



PRESS RELEASE

Statement of the Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General David Shearer

Briefing to the Security Council on South Sudan

23 June 2020

Madame President and Council Members.

Thank you for the opportunity to brief you on the situation in South Sudan.

I would like to begin by acknowledging the devastation caused by COVID-19 to the people and economies of all Member States and nations around the world. These are truly challenging times.

Some early-affected countries are now beginning to emerge from the crisis. But for others, the full impact is only now beginning to hit. South Sudan is one of those countries. While its 1,900 recorded cases appear low, limited testing as well as social stigma is obscuring the true magnitude of the virus.

The only antidote to COVID, as we know, is prevention. The government's prevention measures, informed by WHO guidance, have been communicated constantly through campaigns across the country, supported by UNICEF and UNMISS.

Yet, despite widespread awareness, observance of these measures has been patchy. Few will submit to isolation at home. The need to earn a living means that people's behaviour remains unchanged – not working today means not eating tomorrow.

Madame President, Council Members,

Our greatest fear of COVID is its potential impact on the already fragile health system. Disruption to vaccinations, maternal health services or routine treatment for curable diseases like malaria, diarrhea and pneumonia will result in a devastating increase in deaths – likely greater than the loss of life from COVID itself.

This is the lesson we must learn from Ebola in West Africa when 11,000 died from the virus but many more died from totally preventable health problems.

To keep clinics open, it is imperative that health workers have Personal Protective Equipment. Already 86 health workers have been infected. PPE is in short supply and health workers are fearful. Meanwhile, their salaries continue to go unpaid.

Experts predict the pandemic here will peak in July or August. For those that become seriously ill, there is little in the way of critical care.

International support and the Ministry of Health have expanded the infectious diseases hospital in Juba. In the regions, UNMISS has renovated and equipped hospitals in 10 states. Non-Governmental Organizations are stepping up to staff these facilities, but equipment and expertise is severely lacking.

We are doing what we can to give limited care to critical patients who previously had nothing. But more importantly, these measures are designed to reduce the risk of COVID transmission to other facilities so that we can protect them and continue treating common but lethal illnesses.

The challenge for peacekeepers and humanitarians alike is to balance carrying out critical work while exercising a duty of care to keep our staff safe so that, in turn, they can continue to deliver.

That means peacekeeping patrols – which must interact with local populations – are currently prioritized to critical areas where lives are most at risk.

UNPOL's efforts are also more focused. Two weeks ago, UNPOL was called on to quell fighting between youth in the Juba POC site. Dozens of Rwandan police officers physically intervened, and in doing so, exposed themselves to COVID-19. Their partner contingent was unable to support them as it was in quarantine because some of its personnel tested positive in earlier operations.

We ask our people to take risks to do their jobs. But we have a duty to ensure they are well equipped and that the risks they take are necessary. If we don't, we could lose our operational capabilities and possibly lives. That is the balance we need to strike.

Madame President and Council Members.

Following my briefing in March, there have been some encouraging steps towards peace – the formation of the transitional government, appointment of vice-presidents and a joint cabinet, and gathering of troops at training sites for reunification.

That is all positive, particularly if we compare it to less than a year ago, when the transitional government seemed in doubt and Riek Machar's return to Juba uncertain.

Last week, a four-month stand-off between parties over the allocation of states to parties ended. The individual governors are yet to be named, but women should take at least three of these positions.

These appointments are critical to fill a power vacuum. The political impasse, on top of the COVID lock down, caused conflict to escalate with violent incidents multiplying four-fold in two years.

In Jonglei, Unity, Lakes, Warrap and Western Equatorial states, hundreds of civilians have been killed, women and children abducted, property stolen or destroyed and over 60,000 people displaced.

This violence can no longer be pigeonholed as “intercommunal.” Fighters in uniform have been spotted amongst them suggesting that organized forces may be joining the conflict which risks unravelling the ceasefire.

A truly unified national leadership would have acted promptly and stepped in to curb this conflict. Instead, the violence has been allowed to play out and is being used to sort out power arrangements at the national and subnational levels.

This cycle of impunity fuels serious human rights violations where civilians once again bear the brunt of violence.

These tensions have also been reflected in riots between different communities living inside the Protection of Civilians sites. Today, POC residents face greater intimidation from people they live alongside than external threats for which the sites were originally founded.

Tragically, the escalating violence has hit the most desperate even harder. People in Jonglei, for instance, live in what is described by WFP and FAO as the “famine triangle”, where livelihoods were shattered by last year’s floods.

A new addendum to the Humanitarian Response Plan, outlines the deterioration, combined with a hike in food prices from COVID-related transport delays. About 7.4 million people will need humanitarian assistance, an increase of 1.6 million, including many urban poor who previously did not need support.

Last week, the Humanitarian Country Team launched a \$390 million addendum to its original plan to respond to the additional needs.

Madame President and Council Members.

My report today might have been more bleak had it not been for the recent agreement between parties on the allocation of states. However, the peace process is faltering. It requires renewed energy and a reset.

I would like to leave you with three key takeaways:

First, what is needed from a Transitional Government of National Unity?

A unity government, by definition, takes decisions collaboratively – whether as a presidency or cabinet. This way of working needs to become a habit, not an exception.

A unity government – acts in the best interests of all its people regardless of ethnic identity – and should act collectively and swiftly to curtail conflict in the states.

Within a unity government, parties should negotiate their positions, of course, but important decisions such as those concerning the Constitution, should remain true to the peace agreement.

And, collective solutions must be found to advance Transitional Security Arrangements so that soldiers no longer walking away from their locations in the absence of food and supplies.

Second, we acknowledge that regional partners are beset by their own COVID-19 struggles. But it is vital that the guarantors and IGAD remain actively engaged to maintain the momentum of the peace process. Maintaining the ceasefire, for example, between NAS and government forces that is causing immense harm in Central Equatoria is also a priority.

Third, COVID is going to hit hard. But not necessarily in the way that we think. Yes, people will die from the virus, like everywhere else in the world.

But the real threat to the people of South Sudan lies in the collapse of the already fragile health system. This could result in many, many more lives being lost – a tragedy that can be prevented.

Lastly, I would like to finish with a message from the UN to the transitional government and people of South Sudan: We are here, standing strong with you as we pass through this COVID-19 emergency. The UN, humanitarian agencies and donors have remained and, together, we are saving and changing lives.

By working together, we can overcome COVID and, also, push the peace process forward so that South Sudan can achieve the lasting peace and prosperity it deserves.

Thank you.