thank you and I am ready to answer any questions.

Q & A

Q: You mentioned the problem of child abductions in Jonglei. Could you give us of how big a problem that is? Any figures or evidence of how substantial those abductions are?

SRSR Radhika Coomaraswamy: I don't have any figures at hand. We could try and get some figures back to you later but it is our sense that one of the factors that lead to revenge and retaliation between the two communities is because children are abducted. There are perceptions also in the narratives of these ethnic groups that one group abducts for particular reasons ... you know the historical narratives that condition their perception of the other group. It is therefore at the heart of the conflict in some ways. Even though the actual conflict may be over material things, these factors, the abduction of the women and children, really fuel the violence and lead to levels of revenge and retaliation that are very difficult. I think also that to some extent, it also puts women and children in a terrible situation because we found out in other parts of the world that when children and women are abducted and live for a while in other community, they then develop an identity with that community whatever their role is. Bringing them back to their original community is another traumatic transfer for them and sometimes women especially may not be accepted back once they have been wives of men of other communities. So these pose enormous social problems to the victims.

So it is not only the questions of impunity but rather the actual effect on these families. That is why we are urging that the best interest of the child be the criteria to choose what to do with the child's future.

Q: You talked about impunity and how it has to stop with regards the abduction of women and children and yet during the Murle attacks [*indiscernible*]. What is the UN going to do to try and ensure that this impunity does stop because it seems to have been relegated to this tradition that women and children are abducted?

SRSR Coomaraswamy: I think, if I may, that there are two schools of thought as to how this should be handled – whether it should be handled at the community level with regards to reconciliation between the parties and work that way; or we work through the rule of law, the state, punish perpetrators, etc. I think that debate is going on.

Of course, coming from a human rights background, my sense is that it is really important to confront impunity and that it is important to have attackers put in jail. Sometimes the scale of the violence is such that you have to have more innovative and community-based remedies as well. I think that is a dilemma facing the scale of the violence and whether to deal with it as a community reconciliation issue or whether to deal with it as a justice issue. And I think people are still working those issues out.

DSRSG Grande: Maybe I should just build on the Special Representative of the Secretary-General's comments. Colleagues would be aware that there is a two-track approach to dealing with the aftermath of the Jonglei crisis. Track one; the government showing strong leadership and getting to grips with what happened there and laying the ground work for future judicial action and, track two, just as the Special Representative said, focuses on those initiatives at the community level which aim at reconciliation and addressing the problems that drove or the factors behind the recent violence. So there are two tracks. Both tracks are in motion at the moment.

Q: You talked about returning children to their original families. What way will you use to get them back from their abductors?

SRSR Coomaraswamy: The UN stand is that everything we try to do at this moment is through a voluntary basis. So basically, what we hope is that with the community-based reconciliation processes, abducted children would be handed over. That is what we hope.

But also we want to make sure that that is also in the best interest of the child – what exactly the child wants to do – also have to be considered in this process. so basically it is working with the communities and, hopefully, a voluntary process focusing on the best interest of the child would be the best at this point, we feel, rather than a forced release – how are we going to manage that, I don't think it would be possible.

Q: [*indiscernible question on figures for the Jonglei attacks of January and December*]

DSRSG Grande: Kouider [*UNMISS Spokesperson, a.i.*] do we have the numbers?

Kouider Zerrouk: No we don't.

Q: You said that the government should prioritise education in the austerity budget. In the last few years, I think, the budget was not even enough to cater for education and now the economic crisis is going to hit all sectors of the government. How can you help the Government of South Sudan provide schools for the children and also in returning abducted children?

SRSR Coomaraswamy: I think it is such a priority issue for the government that it should make that investment regardless of a donor climate. The worst thing for a country is to make its education system completely reliant on foreign funding. From around the world, we think that is a bad idea. The education sector should primarily be funded as much as possible from the country's own resources. It is a commitment also for the government to show priority for the children. As long as possible, we argue, that in an austerity budget there should be funding for education.

Of course donors and outside agencies would augment and help the various programmes and other kinds of things to help, but the core funding, the core basis for schools around the country, has to come from the government's own budget.

Maybe UNICEF would like to say something on that because that is an area of interest for them.

UNICEF: If I can add, UNICEF, for instance, has supported the government to come up with a comprehensive strategic plan for education for them to use that as the tool to reach out to donors and well-wishers to support the government in rolling out that action plan. Our role would be continuously to lobby and advocate for the right to education and for the government to increase the budget from the current minimum 6% to a bigger percentage in future.

We are confident that once the Education Strategic Action Plan and the Education Policy are approved – they are both in draft at the moment – those would be very critical tools for them to put

money aside from their own budget but also to approach other well-wishers to increase the budget for education.

