



United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS)

Media & Spokesperson Unit, Communications & Public Information Office

TRANSCRIPT

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Near Verbatim Transcript of the Press Conference

by SRSG Ms. Hilde Johnson

UNMISS Compound

Opening Remarks

Good afternoon to all of you.

In my last appearance before you, less than eight weeks ago, I said that relations with the Sudan and internal security challenges were consuming a lot of energy and resources that the country needs to build national capacity, strengthen its institutions, and consolidate peace and democracy.

Today, the tension between Sudan and South Sudan appears to be easing following the March agreement on the implementation of the 27 September Cooperation Agreements signed by both countries. If all goes as planned, we may be able to see the President of Sudan arrive in Juba shortly. With the restart of oil production this weekend, and hopefully full utilization of the pipeline in the coming weeks, we also hope that a new chapter can open for South Sudan. Not only with an improved economic situation, but also with conditions more conducive to progress on other political and security challenges.

South Sudan faces considerable security challenges, in particular in Jonglei State and the tri-State area of Lakes, Warrap and Unity. The security situation in these areas remain a source of deep concern for UNMISS and for the international community.

I will focus on the two biggest threats to stability and to the security of civilians in Jonglei State right now: inter-communal violence and armed group insurgency.

In Jonglei, significant efforts were made, both on the part of the Government as well as the communities and the Presidential Committee to achieve peace and reconciliation. It is of major concern that these achievements are now being jeopardized by continuing inter-communal violence and attacks by armed groups.

Inter-communal violence

In my last press conference, held only a few days after a deadly inter-communal attack in Wangar, Buong payam, Akobo West County, on 8 February, I called for maximum restraint to prevent the occurrence of additional attacks. Today, I repeat this appeal and call for an end to the cycle of violence.

This past Friday, UNMISS released a report on our investigation of the 8 February attack in Walgak. According to our findings, at least 85 people were killed, the majority Lou

Nuer women and children, allegedly by armed Murle. Furthermore, as many as 34 others are still reported as missing. This attack caused the highest single loss of life since the start of the disturbing trend of increasing inter-communal violence in recent months. It also shows that the initial reports from the community seem to be very close to reality. In the report, UNMISS calls for the perpetrators of this deadly attack to be held to account. For the betterment of a united South Sudan, the Government must investigate all major attacks, and bring perpetrators to justice.

Now, the situation in Jonglei has been further complicated by reports of mobilization of Lou Nuer youth. Risks for attacks also from Murle youth remain prevalent. It is therefore incumbent that the communities involved urgently act to prevent any further attacks. Otherwise, there is a grave risk for an escalation of the cycle of violence, which will trigger more deadly attacks. In this scenario, it cannot be overemphasized that everyone ‘loses,’ particularly women, children, and the elderly, who are not, engaged in the hostilities, yet the most vulnerable to them.

Now is the time to call for restraint. Now is the time for all communities, their leaders and the authorities, in Jonglei and in Juba, to say “enough”, enough of senseless bloodbath. Now is the time to tell their youth that the future of their communities is not in their arms -- but in their bare hands.

Equally important, it is critical that all levels of government, including state bodies in Jonglei, take measures to prevent the mobilization of armed youth to carry out retaliatory attacks, and to act with impartiality.

At the same time, it is critical for me to underscore that UNMISS treats all communities with impartiality. I know that there are stories out there that we are protecting one community, and not the others; that we are biased. Let me make one thing very clear, the UN is set to all protect civilians, wherever they come from, whatever their ethnic identity or background. There is no difference.

In some cases we have managed to deploy on time and protect, in other incidences we have not. There are only two factors that determine this: Firstly, early warning; we need early warning early enough – to be able to deploy and protect. Without timely early warning about where an attack may happen, we will not be able to act on time. Secondly, logistical difficulties determine our ability to protect; depending on the availability of air assets and access to the possible site of the attacks.

If we have been seen to act in some incidences, and not in others, it is only because of these two factors, and not because of preferences in relation to ethnicity. I can promise this: We will always act with impartiality in South Sudan, in all circumstances. Anything else would be a gross violation of our UN-mandate.

Armed group violence

Hundreds of civilians continue to seek temporary protection in UNMISS bases in Jonglei during clashes between the SPLA and armed groups. On 6 March, more than 1,800 people were given protection in the Pibor base of UNMISS. Overall, 6 – 7 times, the number of civilians seeking protection was ranging from several hundred to over 3,000, and in Gumuruk in the hundreds. This comes in addition to the 5,000 seeking refuge in Wau, the capital of Western Barh el-Ghazal, last December.

The frequency and gravity of these cases underscore the importance of the protection of civilians mandate of UNMISS, but also the need to build the country's capacity for the Government and its security institutions. It is first and foremost the responsibility of the Government to protect civilians.

