

**Full remarks from joint press conference by Jean-Pierre Lacroix, USG, Peace
Operations & Hanna Serwaa Tetteh, SESG to the Horn of Africa
Press Conference, Juba, South Sudan
23 February 2024
[Near Verbatim]**

Remarks by UN Under-Secretary General Jean Pierre Lacroix

Thank you very much and a very good afternoon to all of you. Thank you for having joined us. As was indicated, this is a joint mission headed by Her Excellency Special Envoy of the UN for the Horn of Africa, Miss Hanna Serwaa Tetteh, and myself Jean Pierre Lacroix, the Under-Secretary-General of the UN for Peace Operations.

We are about to end that visit. We spend a week in South Sudan. During that week, we also went to Abyei for two days and we met with the authorities there. We met with this Excellency President Salva Kiir, the 1st Vice President, number of cabinet ministers who were attending the meeting with the President.

And of course, we also met with the representatives of the civil society, local authorities, the Governors and the other senior officials in the states of Warrap and Western Bahr el Ghazal, and of course, with the local communities. As I indicated, we also met with the various local communities in Abyei and with our colleagues from the United Nations family, both here and in Abyei.

So perhaps by way of opening the discussion, I think one of the key purposes of that visit was to emphasize and convey a very important message, which is the continuous strong commitment of the whole UN to supporting South Sudan. We thought that it was important to convey that message at the time where on the one hand, there are many challenges that South Sudan is confronting, but then on the other hand, there are many crises around the world, unfortunately.

Some of these crises you know, are very much sort of overwhelming the media landscape. And they're also, I mean, the multiplicity of this crises is putting a strain on the available resources, both in terms of the resources available for humanitarian assistance as well as for other activities. So, in that context, we wanted to make sure that this message of continuous strong commitment by the UN, and by the Secretary General António Guterres to continue supporting South Sudan, would be conveyed to our interlocutors.

Now just to cover with a broad brush, the issues that we've been discussing. And I assume that there will be a few questions about those. We, talked about the current security and humanitarian challenges in South Sudan, the intercommunal violence, and the resulting impact on the humanitarian situation, the fallout from the events, the situation in Sudan. With the

resulting influx of returnees and refugees to South Sudan, and again with humanitarian consequences and potentially with additional security impact as well.

We discussed the process towards elections as part of the implementation of the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS) and how the UN could continue to work with South Sudan in terms of accompanying South Sudan towards the holding of election in the best possible conditions.

And we also talked about Abyei against the backdrop of the intercommunal violence that took place recently between two communities, the Twic Dinka and the Ngok Dinka and the need to do everything we can collectively, with all those who can help. To bring about de-escalation and to rebuild trust with the communities, knowing that the issue of the final status remains. Of course, a very important issue, and at the same time the solution to that issue is likely not to be forthcoming as a result of the events occurring in Sudan, so I will leave it at that.

I think the Special Envoy will certainly have much more to say. And of course, we'll be looking forward to your questions, with the SRSNG Nicholas Fink Haysom. I would be remiss if I didn't end by thanking all those who contributed to this visit, the authorities in South Sudan, the communities with whom we met and also our colleagues from UNMISS. Thank you so much.

Remarks by the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General to the Horn of Africa, Hanna Serwaa Tetteh

Thank you very much, Your Excellency Jean Pierre Lacroix. Good afternoon, distinguished ladies and gentlemen of the media. It's a pleasure to be with you. I would also like to join my colleague Jean Pierre in thanking first and foremost, our colleagues in UNMISS, our colleagues in UNISFA and all of the government and national and state level officials that we had the opportunity to meet over these last few days and the people who we met from the communities. From civil society, from women's groups who were ready to share their thoughts with us very frankly and very openly. And of course, by so doing added value to this interaction.

I would like to focus my remarks particularly on the situation in Abyei. I think that it's important notwithstanding the fact that the final status of Abyei has not been resolved and is unlikely to be resolved anytime soon, given the conflict in Sudan. To consider, the administrative area as a frozen conflict, especially because it borders on South Sudan itself. The communities are very much interlinked, have been intermarried, have engaged together over time and it is unfortunate that there has been this breakdown so far.

I would very much like to commend colleagues in UNISFA for the work that they are doing for the protection of civilians. To express my condolences once again for the two peacekeepers who we lost about two weeks ago while performing their duties on protecting civilians, but also to emphasize the need for continuing inter communal dialogue to address the differences between the two ethnic groups, because at the end of the day that is how this matter will be

resolved. Not by fighting, not by injuring, not by hurting each other, but by coming together to talk to each other.

Indeed, this is a very momentous year for South Sudan because it could mark the end of the implementation of the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan, if indeed it is possible to hold general elections, and those elections would be an important milestone in moving out of a post conflict phase into now consolidating the institutions of state and building a stronger and more inclusive democracy.