Q: I seem not to have got some of your points correctly: what did you say about child rights violations found in your recent tour of South Sudan, you did mention the about 3,000 children that are ready to demobilise. I just wanted to find out what kind of demobilisation or reintegration package has been offered to these children? You said that the SPLA estimates around 2,000 children within its ranks. Are these with the SPLA or with the militia groups? Finally, in what ways is the UN working to assist [*indiscernible*]?

SRSR Coomaraswamy: With regards child rights violations in South Sudan and monitoring it for the global report of the Secretary-General, is basically the issue of child soldiers we have as a concern. Secondly, sexual violence against girls, though it is not so much conflict related but we find that that is also of some concern. Then the third area is the occupation of schools and, therefore, the right to education, and the attacks and destruction on schools that take place.

The annual report of the Secretary-General looks at six straight violations: the killing and maiming of children – that also takes place, as you know, in Jonglei, etc. – second is the recruitment and use of children as child soldiers – that is also taking place – thirdly, sexual violence against children, fourth, attacks on schools and hospitals, the fifth is abduction – that is also taking place, and sixth is denial of humanitarian access. So five of the six are taking place in South Sudan and will be reported on.

Secondly; with regards to the 2,000 that would be demobilised and where they are, I must say that we estimated the majority are in the militias that are being integrated into the SPLA and maybe a few local units. The main barracks and the main training centres of the SPLA are, at the moment, child-free after the release of those 3,000 children. But with regard to these local divisions and the integrated militias, there are still issues of children.

With regard to the reintegration programme, I'd refer this to UNICEF which is in charge of the programme.

UNICEF OIC: We have the Chief of Child Protection at UNICEF who is behind the DDR component on children and the DDR policy and strategy. So I will ask Fatouma to report on the reintegration initiatives that we are supporting at UNICEF. Fatouma ...

UNICEF Child Protection: Thank you very much. I will give you a brief response to that question.

UNICEF has been supporting the Government at different levels beginning at the national level, the state level and working together very much with social workers as well as with implementing partners to provide the reintegration assistance. And it has two tracks: one is basically providing social reintegration of the children. This is where we support them first of all to go back home because many of them have been away from home. So you have to do family tracing once they have been registered and released, handed over to UNICEF and the part of the DDR Commission that deals with children, then they will be taken back to their families. Now, you work with the families to get these children to become more comfortable being back home; working with the parents and community members to actually accept these children back and, for the children, to feel that they are back at home. For the younger ones when they get back home, in most cases they are supported to go back to school. And we do support the schools to accept the children back like providing training to the teachers, sometimes it is providing [*indiscernible*] but sometimes help has gone to individual children like providing them with school uniforms and so on.

However, for the older children, what they are after is some sense of livelihood. So they are provided with skills training so that they are able to find or to start up some kind of employment

when they go back to the communities. This part of the programme has been very much challenged because, of course, the economy of the country has also been not so supportive. However, now with the economy growing, there are more opportunities for these children to get some kind of employment or to start something on their own. They do need a lot of support as they do that because when a child who is 17 years and has been trained, that child still needs support unlike an older person who would just go out and look for a job or try to start one.

In order for that to happen better, we are working together with the ILO, which has a lot of competencies in the area of economic reintegration, to enhance the work that we are doing, and also tapping on to the programme for the adults.

Already, as we are talking, you know that the DDR programme for the adults is about to begin. However, because the DDR for children has been going on since 2005, it has been something that we have been doing but now improving what we have been doing so that [*indiscernible*].

Q: Talking of sanctions, we have just witnessed an Action Plan signed between the UN and the Government of South Sudan. What sort of sanctions does the UN normally impose on parties that fail to comply with this Action Plan?

Secondly; in your visit to Upper Nile, I came across a statement where you actually warned of a possible humanitarian crisis if the situation of children is not addressed. Maybe you could shade some light on the conditions of the children there.

SRS G Coomaraswamy: With regards to sanctions, the United Nations Security Council is only now beginning to move in the direction of sanctions against on persistent violations in that list. They moved against some parties in the Democratic Republic of Congo and also in Cote d'Ivoire and they are looking for it in Somalia. The sanctions mentioned in the resolution are arms embargoes, freezing of financial assets and travel embargoes. These are the three aspects that are mentioned as the targeted measures that would be used if sanctions are imposed.

We hope that doesn't come to any such state here in South Sudan and it is only for persistent violators and it will be up to the United Nations Security Council to decide when that is the case.

With regards the humanitarian crisis in Renk, the point is we don't know what will happen. I can have my UN colleagues back me up on that. At one point the figure of one million was cited – I don't think that is the number that is going to come. We don't really know the numbers but we want to be prepared when they do come. I felt sorry when I talked to these children they would very longingly think of Khartoum. They teared up and said they wanted to go back there; their friends were there and here they were with mosquitoes and out in the open. If they are going to come back to South Sudan and feel they are in their own counties and new citizens, I think one has to take care of them properly. I think that is really an important thing.