Credible efforts to bring peace and stability in Jonglei have been made by the Government and community leaders throughout the peace process and in recent weeks. It is regrettable that their calls for dialogue and the patient and active outreach to militia leader David Yau Yau have been unsuccessful. As military operations against the David Yau Yau armed group is underway, it is absolutely essential that the Government, the SPLA and all other security forces abide by their international and human rights obligations, especially those under the Geneva Conventions, which South Sudan signed last year.

It is essential that the SPLA distinguish between combatants and non-combatants; that wounded and other out of combat individuals be treated humanely; and that civilians be protected during military operations. Women, children and the elderly are vulnerable and need special protection.

As Head of Mission, I have personally delivered this message to the country's political and military leadership, and they have affirmed their commitment to abide by these responsibilities and obligations.

UNMISS POC operations and contingency plan

Pursuant to its mandate, UNMISS will continue following up on any reports of human rights abuses or incidences where civilians are impacted. UNMISS has and will continue to maintain a significant military and civilian presence across Jonglei, acting with impartiality to assist the Government in protecting all communities.

UNMISS civilian-military integrated teams continue to undertake monitoring and assessment missions to all parts of Jonglei. UNMISS has 6 military companies currently deployed equally in the State, in Dinka Bor, Lou Nuer, and Murle-majority areas. We also have recently increased military deployments in flashpoint areas in all of these communities, including in Bor, Akobo, Yuai, Gumuruk and Pibor. These troops have been tasked with conducting expanded patrols to not only deter violence, but also to assist in early warning efforts with respect to threats to civilians.

UNMISS has contingency plans and stands ready to scale up its presence in Jonglei if necessary, including in a 'worst case scenario.' This scenario would translate to the deployment of up to two-thirds of the Mission's infantry companies. In determining necessary triggers for additional deployments, the necessity to share and exchange *timely* early warning information cannot be understated. UNMISS needs 'early enough' early warning to deploy as quickly as possible within the Mission's existing logistical capacity. To this end, the relaying of information to UNMISS and Government authorities by the communities themselves is key.

The destabilization of Jonglei must stop. I urge the Murle, Lou Nuer and Dinka communities, their leaders, and the Governments of Jonglei and South Sudan to resume—and sincerely engage in—peace initiatives. I call for people from all the communities in the state to come together, to join hands and to do their utmost to end this

cycle of violence. UNMISS will continue to support these peace processes. Without stability and peace in Jonglei, the largest State in South Sudan, in the long run stability also in the country could be at risk.

To all South Sudanese I would like to say the following: Your ethnic diversity should be a major asset, a wonderful resource in building your new country. Your diversity is what constitutes the make up of your country; it is what makes South Sudan great. It should be the glue that holds you together. Use it as an asset, – and a tool for nation building. Don't allow your diversity to undermine the unity of South Sudan. Your new and independent country can only become strong as a nation - if unity is built on your diversity. Make use of it. You will have our support.

Thank you.

Q & A

Gurtong Trust: Although there were reports last month that Sudan was moving its tanks along the Heglig areas near the border with South Sudan, you have mentioned that relations between South Sudan and Sudan are improving. How optimistic are you this time that both countries will not be back on the brink of war? (...)

Another question in relation to the report on the investigation into the incidents that occurred in Jonglei [*'Report on the 8th February 2013 attack on Lou Nuer community members in Wangar, Buonj Payam, Akobo County, Jonglei State – UNMISS March 2013'*]. I assume it describes the causes of the incidents. Did your investigation also focus on where the guns used to kill civilians were coming from?

Southern Eye: My concern is also related to your report. You have released it as well as other reports by various international organizations. Is there a way these reports can reach the officials or authorities?

AFP: I understand there was a request for an UNMISS air patrol around the Walgak area before the [*8th February*] attack. However, because of new regulations in place following the shooting down of a UNMISS helicopter last December, I understand that the request process now takes around nine days. Given that UNMISS wants early warning to try to prevent attacks, do you believe it is possible to fulfill your protection mandate with such stringent airpower regulations in place?

Also, I wanted to get an update on whether UNMISS can tell me how many Lou Nuer youth are reportedly mobilizing, in which areas of Jonglei and what UNMISS is doing to try and [*indiscernible*], given that in January 2012 they advanced quite slowly on Pibor town.

SSTV: I would like to ask you about your mandate regarding the protection of civilians. Do you protect them only from internal aggression or external as well? Because last month, some three boys were kidnapped by the Misseriya people in Upper Nile State and we did not hear anything from UNMISS.

SRSG Hilde Johnson: First *on the relations between Sudan and South Sudan* – and I understand you ask this question as I mentioned this point in my initial statement. It is not in our mandate to make an assessment of this relationship – that is the responsibility of the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General, Haile Menkerios and the African Union High Level Implementation Panel (AUHIP).