Now, let me emphasize that elections are not an exit strategy for ending a peace process. They are an important milestone, and they mark the opportunity to move forward. Neither would peacebuilding end and peace building activities end, if there was indeed an election held within time, but that notwithstanding, it creates the opportunity for people to focus their attention on the important task of nation building.

The UN, working in South Sudan, colleagues in UNMISS, under the leadership of my senior colleague Nicholas Haysom and other parts of the UN, both here in South Sudan, in Abyei and working across the region in support of South Sudan. Essentially our role is to provide support to South Sudanese to take charge of your own destiny. We're not here to continuously be part of the system of South Sudan. Ultimately, we would like to see this being handed over fully to the people and the Government of South Sudan, and we hope that we'll be getting to that point sooner rather than later.

I would also like to emphasize that it's important in all of these processes to make sure that there is the inclusion of women and minorities. And by minorities, I also refer to people who are disabled. We should not treat them as if they are not part of society. They are an important part of society, and they can also play a strong a role in the development of institutions, peace building and development as anybody else. And I hope that over the next year, as you, as a country, you grapple with the challenges of this transition, that will be a more inclusive process. And as my colleague has mentioned, the UN very much would be in support of that effort.

Thank you.

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QUESTION & ANSWER SESSION WITH MEDIA

Reporter 1: Thank you very much. I have two questions. What is the main challenge facing the implementation of the peace agreement, and what needs to happen in order to address those challenges?

From your visit to Abyei and your assessment on the ground, what do you think the UN together with the government is going to do in order to address this inter communal conflict in Abyei?

USG Lacroix: Now regarding the first question, you know I think it has to be very clear and I have heard SRSG Nicholas Haysom rightfully very often saying that it's a South Sudanese process ... the electoral process. Ultimately, the key decisions as to how, and the when - all of these have to be decided by the

South Sudanese themselves. What is our role? Our role is a supporting one. It is to try our best so that we support whatever needs to be done at this stage to, I would say, maybe prepare the ground ... whatever can be done at this stage to prepare the ground for the continuation of the electoral process, support in different ways, which is what UNMISS is doing.

The various activities that we can support ... this morning we had a meeting with the National Electoral Committee and the reconstituted Constitutional Review Committee. And these are organs that were, as you know, recently reconstituted with whom our colleagues from UNMISS have been already engaging and which have already been provided support by UNMISS, and of course, the intention is to continue. But at the same time, as I was saying, I mean there are key decisions that will have to be made by the authorities of South Sudan. When we met with His Excellency the President and the cabinet ministers, we heard about the plan for these committees to work together and you know, come up with a recommendation and provide advice to the political authorities for them to make relevant decisions. Of course, this will be critical, including for us, for the UN to be able to come to the Member States and hopefully make the best possible case to the Member States so that they will not only renew, but maybe step up their commitment to support the continuation of the electoral process, including through what UNMISS could do.

But the short answer to your question is that all these key decisions as to when to hold the election as to what kind of election, as to the sort of the legal environment and many other decisions really are for the authorities in South Sudan to take.

In terms of Abyei, and I'm sure Special Envoy Tetteh will elaborate, but again, the issue of the final status, unfortunately, will still be with us for some time. And as was said by the Special Envoy, there will be no solution to violence. Violence will only lead to escalation. What needs to be done is to roll up your sleeve and work to de-escalate and rebuild trust between the communities.

Now, granted it's easier said than done. I think the good news is that we've noted with appreciation. Quite a serious and renewed commitment by the highest authorities of South Sudan to be engaged and to contribute to these efforts. We also interacted with the local authorities, the civil societies, particularly in Warrap State, and in Abyei. And there has been engagement also at this level and including across communities. But there's more that needs to be done because tensions are still very much there. This isn't an issue that will be solved in overnight, but there needs to be continuous engagement at all the levels that I mentioned.

Special Envoy Tetteh: Thank you very much. Fundamentally, our understanding of the basis for the current conflict boils down to a land dispute between two subgroups of the Dinka ethnic group, the Ngok and the Twic. We are not in a position to pronounce on the merits of who has the better case in this regard. That really is not the issue. The question really is that when you do have disputes of this nature, what is the best way of resolving those disputes, especially between communities that have long coexisted, that have a significant record of intermarriage with each other and, to all intents and purposes, have been very close.

And we believe, that for that reason, it should be possible to resolve whatever differences exist through dialogue. And it was impressed upon both the Ngok Dinka community when we had the opportunity to interact with them and we also made the same when we had the opportunity to interact with the Governor of Warrap State in Kuajok. It is our hope that, that conversation, that discussion between the two groups with a view to resolving this matter peacefully will take place and, as we indicated when we

met the different communities, the UN would be very willing to support that in order to arrive at a peaceful outcome.

