

Near Verbatim Transcript, including Questions and Answers

Press Conference on the situation in South Sudan

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From UNMISS Headquarters, Juba, by video link to United Nations Headquarters, New York

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Opening remarks by SRSG Hilde F. Johnson

Today I visited some of the IDPs [internally displaced persons] who have sought refuge in our UNMISS base here in Juba. Two women had just given birth to two babies: a baby girl and a baby boy. While one had a father, the other father's whereabouts were unknown. They lost each other while fleeing from the bullets.

At our overwhelmed hospital, people were treated for many things, including a number of them for gunshot wounds. A trader selling fish was caught in the crossfire in Bor and was happy he had survived. This also happened to another, who had suffered several gunshot wounds, and had seen his shop totally looted by armed groups. He had nothing more to keep his family going. But he was alive.

These past 11 days have been a very trying time for South Sudan and its citizens. What has happened this last week has for so many South Sudanese brought back the nightmares of the past.

The nationhood painstakingly built over decades of conflict and strife is at stake. And for us, one of the most important things is to have those nightmares end.

I, therefore, call on the political leaders of South Sudan to order their forces to lay down their arms and give peace a chance. And to do so urgently. That is my first key message today.

Today, President Kenyatta of Kenya and the Ethiopian Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn visited Juba. IGAD heads of state have engaged actively with both parties, and a summit of IGAD will take place in Nairobi tomorrow. They have just departed and I am waiting to get an outcome of their meetings.

The Mission fully supports these intense and ongoing efforts of South Sudan's neighbours to seek a peaceful resolution to the current crisis.

I have been in regular contact with President Kiir and other political leaders of South Sudan on this very critical process to bring an end to the fighting and violence that is unfolding as we speak.

My second message is that the mission, UNMISS, is here to stay and protect.

We are maintaining and increasing our footprint and presence across the country. While we need to protect our staff and relocate those that are not critical from many locations, we are increasing our capacity elsewhere.

We are improving an increased and rapid redeployment of available mission assets to the most volatile areas and in particular where civilians have sought refuge in our camps which are now at over 50,000 civilians in our various compounds in Juba, Bor, Bentiu, and Malakal and elsewhere. Their presence is an eloquent testimony to the acute need for enhanced UN operations in South Sudan.

Therefore we are not abandoning South Sudan. We are here to stay and we are here to protect. We will do everything possible with our resources[inaudible].

At the same time we need to also increase those resources. For that reason I welcome the UN Security Council Resolution to bolster the ranks of our peacekeepers and UN police by 5,500 and dispatch more military helicopters and assets to enhance the Mission's capability to protect civilians to actually implement our mandate.

At this point of time, the military is overstretched with current protection obligations related to the civilians in our camps and making sure they are safe.

And we are also doing some patrols now – both day and night – in the neighbourhoods of Juba to try to create a more protective environment for people so they can return to their homes. However, many will remain in the camps due to insecurity.

We are strengthening our compounds to make sure they can carry better and improved security for the civilians and our military and civilian personnel.

The scale of the crisis has challenged an already overstretched Mission. We must not only protect civilians in our compounds and camps, we must also be able to protect them out there, when they are under threat in the environment of violence. That is why these increased resources are so essential.

We are in desperate need for improved capacity and strength to be able to implement the mandate in a much more proactive way.

But let me underline: all peacekeepers are under the instruction to use force when civilians are under imminent threat, within their capabilities. That is an instruction that is also there for those who are protecting our camps and civilians seeking refuge there.

My third message is related to our protection mandate and that it also includes the rights of civilians—their rights are essential.

We have heard reports of extra-judicial killings, arbitrary detentions of civilians, ill-treatment, abuse and also mass graves. Our human rights officers have been working around the clock, throughout this crisis, and they are investigating these reports and allegations.

It is essential that all perpetrators of human rights violations are held accountable for their crimes. In that regard, I welcome President Kiir's statement of 24 December calling for arrest of anyone involved in atrocities and that he would hold them accountable. We are expecting action to follow.

Let me finally say a few words about our humanitarian response as a UN family: I draw your attention to today's call by UN OCHA for \$166 million in emergency relief aid to provide clean water and sanitation, food, shelter, health care and livelihood assistance for those in dire need.