Q: I wonder if I can get your thoughts on the Kony 2012 video – if you've seen it, do you think it is accurate? And if you haven't seen it, I'm sure you have heard talk about it. Just recently in Uganda they tried to screen it and the communities were actually very angry and they had to stop the screenings. So there is a lot of criticism about the video – do you think it is helpful that this has gone viral around the world and 100 million people around the world have watched it, or do you think it is distracting from maybe more important things that could be done?

SRS G Coomaraswamy: I think Mr. Kony is a terrible man - it doesn't get much worse in the world – as a human being. I mobilising people and getting ... I was in the airport in Amsterdam and watching six children around an i-pad watching this video for about 45 minutes. It is viral and to get children excited and mobilised about a cause is a good thing, I think. I lot of these are young people

who are horrified by what is going on around the world and uniting. So I don't think we should really be too cynical.

My sense is that for us, there are two issues. One is that when you say "arrest Kony", there is a sub-text which means take military action. What we are concerned about is that a lot of the people fighting with Kony are children. If any military action is taken, it must be done while protecting children. You can get Kony but you must protect the children. That is absolutely crucial. Secondly; over the years, the UN system, NGOs and others have set in place certain systems. The UPDF hand over the children to us, there are tracing mechanisms, there are programmes for them – so we would prefer that any kind of action strengthens these systems so that things would go well with regard to the issue.

The last thing we want is vigilantes. We have cases in South Sudan of people picking up a gun and deciding to go find Kony. This kind of thing is crazy. We want national armies accountable to the Geneva Conventions who are going to go find Kony. We don't want vigilantes or anything like that.

That is my response to that.

Q: South Sudan has a lot of challenges at the moment. If you look at Jonglei, the health sector, the education sector – everything is a priority. Yet, over 90% of our revenue comes from the oil. Do you think it was the right decision taken by the government? What do you think would happen?

SRSR Coomaraswamy: It is not my position to second-guess the decision of a sovereign government and how it should allocate its resources – especially since my mandate is on children. So I won't answer your question whether this is right or wrong. There are however some signs of movement in Addis Ababa and we hope that the political process and dialogue would continue so that this issue could be resolved and the revenue is increased for all the other things that have to be done. We hope there is a peaceful resolution of this dispute.

Q: Under what circumstances would these sanctions be imposed on South Sudan?

SRSR Coomaraswamy: The sanctions will only kick in from the Sanctions Committee. At the moment, South Sudan is not on the agenda. It may take a few years but our hope is that we don't get there – we will de-list you long before that. The intention of the government is to comply and, as you know when that kind of intention is there and there is compliance to some great degree, these political processes don't proceed. Because of that intention, we hope that they will be able to take them off. They have shown a very clear intent at the highest levels of government that they want this to stop.

Q: *[indiscernible question on whether there is a deadline for the child soldiers to be demobilised].*

A number of security NGOs in South Sudan were extremely worried that this disarmament process in Jonglei was going to happen before any peace process has happened and before a buffer zone. The recent attack on Akobo has shown that the buffer zone is basically non-existent and the peace process is not started. How concerned is the UN about the safety of children during this process?

SRSR Coomaraswamy: With regards the first question, the deadline was yesterday. We hope the SPLA would do it as soon as possible and that within a year they would be able to demobilise all their children so that they would be de-listed the following year. That is what we are hoping.

With regards your second question, I would also turn to Liz on this for the UN's position but, as you know, I have always urged that it be voluntary and that it be done in consultation with the communities.

DSRSG Grande: Hannah, I think we had a press statement that UNMISS released was it two days ago that laid out our position on that issue. We can share with you the statement.

Q: Just wanted to ask what action plan UNICEF has for the street children in Juba?

OiC UNICEF: We do realise that due to the austerity measures and even before that, the number of children living on and off the streets has increased. We are also asking that question to government. We contribute to the government effort to take care of the vulnerable children that are not accessing their rights. On the other hand, as UNICEF, what we are able to do this year is to support what we call Child Protection Systems at the community level to ensure that they have the means and the knowledge to take care of their children. We would like to have a system in place so that such children have a fallback system so that they don't end up on the streets.

I won't give you a straight answer and say to morrow we shall round up all the children from the streets ... I don't think that is the best way forward. But we need to educate, raise awareness and make the Child Act implementable so that all the actors who should be doing something about children are doing it.

DSRSG Grande: We would like to thank all of you for joining us and to extend to the Special Representative a very special thanks for being here with us in South Sudan this past week.

Thank you.

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