

UNITED NATIONS
United Nations Mission
In Ethiopia and
Eritrea



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UNMEE PUBLIC INFORMATION

A near verbatim transcript of the press briefing held by the Spokeswoman and Chief of Public Information Gail Bindley-Taylor in Asmara, via videoconference linking participants in Addis Ababa and Asmara.

MEDIA BRIEFING NOTES- 15 APRIL 2004

POLITICAL

On 8th April the Special Representative of the Secretary-General, Ambassador Legwaila Joseph Legwaila accompanied by the DSRSG- Addis Ababa, Mr. Cheikh Tidiane Gaye, inaugurated the newly built automobile workshop at the Addis Ababa UNMEE Headquarters in the presence of UNMEE staff. The SRSG returned to Asmara on 11 April.

On Tuesday, 13 April, DSRSG Gaye met with His Excellency Robert Dewar, the British Ambassador to Ethiopia. They exchanged views on the current situation in the peace process. On the same day the DSRSG- Asmara, Ms Angela Kane met with the Chargé d'affaires of the US Embassy to Ethiopia, Mr. Tom Hull, and briefed him on the status of the peace process.

MILITARY

General Overview

During the past week, UNMEE conducted 720 ground and 8 air reconnaissance patrols throughout the Area of Responsibility (AOR). The general situation in the Mission area remains militarily stable. There have been no significant changes in troop locations or dispositions reported over the past week.

In all sectors, UNMEE peacekeepers continued to provide medical assistance to local civilians, including Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), along with supplies of bulk water to civilian communities in the Temporary Security Zone (TSZ) and the Adjacent Areas.

Restrictions of Freedom of Movement

The Asmara – Keren – Barentu road continues to remain closed to all UNMEE vehicular movement, a restriction that considerably hampers UNMEE operations in Sector West.

Mine Action

The Slovak Engineering Company, demining mechanically and manually, cleared an area of 4,150 square metres in the Adi Hakin-Mai Hbey minefield and an area of 300 square meters in the vicinity of the village of Sheshebit (8 kilometres southeast of Shilalo) in Sector West. Four POMZ-2M mines, 56 MUV-2 mines, two TNT charges, one detonator and three 7.62mm cartridges were cleared in the Adi Hakin-Mai Hbey minefield. In Sector Centre, a detachment from the Company manually cleared a total area of 2,682 square meters along access roads to the border area near Ksad Eiqa, about 15 kilometres south of Adi Quala. No unexploded ordnance (UXOs) was found.

The Kenyan Demining Engineering Company, working in the Adi Hakin-Mai Hbey minefield, manually cleared an area of 1,873 metres and disposed of one POMZ-2M mine, one detonator and one fuse.

The Bangladesh Engineering Company demined an area of 9,200 square metres along the road Shilalo to Maykokah and destroyed one PMA-3 mine, one PMN-2 mine and two 60 mm mortar shells. The Company also demined an area of 10,800 square meters along the road Bushuka to May Ambesha, clearing 1,050 pieces of 12.7 mm anti aircraft machine gun ammunition, one TM 62m mine, one mortar shell and several rounds of small arms ammunition.

Meetings And Visits

On 8th April, the Acting Force Commander (A/FC) Brigadier-General Walid Krieshan met the Ethiopian Commissioner for Coordination with the Peacekeeping Mission, Brigadier-General Yohannes Gebremeskel to discuss issues concerning UNMEE activities in Ethiopia. On the same day, the Deputy Military Adviser of the Department of Peacekeeping Operations at the UN Headquarters at New York, Brigadier General Elhadji Mouhamadou Kandji, arrived on a five-day familiarization visit to UNMEE. Following briefings in Asmara, he toured the three sectors on successive days. On 12 April, Brigadier General Kandji traveled to Addis Ababa where he met separately with DSRSG Addis Ababa, Mr. Cheikh-Tidiane Gaye, officials from the African Union and the Ethiopian Commissioner Brigadier-General Yohannes Gebremeskel.

Questions and Answers

Question (Asmara): About the UNMEE employees who were detained a few weeks ago near Barentu, what is the situation regarding them?

Spokeswoman: I have to get the exact figure for you but I do know that some were released and some have remained in detention. What I would have to get for you are

the figures from the human rights because our human rights office has been handling it and has been looking into the detentions.

The Spokeswoman confirmed that 13 persons have been released following the intervention by UNMEE's Human Rights office in Barentu, while 23 remain in detention.

Question (Asmara): Have representations been made to the Eritrean government regarding this and what level if they are taking place?

Spokeswoman: Yes, because human rights is very concerned about anybody working for UNMEE being detained no matter what level they are.

Question (Asmara): So would you say that Ambassador Legwaila has been involved in this?

Spokeswoman: Yes, absolutely, because he is aware of what is happening and as I mentioned earlier he has gone to see the Commissioner (for Coordination with the Peacekeeping Mission) this morning. So I am sure this will be one of the talking points.

Question (Asmara): And what have the Eritreans said to him in response about this?

Spokeswoman: Well the SRSG has not actually had a meeting with the Commissioner about this because as you know just before this, it was the fasting season here and then Fasica (Easter) and the SRSG himself has been away (in Addis Ababa) so this is the first opportunity that he has had to speak with the Commissioner since he spoke with you last. And I would expect that once he has come back from the Commissioner we would have a lot more that we can say on these things.

Question (Asmara): How would you say relations are going with the Eritrean government?

Spokeswoman: I think at the moment we would characterize the situation right now as one where there seems to be a number of issues to be discussed on a constant basis. We have had a number of restrictions of freedom of movement that are of concern to us, there is the situation with the road (Asmara- Keren-Barentu) but we continue to talk.