Overall, it has been estimated that South Sudan needs \$1.1 billion in humanitarian aid, so the \$166 million is not a flash report...[inaudible]...the humanitarian coordinator will come back with a more comprehensive assessment.

We continue to provide food, water and other supplies as well as some medical treatment and sanitation facilities to civilians in our compounds. We have established a good partnership with our humanitarian partners that are taking on many of these services.

As you know, humanitarian response is not the mandate of UN Missions and is not our area of expertise. It is therefore critical that our humanitarian partners undertake these important functions. This is now working and we are consistently increasing services to the people in the camps.

Let me end with some words on South Sudan as a nation. The diversity of this nation should not be a force for division. Diversity should be an asset, a strength, and a source of unity in the process of nation building.

Today, unity among South Sudanese is more needed than ever, and it is absolutely fundamental that leaders of the country and all political forces and communities now put their identities of South Sudanese first and not their own identities as members of a particular community.

It is on that account that this country can move forward out a situation of violence and strife and onto a peaceful track.

And the babies that I saw this morning. Let us hope they can grow up in a South Sudan at peace and in stability and an opportunity to be in prosperity and development. Thank you very much, and I will be happy to take questions.

Questions and answers:

Question: Evelyn Leopold, contributor to the Huffington Post. Thank you for doing this, on behalf of the UN Correspondents' Association. The first question is, did you see this coming? And if so, what were the signs that it would get that brutal? And secondly, can you update us on Bor, where there seems to be clashes between the two sides, and the UN camps?

Hilde Johnson: On the issue of if we did see it coming. Before the crisis broke out and the violence erupted, there were 800 international business men and women in South Sudan on an investment conference which was actually organized and very actively supported by all the international partners. It was one of the biggest conferences in the region, with enthusiastic support, and a lot of investment deals were signed. That was basically on the 4th, 5th and 6th of December. Ten days later, we have the situation. No, we did not see this coming. However, what we did know were the internal challenges and tensions within the SPLM...[inaudible]...of whether this country would be moving forward...[inaudible].

In my statement to the Security Council, just prior to this in late November, I actually said that the test to this positive development now...[inaudible]...cautiously optimistic as I said will materialise, will be the internal dynamics in the SPLM and how they are managed. So we knew there were tensions and this could lead to problems. But I don't think any South Sudanese nor any of us observers in country or outside expected the unravelling of the stability so quickly. We knew ethnic tensions have unfortunately a great potential to be destabilising in this country. But the speed, the gravity and the scale, I think nobody would have expected [inaudible] very disturbed by. It is still possible to stabilize this country if all good forces come together.

About your second question, on the situation in Bor. There is still fighting. According to the latest reports, the Government forces still control the airstrip and the key cross points in the town...[inaudible]. Yes, there is still fighting which also of course impacts a lot on the civilians in town.

Martin Nesirky: Thank you very much. I am going to go to Lou and then to Edith.

Question: Lou Charbonneau, Reuters. Thanks. I am wondering if you could tell us when you expect the first reinforcements from neighbouring countries to arrive and if you will be able to get them in the next few days at the earliest. Who is coming first?

Hilde Johnson: Thank you very much. A very good question. We are working around the clock to get assets in that can assist us in this crisis as quickly as possible. And we have had conversations with other missions today and yesterday. Without saying too much about it...[inaudible]...till the process has been finalised in New York, we are working on 48 hour delivery of several of the critical assets that we need. If we manage to do that, I think we are able to push the system beyond what is the normal procedures. But we are assisted by very good colleagues in New York and other missions that now understand that the scale and the challenges in South Sudan need to be met with unprecedented speed. That is what we are trying to achieve.

Question: Edith Lederer from the Associated Press. Just as a quick follow up to Lou. When you say critical assets in the next 48 hours, does that include human assets as well as equipment such as helicopters? My question is, you said there was still fighting going on in Bor. We hear that fighting has spread elsewhere throughout the country and is still going on. I wonder if you could tell us the extent of the fighting today. And also, whether you could comment on the number of deaths. Your humanitarian coordinator talked about of more than a thousand. I wonder if you could give us some indication. Thank you.

