



UNMIS

Press Conference

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Near-verbatim Transcript of the Press Conference by
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“Countdown to Elections: Working Together for Success”

Opening Remarks

In 47 days, Sudan will hold its first multi-party elections since 1986. These historic elections are a major milestone in the Comprehensive Peace Agreement, and the United Nations remains committed to supporting the process.

Between now and the time that the first voters show up at the polling stations to cast their ballots, much work remains to be done by the National Elections Commission, its High Committees, and their Returning Officers -- who make up the Sudanese authority directly responsible for planning, organizing, and conducting these elections -- by political parties, by voters, by journalists, by observers and party agents -- in essence, by all of the stakeholders in these elections.

From my own perspective, I can say that the National Elections Commission, with meagre resources but admirable commitment, has worked hard to organise and conduct what we continue to hope will be a peaceful process that will credibly reflect the will of the Sudanese people.

For their part, the political parties and candidates face a daunting task to share their messages and seek votes across huge constituencies, some of them larger than entire countries.

Most importantly, there is much for the Sudanese people to do in order to prepare themselves to participate in this process in a meaningful way, including attending debates and rallies to learn all they can about the parties and candidates; discussing their views and those of the various parties and candidates freely, openly, and maturely with friends, neighbours, and colleagues; and understanding -- and helping others around them understand -- the many different ballots they will face, what they are for, and how to mark them so that they are counted as valid.

We have all recognised for some time the complexity of these elections. Many aspects of the elections are new for voters, and especially so for the majority of voters who are taking part in multi-party elections for the first time in their lives. You as journalists have a duty to help inform the electorate, both by presenting factual information and by encouraging readers and listeners to analyze the world -- and the political campaign going on -- around them.

Let us all be clear: the lack of information alone can damage the credibility of an electoral process if large numbers of voters do not know where to vote, do not mark their ballots properly, or do not know who the candidates are. Unfortunately, there have already been reports of civil society organisations being prevented from holding awareness workshops on the electoral process. We have encouraged our counterparts in the National Elections Commission to address these issues, and they have indicated that they will continue to resolve such problems as they arise.

The campaign period has, so far, been peaceful and orderly overall, even while concerns remain over the ability of all parties and candidates to move and campaign in all parts of the country. Various parties, both in the northern states as well as in Southern Sudan, have launched their campaigns and begun to share their visions for the future of Sudan with people around the country. Candidates are beginning to take to the airwaves to share their messages through radio and television. We want to take this opportunity to encourage all registered parties and their supporters to continue to demonstrate maturity and respect for the rights of others to campaign, to attend campaign events, and to make their personal choice of leaders and representatives when they are in the voting booth in just a few weeks time.

I would remind everyone that UNMIS' role is not to observe or monitor these elections — that is the job of the international and domestic election observers. Election observers, both international and domestic, as well

as political parties and candidates, on the basis of the work of their appointed agents, will issue statements about the credibility of the electoral process. These statements will point out any number of imperfections in the process, but I would argue that the most important purpose of these statements is not so much to make any judgment about these elections as it is to point out areas where improvements can be made in future elections. In the end, it is the Sudanese people themselves who will be the most important judges of these elections.

Let me also say that while all of the policy decisions in this process have been made and will continue to be made by the NEC, the Political Parties Affairs Council, the competent courts, and other national authorities, UNMIS and its Electoral Assistance Division have endeavoured to support our Sudanese counterparts by sharing with them all of our experience gained in electoral support missions all over the world.

Sometimes, our counterparts welcome our advice, sometimes they prefer to do things their way. That is a simple but profound fact that characterises our work here in Sudan. We are here as advisors, and it is up to the duly constituted national authorities to accept our advice or not. This is not unique to Sudan; we have experienced it elsewhere, and we accept it as our mode of work here.

Let me remind you of the tremendous challenges that the NEC faces in organising these elections.