SRSB Haysom: Let me just speak to the first question and welcome to you all again. I spoke to you last week and I think I got the same question. Is it possible for there to be elections? It is. With political will and if the appropriate preparations are put in place. Why? Because this is a society which particularly needs to have the best organised election, that it is possible to have.

In our encouragement of completing those preparations, we've been at pains to point out we don't want the political stakeholders here to implement UN conditions or UN standards or UN election. It is a South Sudan election, which was negotiated in the peace agreement. So, all we are trying to do is to help people complete the obligations that they undertook when they signed that peace agreement. That's the important thing. It is to be South Sudan owned but it requires the South Sudanese people to step up to the plate and to now grapple with those important questions that have to be answered before elections can be organized. And what is our concern? Our concern is that the country must not allow elections to force the country back into violence.

So, we will be guided and in be encouraging our South Sudanese partners to do everything possible to ensure the elections are not an excuse to trigger for renewed violence. Thank you.

Reporter Two: I have a question for Under-Secretary-General Lacroix. You did mention there is tension or tension is still high in Abyei. You reached on the ground, you spoke to local authorities, you spoke to the locals, the victims who are affected by the violence, you spoke to UNISFA. What did you find is the major cause of this recurring violence in the recent months?

Reporter Three: I have only one question for Lacroix. You did mention that given the current status or the situation in Sudan, determination of the final status of Abyei will take some time. What do you think could be the implication on the people of Abyei and the relationship between South Sudan and Sudan?

Reporter Four: I just wanted to give a random question to all of you. As we are going to have an election, I wanted to be mindful of the refugees and the returnees. Are they also going to vote or are there ways to repatriate them back from where they have gone to seek asylum to the country in order to vote, or else are there other mechanism for them to at least?

USG Lacroix responding to Reporter # Two and # Three: Regarding the question about tensions, well, I think yeah, Special Envoy Hanna Tetteh and myself we talked to the communities in Abyei and also in Warrap State and, clearly from what we heard from those communities, the conclusion is that there are still tensions and there is still a level of mistrust that is significant. So how do we overcome this? I think we shouldn't forget that yes, of course, there are many issues that are unresolved ... the final status we heard about the decision that was made a long time ago, I will not enter into the details. But what we are aware of as well is that those two communities, the Twic and the Ngok, were not fighting each other a year ago and they hadn't been fighting each other for quite some time. Indeed, they had been coexisting peacefully.

So that leads, of course, to the question of what has triggered this violence. There can be a multiplicity of reasons - why has this issue of boundaries suddenly sort of resurfaced and so on so forth. It's difficult to tell because there are many moving parts. I think what we need to look at is more the way forward and how we can deescalate, how we can revert to the situation that we had before these outbreaks of violence where those two communities were living together in peace. And that involves, as I suggested, and I think we are all aware of that, very strong and consistent engagement at all levels. As I said, the

good news is that now this engagement is much more forthcoming at the highest level here in Juba, local level in the states in Abyei, and of course we are highly supportive of that and that is really the way forward.

Now the implication of the final status or lack of solution on the final status, I think that obviously that perpetuates a situation where there are more, let's say risk of instability. I mean it's by definition an unresolved situation whereby or because of which there can be more risk for tension and violence. This is why, we need to be extremely committed to preventing that and, regarding the Twic and the Ngok, of course, mitigating and reverting to that pre-violence situation.

But I would add one thing though. The communities in Abyei are all suffering. They're suffering from lack of resources, lack of services, the impact of climate change. I saw that last year and you know the massive floodings. So, one thing that we have been constantly advocating is more humanitarian support to those communities irrespective of who they are, where they're hailing from. It's not easy because resources are very much overstretched and also the events in Sudan certainly do not help in terms of the delivery of humanitarian assistance. But I came back from Abyei convinced that, however challenged that maybe, we need to make or step up this advocacy in terms of the need for more humanitarian assistance to the communities in Abyei.

Regarding the issue of the refugees and returnees and the extent to which they would be able to vote, I believe that this is one of the issues that will have to be determined and decided upon by the authorities in South Sudan. What I can only say is following up on what SRSR Haysom was saying that, you know, we are looking to an election that would be as inclusive as possible.

Special Envoy Tetteh responding to Reporter # Three: If I may add, the reason why there will not be the opportunity at this stage to discuss the final status is that given the conflict in Sudan, if we were to facilitate a discussion between Sudan and South Sudan on the final status of Abyei, who would be our counterpart on the Sudanese side given the current circumstances in Sudan? And even if we were able to do so, what would be the guarantee that any agreements reached could be implemented especially if there's any change as a result of the ongoing conflict situation. So, when we say that it's not possible to discuss the final status issues at the moment, the current circumstances do not present the opportunity for that to happen.