Nevertheless, let me just underline that I said the relationship between them seems to be easing. These are not very enthusiastic optimistic words but there is actually a rationale behind them. Oil wells have re-opened last weekend and I just had a briefing from the Minister of Petroleum with the Vice-President, other ministers and key embassies which gave us reasons to believe that we are now moving in the right direction. That is the rationale behind my language.

We can never rule out setbacks in a relationship as complex as that between Sudan and South Sudan, but we are hopeful that what we are seeing now will continue to move forward in a positive manner.

On the investigation in the Wangar/ Wulgak attack, we have reported the countries where the weapons we have found come from - cartridges and ammunitions. The report is available on PDF, and we have our Human Rights Director here who has a copy or two with him. I want to underscore that the fact that you will find such information in the report does not necessarily point directly to one country specifically. Arms proliferation in South Sudan and Sudan as well as the surrounding neighboring countries - Ethiopia, Uganda, Kenya - is rampant and no one really knows how they circulate. In this respect, I would like caution against any basic interpretation of the report. But the report and the information is there.

For *Southern Eye on reports coming from other international organizations* as we have seen regarding Jonglei a number of times... As for us, every time we release publicly a report, we always share it beforehand with the Government to give it an opportunity to react or come with factual information that might be important to be added. We do that as a routine practice. We never release anything publicly that has not been shared with the Government first. And this is important because it is part of the relationship we have with the government. The report remains independent, it is our own report; but we need to make sure that the government is informed of its content as well as factual issues that we may not have got right. The government is in a position to provide other information.

For reports coming from other NGOs and international agencies, you will have to ask them. I can only talk for us. Sharing information as a routine practice is the way we work.

On Hannah's (AFP) question *regarding flight issues*, your reference to nine days is just a worst-case scenario. We can do it much, much faster than that. Your information is not entirely correct. In this particular case, there were procedural hiccups that were not only related to flight issues but also to communications breakdowns.

That particular flight request was not processed with the speed it should have had. You will see in the investigation report that this issue is referred to, and that the Mission is requested to be more timely in the way it prioritizes flights. I fully agree and we are looking carefully at ways to do that while abiding by aviation safety rules. We have been given a clear mandate and clear imperatives from countries flying in South Sudan.

They will not fly unless these procedures are in place. So we need to find a way to have timely procedural management and prioritization of flights while respecting aviation safety rules ... We are assessing and reviewing that now.

Secondly, ***with regard to Lou Nuer mobilization***, we have three ways of monitoring the situation. First, we have integrated teams deployed in a number of Lou Nuer communities areas – although we also deploy such teams with all other communities (we treat all communities equally). We have also sent out long-distance patrols and have a military and civilian presence. They pick up early warning information. We also have direct contacts with county authorities, community leaders and chiefs, to generate as much information as possible. And, finally, we have air reccees. We have one of our helicopters from Rwanda on the military side which is able to carefully monitor whenever it is possible to observe any movement.

While the week before last week, we had quite a number of reports of mobilization, it has not been the case in the last week. Air reccees have covered virtually the whole Lou Nuer territory and have not observed any major movement of armed youth. Hence, at this point in time particularly, we do not have indications of a major mobilization.

Nevertheless, as of last November and December, we saw how mobilization can go uninterrupted – disappear, amass and reconvene – so we know it could be the case now as well. Therefore we are monitoring very, very carefully with all the resources we can use and have at our disposal, both in Lou Nuer areas but also elsewhere in Jonglei State.

To the question from ***SSTV on the protection of civilians***, I am very happy that you have asked this question because if people are still not certain about our protection of civilians, we really need to improve our communications!

The Mission's mandate is related to the area of operations of the Republic of South Sudan. This means that our protection of civilians mandate is not related to the border areas, and is not related to the disputed territories or the claimed areas. Basically, our mandate implies the protection of civilians, not the protection of territory, the protection of the sovereignty of the state and the protection of property.

This is very critical because during the Heglig crisis and the following period, there were a lot of misunderstanding around the mandate implying that we should have been a “buffer mission”. And now we have a border monitoring mission, which is already operational, at its very beginning, nascent. The Joint Verification and Border Monitoring Mission (JVBMM) has started in the last days; they are still getting their bases up and running. It includes observers from both Sudan and South Sudan, and military support from the United Nations Interim Security Force for Abyei (UNISFA). They will be leading the monitoring mission.

That mission will operate 10 kilometers each side of the border zone, the Safe Demilitarized Border Zone separating the two countries. They will observe and engage in monitoring and the verification of any event or incidents between both countries.

