



PRESS RELEASE

PRESS CONFERENCE – OPENING REMARKS AND Q&A

DAVID SHEARER

SPECIAL REPRESENTATIVE OF THE SECRETARY-GENERAL

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[near verbatim]

Good afternoon everybody. Thank you all for joining me today and welcome to everyone who is tuning on Radio Miraya.

This is my final press conference as the Special Representative of the Secretary-General and Head of UNMISS, the UN Mission in South Sudan.

I wanted to take this opportunity to speak directly to you – the people of South Sudan – to thank you for your support and to wish you well as I prepare to depart the country tomorrow after more than four years of service here.

I have so much admiration for the people of this country who I have enjoyed working alongside immensely. You are a tough, resilient, and remarkably patient lot of people.

I am inspired by your seemingly endless hope as you fight against huge odds to achieve the much brighter future you deserve. I will miss this young country, and I wish you well from the bottom of my heart.

I have been extremely privileged to support South Sudan during its difficult transition from war to recovery and to peace.

I am proud of the progress that has been made, including the ceasefire, the peace deal, the formation of a transitional Government and the installation of local leaders in the states.

I am also pleased and encouraged to see that most people who once fled in fear to UN Protection of Civilians sites have either returned home or are living in newly transitioned displacement camps under the responsibility of the South Sudan Government.

While important progress has been made, the peace process remains fragile and there is still much to be done, including picking up the pace on constitution-making, transitional justice, and economic reform.

There are also courageous decisions that need to be made to unify the soldiers of the different parties.

I hope that there is an end to the sporadic but brutal violence that we continue to witness in parts of the country, like Jonglei and Warrap, so that communities right across the country have the opportunity to recover and to rebuild their lives.

I urge the people and leaders of South Sudan to remain unified and energized to push the peace process forward to fully implement the revitalized agreement and hold elections so communities across the country can finally enjoy true peace and prosperity.

When people in years ahead look back on this year, I hope they can say that it was a time when leaders made bold decisions that took unity and peace forward.

I want also to pay tribute to my colleagues – the people from the UN agencies which have stood by South Sudan over many years and the almost 20,000 UN peacekeepers – who are helping to reduce violence and bringing diverse communities together to reconcile and build peace.

UNMISS is a stabilizing force that extends well beyond our physical presence. Our independent surveys of people have consistently shown that we are welcomed by nearly 80 percent of South Sudanese.

We are fully committed to continuing to secure durable peace by working closely with all political parties across regional and international boundaries.

As I said when I came to South Sudan, our success will be measured by the downsizing of our presence. That has started. Over the coming year, there will be a reduction of our military and police peacekeepers by around seven percent.

We are also re-focusing our efforts to ensure that UNMISS is fit-for-purpose in the evolving political and security situation.

We are redeploying staff and resources to build the capacity of important local institutions, like the courts, the justice system and the national police, and prioritizing technical support for the security sector reform as well as the election process itself.

And not to forget the roads, which the troops of seven different companies have worked on so people and goods can travel across this vast country.

I want to also thank my humanitarian colleagues – international and national – for their efforts to provide life-saving assistance to millions of people who are in need.

They are working in remote, difficult and sometimes dangerous conditions to deliver much-needed support to vulnerable communities across South Sudan. I thank them for their courage in risking their own health and wellbeing to help others.

As I prepare to leave, my thoughts and best wishes are with the people of this country who we, as the UN, are here to serve and support in their journey towards lasting peace. I truly wish you a bright and prosperous future.

In finishing, I would like to thank those of you here – the journalists in this room – who work tirelessly to provide communities with the important information they need to stay safe and to understand, and participate in, the peace process.

You work in a tough environment where criticism is too often silenced rather than listened to and heeded as a cry for change.

I know you face difficulties. But please know that your work and efforts matter. Your words have influence to change hearts and minds for the better. So please don't lose heart.

On that note, I want to thank you for being here and let's move to your questions.

Media Q&A

MEDIA: I would like to ask about this seven percent. What number does it represent in the reduction of peacekeepers? Police and military? And why is this reduction happening?

SRSB: The reduction is simple. As we have moved out of the POC sites and they have transitioned to become IDP camps under the authority of the Government, it means that the troops that we use for that purpose – some of those can be repositioned across the country, but some of them can also be withdrawn. It's those peacekeepers and those police that we are looking to reduce in numbers. In approximate numbers, the number of military peacekeepers here is about 14,500, and the police, at full strength, are at about 2,000 or 2,100.