Hilde Johnson: First on whether it is human or equipment resources, I will have to respond that it is both. We are expecting both people and equipment or assets to come. I don't want to get into any details about what it is and from where because that is still not finalised as a process and we need to allow our colleagues both in New York and in others missions to complete the process accordingly.

As regards where we have seen fighting...[inaudible]. In Bor, but more heavy in Malakal, which is the State capital of Upper Nile State. It is more peaceful in Bentiu, although we have forces of the Fourth Division that have pledged allegiance to Riek Machar and Government forces in the State [inaudible]. We have still some unrest in isolated locations but the main violence today has been Malakal and to some extent Bor. Although it is of a lesser scale than we have seen in Bor. Bor is still quiet but fighting is going on.

As regards the numbers, as always, the situation is very fluid. Having a full overview of casualty figures is close to impossible. But...[inaudible]...estimated over a thousand...[inaudible]. However, I think he was quoted as saying thousands and thousands, and that was not a correct representation of what he originally said. So you know that. But clearly, the figures are increasing with the fighting. We are not in a position today to give you an exact number for obvious reasons.

Martin Nesirky: Thank you very much. And just for your information, Ms Johnson, the audio is dropping in and out occasionally. And it did at the crucial moment when you were speaking about the casualty figures. You may wish to repeat yourself on that.

Hilde Johnson: Okay, with regards to the casualty figures. It is correct that the Humanitarian Coordinator estimated well over a thousand or more and we do agree with that, it is an assessment of the Mission as a whole. However, there was...[inaudible]...from Tony Lanzer, in which he was quoted as saying "thousands and thousands" and it was not a correct quote. So I wanted to make that clear. However, the longer this lasts and the more conflict, fighting we will see around the country, we will indeed see the casualty figures increase. But giving an exact figure at this time is not possible.

Martin Nesirky: Okay, thank you. Matthew next, then George.

Question: I wanted to ask you about Bentiu. It's been said that President Kiir's forces had said they are going to retake or could have already retaken it. Has it been? Who's in control in Bentiu and what's the Mission's position in terms of any retaking or any reentering by

force? And also, I'm sure you saw in *The Guardian* December 23rd piece, they said that President Kiir had spoken on accountability but in the middle of that article they said that, quote "young men from the Dinka community many of them with no military training were given uniforms from armories, including one located in President Kiir's own compound known as J1". And I wanted to know what do you make of that? Is your Mission in a position to look into this allegation against the President or at least arms within his compound. Do you think it's possible that some of these atrocities have been committed by the Government or with the Government's knowledge? In which case, what will your Mission do about it? Thank you.

Hilde Johnson: Well, first in regard to Bentiu, it's too early to say...[inaudible]...there are two forces present and there might be attempt at retaking the city. However, what we are now hoping for is a political track can be established as soon as possible, which in that case would imply, we hope, that talks would be taking place in tranquility and that these operations would not be pursued. This is too early to say. We are waiting for the outcome of what has happened amongst the IGAD heads of State and their consultations.

As regards to what has unfolded in terms of human rights violations, abuse, and atrocities that seem to have been committed. All of those issues, and all of those allegations and reports, as I said, are being looked into by our human rights division, and they will investigate and verify. I may also add that during the night of 15 to 16 December several of the armories of the forces of the Government, whether Presidential Guard or SPLA, were broken into and a significant number of uniforms and arms were stolen and taken. So that is an important factual piece of information that also needs to be included in any of the investigations going forward. But it is far too early to assess anything in terms of possible perpetrators or indeed responsible actors. We need to see a solid verification and investigation process take place.

Question: This is kind of a recasting of my question to the Secretary-General at the stakeout on Friday afternoon. Is this really an organized rebellion? In which case if they can get them to the table, you can negotiate with Mr. Machar. Or is it rather a series of sporadic outbreaks? And why did this happen at this particular time, in very nearly, to the month, two and a half years after independence. Surely not as a result of that investment conference? Why did it happen now? What do you think caused this outbreak at this time?