Question (Asmara): Would you say that the Eritrean government is harassing some of your employees?

Spokeswoman: I would not go so far as to say that they are harassing our employees but I certainly would say that at the moment we seem to have some difficulties particularly regarding local staff.

Question (Asmara): It has been put to me by the Eritrean government that part of the problem is that you are employing a lot of people who have been deported from

Ethiopia, people the Eritrean government have said to me are the enemy and that is part of the problem, how would you respond to that?

Spokeswoman: Well that is something that I will have to take under advisement, I mean this is the first time that I am hearing that we are employing large numbers of people who are Ethiopian.

Question (Asmara): I did not say Ethiopian, I said perhaps Eritrean, of Ethiopian up bringing.

Spokeswoman: UNMEE has procedures for hiring, which I think are fairly strict and I would expect that if the Eritrean government has a problem with our hiring practices this again will be something that they will take up with the SRSG.

Question (Asmara): Have they raised this issue before because I have heard that they had raised this issue before with UNMEE?

Spokeswoman: They have mentioned that before, yes that is the fact.

Question (Asmara): And how did UNMEE respond? Did UNMEE have any response for that?

Spokeswoman: Well as I said, we have our hiring practices that we conform to and I am sure that any concerns that the Eritreans raise with us will be taken seriously, if this is an issue. But that is all that I can say on that.

Question (Asmara): It is regarding the UN Special Envoy, I am sure you have followed the news reports from last week, has there been any progress from the United Nations in New York? If you have heard of any progress about possible clarification of what the Special Envoy's mission is?

Spokeswoman: I know that the UN has been asked to do so and there is talk of a statement being prepared in New York.

Question (Asmara): A statement has been prepared in New York and do you know what sort of time scale that is going to be?

Spokeswoman: No, I have no idea what time scale it is going to be or how it is going to be released.

Question (Asmara): So can we take it as a fact that the EU delegation reported back to the UN in New York and now the UN in New York are going to respond to it?

Spokeswoman: I do not know whether that has been the trend of events--that this is happening because the EU has necessarily asked New York for clarification-- because I think the request for clarification has also come from here. So I don't think that it is necessarily the EU that is driving that.

Question (Asmara): How did UNMEE regard last week's developments the visit of the EU delegation and the suggestion by the Eritreans that under certain conditions they will be willing to meet with the Special Envoy.

Spokeswoman: Well you know I mean the Eritreans are entitled to give their opinion on this particular issue. We are not entitled to comment on their comments. What I do think is we welcomed the visit of the EU, I think the SRSG said that to the journalists when he spoke with them before the delegation came, that he would welcome any (initiative) that moves the process forward.

Question (Asmara): But do you see that possibly at last, there being some movement after a period of stalemate for quite a period of time?

Spokeswoman: We would hope that things will change in the future. If you look at the recent Security Council resolution (1531) it has given the Parties the next six months for things to move forward, if you read it that is what it says clearly. So we would welcome anything that moves the process forward.

Question (Asmara): Do you think the process is perhaps once again moving forward?

CPIO: That is difficult to say at this time. It is very early. We do not have any tangible proof of anything at this point in time except what we have read in the news reports.

Question (Addis): Maybe well, I sound a little bit out of context, but my question is what kind of connection is now possible in general between Ethiopia and Eritrea? And the second part of the question is I would like to emphasize first of all on low-level aircraft connection. Is it possible? I mean helicopters do they cross the border? Do they somehow monitor the border?

Spokeswoman: At the moment we are still trying to negotiate direct flights for UNMEE-- and I trust that your question is regarding the peacekeeping Mission itself-- we are still trying to negotiate direct flights between Ethiopia and Eritrea. At the moment that does not happen. In fact it takes us now three hours and ten minutes to get between both capitals.

Question (Addis): If I understood correctly, now there is no such kind of connections, no high- level altitude, no low level altitude flights?

Spokeswoman: No, there are no high- altitude flights, no direct flights between....

Question (Addis): And no low level also? I mean helicopters, low-level aircrafts.

Spokeswoman: Oh helicopters, our helicopters do go across the border, yes.

Question (Addis): Do they monitor the border? Monitoring of the border; is it also with helicopters?

Spokeswoman: We do monitor the border areas, yes. The Force monitors the border areas both on the ground and from the air because by helicopters we have what are called “recce” (reconnaissance) missions.

Question (Addis): *I see. And if it’s possible to answer, how many helicopters are involved?*

Spokeswoman: That is a difficult question I would have to check exactly how many helicopters are involved. We have two types of helicopters. If you want to know the exact number of the fleet of helicopters that we have, that I will have to check for you. But we do have two types, one that is used for medical emergencies, especially at night and the others that are used regularly during the day to move the military from one point to another and civilians at times.

The Spokeswoman confirms that the Mission has seven MI8 helicopters and two Bell 212 military helicopters in its fleet.

MPIO: In fact we have two types of helicopters, one for medivac purposes, this is the Bell type helicopter and other one for carrying the passengers and carrying out recce missions, for that we have got the MI8 helicopter. And about the exact figure, as Gail has said we need to get the necessary information from our AIROPS (or Air Operations) then we can give you the total number or the figure.

For further enquires please contact: Gail Bindley-Taylor-Sainte, Spokeswoman and Chief, Public Information Office Or UNMEE Headquarters Asmara, telephone: 291-1-150411- extension 6017 or our tie-line in New York: 00-1-212-963-3779-Ext 6017 or George Somerwill, Deputy Chief, Public Information Office UNMEE Headquarters Addis Ababa, telephone: 251-1-726895 extension 7104; Mobile: 251 9 223031. UNMEE Website: <http://www.unmeeonline.org>