MEDIA: For the time you have been as head of UNMISS, what have been your major successes and challenges? What will you tell your successor about the peace agreement? Would you say you have left South Sudan better than when you arrived? Over the weekend you championed for the return of children and women in Greater Jonglei region. Are you optimistic this process will continue? And lastly, what is the approximate number of people who have left the UN Protection of Civilian sites?

SRSB: When I arrived in January 2017, it was just a few months after the July 2016 fighting. And 2017 was a terrible year. Hundreds of thousands of people fled the country to Uganda, to the refugee camps there and to Sudan from the North. I remember going up to the western side of the Nile, the Upper Nile, and the place was deserted. People had left the country. The situation was grim. As I said in my statement, since then there has been a ceasefire at the end of that year, at the end of 2017; there has been a peace agreement that has largely held; and the transitional Government is in place. If you had asked me 18 months ago whether I would have seen Riek Machar coming into Juba and taking up the role of First Vice President – I would have said that's probably unlikely. But South Sudan is a place that is full of surprises, and sometimes those surprises are very pleasant ones, and today we have a situation where the country is more stable than it was before.

There are challenges ahead. The challenges lie in the increasing amount of violence at a subnational level, and that needs to be addressed. It's not just addressing subnational violence. It's not just addressing it in terms of reconciliation. You have to look at the underlying causes of what creates it. It's not just the spread of weaponry. It's the fact that young men and women don't have jobs. They don't have something to look forward to. They don't have education. And so much of the problems we're seeing fall back on the underlying issues – the lack of education, the lack of jobs, the lack of prosperity. There's no future for the people, so they pick up a gun. While I don't in any way condone it, it's not something that is perhaps necessarily surprising, given the situation.

As you mention, on the weekend we had the first step in what I hope will be many more returns of women and children who were abducted by both sides in the fighting last year. There were around 58 women and children who were flown to Pibor, and women and children from Pibor flown to Pibor. Just think how those 58 women and children felt being able to return home on Easter weekend. That was a major change in their lives. For me, I'm predicting that it will be

the first in many exchanges. And once we have those exchanges, then peace can progress. But while people's families are being held by others, it's very hard to reconcile when that situation still exists. So for me, a few days before I was about to leave South Sudan, this exchange was particularly satisfying. Some people might call it small, but for those people who were involved it was a very large change in their lives.

On the number of people who have left the former POC sites, I remember that Wau was at 28,000; it's now less than 10,000. It's no longer a POC site. Bor is between 1,000 and 1,500 people now. It's going down quickly. We're seeing an outflow of people out of Bentiu as people move home before the rainy season. I don't have the numbers there. I don't think there's been a count there for a while. It used to be around 100,000, and it's probably about two-thirds of that right now. People have started moving back. In part, that's because the situation is a bit better on the ground. For more people to decide to go home, there needs to be education and health services in their villages. If that happens, I think you will see an outpouring of people. Many people are staying put in the IDP camps for services, not because of protection issues. So it's my belief that the challenge now is really for the Government and the humanitarian community to work together to try and establish those services so that people can go home and get the same services they are getting in the IDP camps in their own homes.

MEDIA: On the status of the troubles with the humanitarian access, is it still intense?

SRSB: There is criminality that is occurring across South Sudan, and unfortunately what they are doing is targeting, in many cases, humanitarians who are working in very remote places. As I said before, it's to some degree a function of the fact that many people are not being paid. Military are not being paid. There are no jobs. But people have guns. So what is happening too often people are using those guns in order to feed themselves. As I've said before, nobody condones the use of violence, but it's also important to address the underlying causes of some of that violence as well. That's very important, and that's about paying the salaries, ensuring that people have jobs and an education as well.

In terms of access, UNMISS has enjoyed good access to many areas in the last few months. In the last few weeks, that's become more problematic, particularly in Wau and Yambio. These are areas where we are trying to build roads. It would have been in everybody's interest to have roads in these areas, but we are stopped from doing that. We try to work with the Government and the military to allow us to get through, and some individual stops us. That's the same pattern that is happening with some of the humanitarians as well.

MEDIA: On the report released in March talking about community-based militias, what are your concerns about the surge in subnational fighting? And what is the cause of this increase? And can you talk about the efforts to promote reconciliation and peace talks?