- The size and physical landscape of the country, together with weak infrastructure in large parts of the country, would present a challenge for any election management body.
- The fact of having to organise elections for six offices at the same time -- President of the Republic, President of the Government of Southern Sudan, state governors, the National Assembly, the Southern Sudan Legislative Assembly, and State Assemblies -- and with different elections taking place in different parts of the country, would present a challenge for any electoral management body.
- The complexity of different elections being decided in different ways -- with the two presidential elections requiring an absolute majority, the governors and geographical constituencies requiring simple majorities, and the party lists and women's lists being conducted by proportional representation -- would present a challenge for any electoral management body.
- The time pressures that the NEC has been under since the beginning of the electoral process -- with the election law being passed two and a half years late and the establishment of the NEC itself taking far longer than envisioned in the CPA and in the National Elections Act -- would present a challenge for any electoral management body.
- I would add that the political uncertainties that we are all familiar with have added immeasurably to the complexity of the situation that the NEC is working hard to manage.

Together, all of these factors make these elections some of the most complex and challenging on record.

The success of these elections will require the combined efforts of the NEC, the PPAC, other national authorities, the United Nations system, and the broader international community, but more importantly, it will rely on the Sudanese people themselves, who in the long run will determine if this is a peaceful and acceptable process. Each of us has a stake in these elections and a responsibility to ensure that they are peaceful and that the ideals set forth in the CPA are upheld.

The overall role of UNMIS is described in UN Security Council Resolution 1590 which established the Mission back in 2005, and which mandates us to "*provide guidance and technical assistance to the parties to the CPA to support the preparations for and conduct of the elections and referenda provided for by the CPA.*"

When I last spoke to you, we had slightly over 100 staff on the ground. We now have over 200 and will soon be the only United Nations component with staff in all 25 states of the Sudan.

The Security Council renewed our mandate in April 2009 in Resolution 1870 and reaffirmed that UNMIS is to support the National Elections Commission in its preparations for credible national elections, including the provision of assistance and advice.

We are assisting NEC in a variety of areas, including: advising on the development of operational and logistical plans and procedures for voter registration, nominations, polling, counting, and the tabulation and announcement of results; development of training plans and materials; and development of voter education plans and materials. In all of these areas, we are able to offer the NEC a variety of options for these activities and to share with them our experiences with those various options elsewhere. But again, it is the NEC that makes the decisions and that guides the entire process.

We are also working with other stakeholders, assisting the Political Parties Affairs Council with the development of information materials and their party training activities, and supporting NEC in its relationships with election observation organisations -- to ensure that the CPA provision that "international observers shall participate in the observation of the elections" is fulfilled -- and with civil society groups to ensure that citizens have at least a basic understanding of this complex process. Both UNMIS and UNAMID

[the African Union - United Nations Hybrid Mission in Darfur] have worked tirelessly with the police in both North and South to implement training programmes on election security. Our colleagues in UNDP are providing support to the process by managing funds from donor countries and purchasing some of the materials required for the process. We are working with our colleagues in UNIFEM (United Nations Development Fund for Women) and the Gender Units in both Missions to ensure that women are informed about and engaged in the electoral process. And we have had the pleasure of working with persons with disabilities to ensure that they are also full participants in the electoral process. We will remain committed to supporting the NEC, the PPAC, and other stakeholders – within the resources at our disposal -- to help ensure the success of these elections.

In closing, I want to encourage you as journalists to continue to work as key partners of the NEC and to assist the Commission in informing people about these elections.

Thank you.

Q & A

Al-Ayyam: How does the international community assess the impact of tribal conflicts on the elections?

Political parties in the north have accused the NEC of siding with the NCP. What are your comments?

Ray Kennedy: On the impact of tribal conflicts on the elections, I would say that it certainly has the potential to have a very damaging effect on the elections. But I think it is important for us, the NEC and others to reach out to tribal leaders to request that they recognize the importance of these elections in resolving some of the conflicts in Southern Sudan and to ask for those tribal leaders' support in at least putting in place a pause that would allow voters to go out and vote in a peaceful environment. We are working with the NEC to develop a series of messages encouraging everyone to respect the rights of others to participate in this process or not to participate if they choose not to and to maintain peace throughout the process.