Hilde Johnson: Well, it is very important to underline that this is a political struggle, a political struggle within the ruling party, the SPLM. For those of you who know the history of South Sudan and of the SPLM-A, these tensions have existed for a very long time. Some of the developments that we have seen also have their origin in these early tensions. The political struggle between two leaders, but includes also multi-ethnic representation on both sides. So it's not as if this is an ethnic conflict, so to speak, it is a...[inaudible]...with multi ethnic representation on both sides.

Why it happened at this particular moment? It is pure speculation and I don't think at this time it is appropriate for me to enter into that. We can just note that it was in the context of

the National Liberation Council, which is the highest organ of the party, between...[inaudible]...significant disagreement in core areas.

What sparked the violence? There are still several versions out there. But it was on the evening after that meeting had been completed, where there was disagreement, and one of the factions decided not to turn up for the finals of the meeting. It was after that, that...[inaudible]. We are not speculating as to the reasons why. But I emphasize the political part of it, which means that when it is a political struggle it can only be resolved through political means and that is why we need a political process.

What I want to underline is also that we do have another country that experienced major crisis after its independence. We might recall that East Timor, or Timor-Leste rather, had its tenth anniversary this year. In 2006, a similar crisis erupted in the country, an attempted assassination... [inaudible]...happened as well as major violence broke out with factions of the army and veterans. And we have seen East Timor, Timor-Leste, coming out of that crisis in a very solid way and now be seen as one of the good performers, internationally, among the fragile states. I think that is a sign that even though you can have major setbacks like these it is also possible to get back on track and to move in the right direction.

Question: My question is specifically talking about the UN camps and the 50,000 people there. How is the humanitarian situation? You said it is not your expertise area, but under what conditions are the people living in? Which are the main concerns? Plus all the attacks you might suffer? Thank you.

Hilde Johnson: Thank you. I think I can say without doubt the conditions in camps are very hard. And the main reason basically is that the civilians are...[inaudible]. It is different from many other IDP camps in traditional humanitarian operations where the camps are established from scratch in an open territory, which permits them space and the provision of services in a way that is much more conducive.

For the civilians that are seeking refuge in our camps, there is much, much, much less space and, of course, anything from sanitation arrangements to water delivery, you can just imagine a very packed space, how difficult this is.

Initially, as in other cases, during the first two years of the Mission's life, we had experiences that we have learned from. We have had ten or twelve incidents of big numbers of civilians seeking refuge in our camps. Not, of course, of the size of the current crisis, but the biggest number was in Wau, which was 5,000 in 2012. Then, we saw civilians moving back to their homes after three to four days. Hence, we provided water, but no food also to avoid this being an incentive to attract greater numbers coming in but not necessarily...[inaudible].

We followed initially the same guidance that we have developed in the Mission for these situations. But we realized after...[inaudible]...civilians were too afraid of moving out of the camps. Even in Juba, which is rather stable and secure at this point in time, individuals are really afraid and fear that they might be subject to abuse if they go back to their neighborhoods.

So this is a big challenge and that has led us to establish this partnership with the humanitarian partners. They are basically running operations at this point in time and we provide security.

I do not want to underestimate the challenge. We are over stretched and the locations are not at all appropriate for these numbers. But this is the only solution we have. The only other solution, which we are working on now, is to build additional protection of civilians sites at the [inaudible] of the camps or finding additional [inaudible]. We are initiating this because of the capacity that we had announced being is totally overstretched and overwhelmed. So these are among the measures we are taking, but only a protective environment out there, only peace in the places where there is fighting, and only protective environment where people feel safe can solve this problem and make it possible for us to see civilians return to their homes with their families. And that is now the biggest task, after we hope to see a peace process being established or a dialogue being established that we as an international community and as a Mission can help support.

[Hilde Johnson is asked to repeat parts of her answer as audio cut out in a several places]

So, I said that being almost overstretched at this point in time for the numbers, we need to look at other locations. We are having protection of civilian areas that we can establish in the outer perimeters of our camps or other locations, and we are looking at that as a measure in a couple of places. This will permit civilians to have more space and it will also allow for additional ones to come in should that be the case. However, only a protective environment, first and foremost, of course a cessation of hostilities and the violence, but then subsequently establishing a protective environment for the civilians so that they feel safe and can return home with their families, can solve this problem for all of us. And that is what we hope to see and that is going to be a major task for us as a Mission and for the Government. We need to see people feel safe and secure and ready to go home to rebuild their lives. That is the aim for all of us.