SRSB: The big change that's happened over the last four years is that we've gone from political violence which happened on a very big scale – we're talking hundreds of thousands of people leaving the country – to currently where that political violence has largely ended. But what we are seeing now is a lot more localized violence. The local violence is happening in a relatively small number of payams and counties across the country. Close to 80 percent of the violence is in 17 out of the 79 counties – so it is relatively localized. But where it is happening, it is creating a lot of havoc, a lot of death.

Last year we talked in this room about the situation in Jonglei and the fighting between the groups there, and we talked about how many of those groups were not operating alone. They

were operating with support at a national level. We saw weapons being used that were not usually carried by cattle-keepers. The way the conflict was structured was much more militarized than it was before. There were supplies being brought in to continue to maintain the violence. So there is localized violence around a lot of very local things, but it's sometimes magnified by the fact that others become involved in it. The same thing is happening in Tonj at the moment, and it is between the different clans in the area. But it's also sometimes been magnified by others who have become involved.

One of the big deficits is the fact that there has been no county commissioners and no governors in place until the middle of last year. Slow movement on the peace process is not without cost. If you don't move on things, if you don't move on putting governors and county commissioners in place – and ultimately if you don't have a legislative assembly that can pass legislation and move the constitution along – it will create problems and frustration and anger that will manifest itself in violence. It's been something I've been saying ever since I've been here. The peace process must to move forward. There must be momentum or there will be more problems. Some of the inter-communal violence we are seeing is a direct result of the fact that there was a gap – a vacuum of power at the local level – that allowed various groups to take advantage. It's important that the peace process moves on and maintains its momentum.

MEDIA: On the reduction of forces, could you clarify whether it is a decision of the UN Security Council? And what do you see as the impact of the reduction of forces for South Sudan? Also, what is your overall assessment of the revitalized peace agreement?

SRSB: We've been able to plan for a reduction in our forces by a modest amount over the next one or one-and-a-half years due to the fact that the POC sites that we used those forces to guard are no longer under our authority. That also goes for the formed police units that we used to use when there were disturbances inside the POCs. So it gives us an ability to be more mobile and to use some of the forces that we pulled out of the POCs to be more mobile across the country. And it also gives us the ability to reduce the overall numbers in the country too.

I think it's important to show that if there is a peace agreement, and if there is peace, and if violence is reducing, then the UN will also look to change its posture as well. Now we're not leaving completely, as many of you know. About three weeks ago, we had our mandate extended for another 12 months. So we're not going anywhere. But we believe we are repurposing ourselves, restructuring ourselves, to take into account the new situation.

If, for example, we have functional courts in the main areas – Wau, Bentiu, and other places – then people can be protected by their own police who arrest criminals. It's a much better way of protecting people. In my country, I rely not on a peacekeeping force. I rely on the police and the justice system to protect me. That's what South Sudan should be moving toward. So our restructuring is about trying to build the local capacity of South Sudan to be able to protect its own people, independent of our peacekeepers. You're not going to see a large exodus right now, but it's a good signal to send that the situation is getting better.

Is the peace agreement safe? Yes, I do believe it is. I have spent a long time talking with South Sudan's leaders. I just spent an hour chatting with the President. Last week I spent nearly two hours talking with Dr. Riek Machar. I've spent a lot of time talking with many others. I don't believe there's an appetite to go back to political conflict. I believe the peace agreement is secure. But the agreement needs to progress. It can't sit and stagnate. And to move it forward needs courage. The biggest and most courageous decisions need to be around the unification of the forces. You have to bring the forces together into one South Sudan military. That needs

to happen, and that needs courage. Other countries have done it – just about every country where there was a civil war. You had to bring troops together and make them feel like they are functioning under one unified command, under one general, one president. I think there needs to be momentum on that front and also there needs to be real work to try and calm the intercommunal violence because that can bubble up and spread to other areas as well.

MEDIA: What can you say about accountability in terms of those who are killing people around the country without any justice?

SRSB: It's a very good question. Accountability stops impunity. If you are accountable, if you are going to be held to account, then there will be less impunity. I was reminded of this the other day. A little while ago, a colleague of mine was up in Bentiu where we had opened one of the mobile courts. In the courtroom was a young woman who had been gang-raped by four men. They brought these four men in, who were very arrogant because they believed they were immune and that nothing was going to happen to them. But then they saw the woman standing there, and the other women around willing to testify and be witnesses, and their faces fell. After two days of the court hearing they received sentences between four and 12 years. The next day, that same colleague of mine went to the court and saw 48 women lined up outside the courtroom. She was told that after what happened the day before, these women were coming to be witnesses in the next trial.