Having said that, the challenge that currently exists. Is not on the northern side of the Abyei Administrative Area; it is on the southern side. Which means it is a community in South Sudan and a community in the Abyei Administrative Area. Now, as we understand it, it has been the preference of a number of the citizens, if not the majority of the citizens, of Abyei, to be part of South Sudan - ultimately, when this issue is resolved. And that's all the more reason why we think in this particular context, with currently the issues that have given rise to tensions today, this can be resolved without reference to final status is because it is an intercommunal dispute. So that should not jeopardize any efforts to achieve peace at the present time.

SRSR Haysom responding to Reporter # Four: Let me just try and answer the question on refugees. You know, I've said with you before that we offered the parties 10 critical questions which have to be answered for the elections to take place, such as when will there be voter registration, or will there be voting? One of those questions concerns the arrangements for refugees to vote. Which is to say that no provision has actually been concretely developed, but that we put it on the list, and I believe that the political stakeholders, political parties and signatories will have to discuss this question. But I should

indicate that the R-ARCSS contemplates that refugees will be able to vote. The question is, in what way? Will they be required to return to vote? Will there be provision for them to vote where they are? So, the answer strictly is it will be an important question to be resolved. As far as we can tell, it hasn't been resolved at this stage.

Reporter Five: Just one question to the SRSR. On the violence in South Sudan, if you see early this month and last month, there have been a rise in the communal violence and, for example, some communities in likes versus a community in Warrap; a community in Northern Bahr el Ghazal versus a community in Warrap; communities in Abyei and also communities in Warrap as well. Some analysts and researchers say these conflicts are politically motivated. What they say is they understand the cause is related to a scramble over resources and sometimes issues related to borders. In your own understanding, SRSR, do you concur that these conflicts or this violence are politically motivated ahead of the elections, probably politicians could be behind, you know, because of their interest ahead of the elections?

SRSR Haysom: You know, at the moment we in UNMISS are probably involved in seven or eight areas where there is intercommunal conflict. Sometimes it's just below the surface, it's subsided. In other cases, it may break out any moment from whether it is Jonglei or the north, or the south, or the east or the west. We have ourselves noted that there's been a rise in violence, and we've associated it with the tensions which may be arising from the approach to elections.

But I think each one has its own particular causes. What it requires is the response of all of those agencies, including government, to try and mitigate the effects. You would have seen in the media there have been a number of comments which I've certainly noted in which people have pointed out, and I believe the President also pointed this out, that at this rate, it will preclude holding elections if there's a state of generalized violence across the country. We need to contain this violence, the communities, the community leadership at the local level and the Juba level needs to engage in the project of mitigating the violence, if only to protect the rights of the South Sudanese people to have a peaceful, free, fair, and credible election.

Reporter Six: My question goes to Special Envoy Tetteh and it is about climate change. South Sudan and many other countries in the Horn of Africa are experiencing climate change. According to your assessment, how much is climate change impacting on those countries and how is the UN together with the governments of those different countries trying to address or mitigate its impacts?

Special Envoy Tetteh: To respond to your question, climate change is not necessarily a driver of conflict, but to the extent that it impacts the ability of societies communities to be able to get the basic things that they need to sustain their way of life, it is a cause of increased tension. And within this region, the Horn of Africa generally, over the last five years, there have been very significant climate developments. There has been extended droughts in some parts of the region, and there has been extensive flooding in other parts of the region as well. And I'm sure here in South Sudan, in Unity State and in other parts of the country over the last couple of years, you've seen the impact of extensive flooding and that has also been the situation within the Abyei Administrative Area.

So what does that mean? It means that going forward, in order to focus on conflict prevention, it is also important to pay attention to what is happening and what we anticipate as climate developments, so that they do not take communities, governments by surprise.

Luckily, within the Horn of Africa, IGAD has the IGAD Climate Predictions and Application Centre (ICPAC) based in Nairobi, that has very sophisticated systems that is able to predict what the climate patterns within the region are going to be in a particular month in the year ahead in order to help using this forecasting for preparation. And so it's important that government agencies, but not just government agencies but communities as well, use the information that is made available to ensure that they can anticipate some of these climate shocks and begin to respond to them.

For instance, where you have increased flooding, obviously this is not going to be an area where you're going to be able to migrate your cattle to if that was previously a route for the migration of cattle from one part of South Sudan to another. Where you have a situation where there's conflicts, let's talk about what's happening in Sudan right now, it's also clear that that is also going to impact those migratory routes. These are things that with a little bit of effort, can be anticipated.

And I think that going forward across the continent of Africa, but certainly within the Horn of Africa and South Sudan is not an exception, it is important to take into consideration climate events when doing planning across a whole spectrum of national activities in order to mitigate the worst impact of these shocks, and very often, to prepare communities to adapt and to build resilience, to cope with these disasters in a more effective manner.

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Contact: UNMISS Spokesperson at unmiss-spokesperson@un.org