Question: Any sign of commitment of local leaders to end the crisis?

Hilde Johnson: We need to wait for the IGAD leaders to come out with the results and outcomes of their discussions. They are meeting again tomorrow in Nairobi, but so far I have not heard that any breakthrough has happened today. And we will have to wait for the leaders [inaudible] and also for tomorrow's meeting to happen.

Question: Thank you. You are in close contact with the regional leaders. Do you think that they are controlling troops or armed groups on the ground? Also, could you give us an update on the situation in the capital, Juba?

Hilde Johnson: First, the situation in Juba, at this point in time, is calm and quiet. However, some of the citizens still feel they are not safe, and I refer to what I said in response to another question. But for anyone else, such as us internationals, such as the Japanese Defence Force, or any other partner, Juba is peaceful, stable, and rather safe.

As regards the regional leaders, they are engaged very actively in trying to get the parties to the table. Beyond that we know that one particular country has engaged in South Sudan. None of the others. And the main aim of the IGAD community is to make sure that we can re-establish peace and reconciliation in the country.

Martin Nesirky: I am going to take the last three questions at one go. Yes, you please.

Question: There are allegations that the UN Mission provides protection for rebels, some of them with weapons. What is your comment on this? How are neighboring countries dealing with this conflict? Is there any kind of negative intervention to fuel this fight?

Martin Nesirky: Second person, yes?

Question: Could you give us an update on reports of atrocities and mass graves, in particular allegations that about 250 Nuer tribesmen were herded into a police station and gunned down in Juba?

Martin Nesirky: Okay, and finally?

Question: My question is the same, there were allegations that armed groups or armed individuals came to the camps. What do you do about their weapons when they come with their weapons and do they mingle with the civilians or not?

Martin Nesirky: Okay, so these are the three questions, and that would round it up for you, Ms. Johnson.

Hilde Johnson: Let me take the questions related to atrocities, mass killings and mass graves. Just to say that we are working our way through all these reports and allegations through a thorough human rights investigation. It is not appropriate for me to comment on individual incidents such as the one in Gudella police station, because we need to verify that these reports are correct, first and foremost, but to also be able to go through the details so that we know whether the numbers are correct and so on. At this point of time, we do not have any outcome of the work, as it has just started.

As regards the report from Bentiu, I just wanted to tell you there was a misrepresentation of a figure that just came out and we corrected that immediately. There was a misunderstanding between the Mission and Geneva. We do not have any possibilities to verify mass graves in Bentiu, and the number 75 is incorrect. We have had a dialogue with Geneva about this. There were between 13 and 15, we are not exactly certain, SPLA that were found in one location. They had died in a skirmish. So I wanted to clarify that as well, and it is important that this is communicated.

If I can move to the issue of intervention from any party. I don't want to go into specifics here, but I want to say that generally any internationalization of any conflict or violent eruptions of the nature we have seen is not helpful, because it can aggravate the situation and

bring in more regional players. I just want to make that point clear and then not comment any further on that issue.

As for protection of so called rebels in camps, let me make clear the procedures we are following. No individual is permitted entry to any of the locations or camps where we are providing protection...[inaudible]...are disarmed so they are coming in as civilians with no weapons. This is followed. At the same time, I think it is important to know that we are challenged on full security when we have numbers like 50,000 with very few personnel, both military and police, to ensure protection. This is what I referred to when I said we are reinforcing our camps with relocating military to them and one of the reasons why we have requested [inaudible] of course to have them be able to assist us with protection. This is absolutely critical. But we are taking this very seriously.

Today in Bor, where some of these allegations have come out from and there have been stories in the media about them, we have done a search and we can verify that these stories are not correct. And so there was a clear and strong search that went through the protection area. So bear with us. There are a number of stories and rumors going around in situations like these, as in all situations involving people that are fleeing for their lives and in conflict-related situations, and we just need to make sure that we try to verify them and be clear about what is correct and not correct.

Let me say this. We are taking safety and security in our camps very seriously. This is also why we need to reinforce every location so that we are in a position to handle this in a professional and a strong and strict manner.

END