I believe that the reduction in sexual violence in Bentiu – it's still a problem – has a lot to do with the fact that there are courts that function and people are being held accountable. I agree with your proposition that these people need to be held accountable. And there's lots of ways we should be able to do that – and one of these ways is the hybrid court. The hybrid court, in particular, should focus on the issues of the last year or two before it focuses on earlier issues. Without accountability, impunity will continue.

MEDIA: On the importance of the implementation of the peace agreement, one of the concerns is about the arms embargo. Are you going to talk to the Security Council about the arms embargo?

SRSB: No, I don't have a meeting with the Security Council. I did meet with the Security Council about a month ago. But the question of an arms embargo doesn't involve UNMISS. It's a question for the Council, and we don't have a position and we're not asked, as a general rule.

MEDIA: A few clarifications. On the reduction of the peacekeeping force, you did say that over the coming year, you meant 2021 or 2022? You mentioned 14,500 military peacekeepers and 2,000 police. Is this figure of 2,000 separate from the 14,500? And lastly, where did the decision for this reduction come from? Is it the UN Security Council? And when was it made?

SRSB: The numbers I gave you are the numbers as of now, because nothing has changed yet. We are looking at the reduction being in total around 1,400 people – if it proceeds as planned. It's linked to the budget, not to the Security Council decision. The Council has given us a ceiling of 17,000 troops, and that remains. So it's possible that if anything should happen that requires more troops, then they can be brought in. The decision to down-size by this small amount is going to be dependent on what happens. If fighting breaks out, that may be reviewed. But as we sit here, that's the number that will be reduced. That comes from our decision to re-designate the POCs, so it comes from within the mission. It's not something that has been imposed upon us by the Security Council. We've spoken to the Security Council about it, and about our plans going forward.

MEDIA: After the past four years, do you have any regrets? And what is the last memory as you will be getting into that plane to depart?

SRSB: I don't look at life and think about regrets. I've met some wonderful people here, and despite all of the problems that people face and the struggles that they have, they can still smile and still laugh, and still laugh at themselves, as well as laugh at me. I've had great friendships with some fantastic South Sudanese. And if I have a regret, it's that those people still haven't gotten the country that they really deserve.

I have traveled all over this country. I've been to every single one of our bases across the country. I've been lots of places where I've sat under trees and spoken to people and chatted with them. I think there's just so much potential. I remember being down in Maridi and sitting under a tree just after the peace agreement was signed. Everybody was sitting together in their uniforms, coming together for the first time. We had flown some of them in to bring them all together. They laughed and joked with each other. I know that some of it was maybe politeness, but they genuinely wanted to see this country move forward. All of them.

So I guess my biggest regret as I leave is that I think South Sudan could be so much more than what it is at the moment. I thought that maybe things could have moved more quickly, particularly in the last year or so. Every country, at its birth, has gone through problems. South Sudan is going through its tough times, but I would have hoped that we would have been in a better place than where we are right now. That's perhaps my biggest regret.

Some of my best memories? I know there are a lot of people I'm going to miss, but I'm also going to stay in contact, and that's nice.

MEDIA: What did you tell the President as you are leaving the country? Also, civil society says that there seems to be no political will in the leaders about the peace agreement. What is your last call to them to pick up the pace?

SRSB: I said a lot of things to the President, but one of the things that I acknowledged is that it's probably the toughest job you can have in this environment. To keep the peace process moving is the most important thing – to make sure it continues to develop as it goes forward.

When it comes to civil society, this is the backbone in any situation. There is no such thing as a peace process that doesn't involve civil society – anywhere in the world – so it's important that civil society continues to keep hope and keep active and keep pushing. And sometimes that's going to take some courage, as we saw last week when there were demonstrations and people were locked up. But you just keep doing it, you just keep going.

The final word is that you – you journalists in this room – you are the eyes and ears of the people out there. It's your words that they hear. It's through your words that they come to understand what's going on here. Again, you're going to need courage. But keep doing it, because your work is so important for this country. Don't be deterred. Don't be frightened. Continue on. Your job is a very important one for this country.

All my very best wishes to you in this room, and beyond.

And best wishes to the people of South Sudan.

Thank you very much.