So my response to your question is that our primary responsibility [*UNMISS*] is the protection of civilians within South Sudan or related to security incidents in South Sudan.

AlJazeera English: [inaudible but question on the launching of an investigation in Russia on the Russian helicopter crash].

Radio Miraya: Can you tell us some of UNMISS achievements regarding the protection of civilians in Jonglei State? What are some of the challenges UNMISS faces in implementing its mandate, specifically in Jonglei?

Gurtong Trust: On the security situation. David Yau Yau activities seem to be expanding. He is reportedly on the offensive not only against Government troops but even against civilians. Can you say something on that?

Meanwhile, on the work of the JVBMM, could you try to shed more light on when it has started and how long it will last?

SRSG Hilde Johnson: On *the issue of the crash of the UNMISS helicopter*, obviously UNMISS is subject to an investigation. In other words we cannot engage in finding out who is doing what on any investigation since we are one of the parties, among others, being investigated. So we have nothing directly to do with any investigation.

However, we can report on two things: firstly there is a board of enquiry put together by the UN – quite high level –investigating the incident. It will shortly come with its report. As far as I know, the technical side is completed and the report is now in New York. We are awaiting the findings. Secondly, the Republic of South Sudan has its own investigation underway. The timeline given to Russian authorities and the international community is May 10, when they are supposed to have completed the investigation. Both are ongoing and, until they are released, we have no knowledge of the findings.

In the case of Russia, Russia is a sovereign country. We have no information or further details for you. I suggest you contact Russian authorities to get the response to your question.

To Nelson (**Radio Miraya**) and what we have been doing in terms of protection of civilians in Jonglei State. I think I can mention three occasions where we have been protecting civilians and where lives have been saved.

The first and the most important one was our deployment to Lukuangole first and Pibor afterwards during the crisis end of December/ beginning of January. We have reasons to believe – and it is actually verified also in the human rights report – that thousands of civilian lives were saved. Firstly, because they were given enough early warning to be able to move out of harm's way. Secondly, thanks to the protection done in Pibor town while the SPLA was in one part of town and we, as UNMISS force, were adjacent to them, the main column [inaudible] actually turned around and left the territory. It remains unfortunate that too many civilians were killed along the river and behind [inaudible] that broke out from the main column and went out to Fertit and other areas. Hence 612 people lost their lives in this incident. Nevertheless, many, many more would have been killed without the protection of UNMISS and other forces.

Another incident, closer in time, is two weeks ago in Yuai where we got early warning in a timely manner from community leaders, chiefs and the County Commissioner. Our troops in Yuai were able to take action and prevent two quite significant attacks on civilians and cattle. This is another example.

Thirdly, we have had also many incidents where civilians have sought protection within our bases. Those who follow international peacekeeping will know that it is not a general trend in peacekeeping to have civilians coming into peacekeeping missions' bases. In this mission, we have made the decision that civilians fearing for their lives can knock on our doors, and we will not reject them. They will be welcome. And they have been doing that, I would say, eight or nine times in two locations in Jonglei State. We are doing our utmost to make sure we do not become "permanent settlements" and make sure civilians can return to their homes as soon as possible and as soon as they feel safer. This is working pretty well. There have been no incidents of long term presence in our camps and we do provide civilians protection.

I think I will limit myself to these three examples. There are other cases around the country. Maybe one of the big dilemmas we have in peacekeeping is that our success stories will always be invisible because *[by definition when there is success]* nothing happens and no one ever notices when nothing happens – what has been prevented. But we have a long list of similar cases where we have protected civilians.

To **Gurtong**, with regard the situation with David Yau Yau, I think at this point in time it is very difficult to know what is happening in the military theater. We have noted casualties have been taken by SPLA. We do not have visibility on what casualties are on the "other side" but we have heard reports from SPLA on their number of casualties and numbers they say David Yau Yau has taken but we do not have an independent presence in these locations.

We are increasingly deploying into Murle areas, and of course there are movements where operations are. We are trying to have independent eyes on the ground but, clearly, when there are active military operations, two forces can usually not be present at the same time *[on the same theater]*. So I am not in a position to give you independent views on that.

On the JVBMM. They have been given all needed clearances by both parties to be operational. They are working to establish themselves in bases in South Sudan and on the other side of the border. Numbers of military monitors have been appointed, names are there, and as far as I know things are moving. But they are not yet fully operational in terms of immediate ability to move rapidly into areas where there have been incidents reported by either party. I think you need to get updates from our colleagues in UNISFA on exactly when they are in a position to do that.

We have also had discussions and agreements with UNISFA on how we operate and coordinate because we are two missions next to each other and partly in the same area of operations. We are also doing all we can to make sure that the information flow is unimpeded and that it works seamlessly between the two of us.

If there are no further questions, thank you to everybody and thanks for coming.