On accusations of partisanship of the NEC, I do not participate in the meetings of the NEC but I know all of the commissioners, I speak with them on occasion – individually, not generally as a group – and I can tell you that we are aware that the NEC has very vigorous discussions in their meetings. I would say that there are people of different backgrounds on the NEC. I believe that the NEC, as a whole, is working to make this a credible electoral process. Different individuals within the Commission may have different views on the issues which sometimes makes the work of the Commission in reaching decisions on critical and urgent policy matters slower than we would hope given the very short time left before the elections, but they are working very hard to make this process credible.

Sawt Al-Umma: Many political forces in the country think that Article 19 of the Criminal Law and the National Security Law would hinder any political process and attempts at a democratic transformation in Sudan. Have you discussed these issues with Sudanese officials?

UNMIS Spokesperson Ashraf Eissa: I think for the answer to this question, we would defer to our Rule of Law department. We could ask either the head of the department or someone senior in the department to answer your question. But Ray may wish to comment.

Ray Kennedy: Let me just say one thing on that. As Ashraf said, my area is not that of Rule of Law, but I would say it is important for everyone to see these elections in the context of a broader process of transformation. I sometimes feel like people expected these elections to be like flipping a switch. These elections are not like flipping a switch; these elections are like taking the first step in a process. I have said consistently that there is no such thing as a perfect election anywhere, anytime; these will not be perfect, as I pointed out in my opening remarks. The observers will make any number of comments about the quality, the imperfections in the process. Let us all focus on those comments and observations as guides to ensure that future elections in this country are better than these, just as we are working to help ensure that these elections are better than previous elections.

AFP: Are you having any discussions between your office and the NEC about a possible postponement of the elections?

What would be the impact if it is postponed?

Ray Kennedy: There have not been any discussions between us and the NEC on the issue. We are 47 days out and there is a lot yet to be done, but that should not hide all the work that has gone into the process. Things are moving very quickly at this point. And I could say that with materials going to the press and with schedules already in place for the movement of materials, it would be quite a task to slam the breaks on at this point. That's not to say that it couldn't be done if that were the political decision, but it would be a major task.

I think that one of the other things we have to be aware of is that we all have been working a long time towards this and there are other elements in the CPA timetable that need to move along. We are already concerned about elections getting in the way of starting the preparations for the two referendum exercises that are due next January, and that has to be taken into account as well.

SRS: There have been complaints by political parties regarding the allocation of airtime on state-owned media – national radio and television. For example, SPLM candidate for president, Yassir Arman, will not present his programme on the TV due to the fact that the NCP is allocated 23 hours 40 minutes of airtime each day while the other political parties are given only 20 minutes or so. What does the UN say about this?

How will this impact on the elections if it continues like this?

Ray Kennedy: Let me say that the allocation of time, as I understand it, is equal across parties. I would understand Mr. Arman's remark as referring to the fact that the general programme may be biased towards the NCP. I would not go into that; I don't monitor the media, and I don't have access to complete reports from people who do monitor the media. My understanding is that each candidate running for president has the same amount of time to present their specific platform or message, and that once we get through all the candidates for president we will go through all the candidates for governor. I don't know what arrangements are in place for legislative bodies. My understanding is that the allocation of slots for presentation of their statements and messages are equal.

Ashraf Eissa: I would like to add to this that as far as Radio Miraya and the UN is concerned, we have recently published on our website an airtime charter to guarantee equal airtime for all parties and all candidates. In terms of the broader picture, I think that this is a probably a question better placed to the Sudanese stakeholders in the campaign process. We will not have a monitoring role. We can not monitor that. But in terms of what we as the UN and Radio Miraya are doing, our charter is available on our website, and I understand that it has been sent to the various parties and contacts and we from our side try to make sure that this is a level playing ground for everyone during the campaign.

Ray Kennedy: Was there another question? [*indiscernible follow-up from SRS*]. One candidate boycotting does not mean that all parties are boycotting. Let's see what happens.

Al-Arabiya: You mentioned "political uncertainties" in your opening remarks. Can you be more specific as to what you are referring to?

Ray Kennedy: I was referring first and foremost to uncertainties about when the elections would be. You know that the original CPA timeline was for the elections to be held no later than the end of the third year, which would have been July 2008. Then it was moved to no later than the end of the fourth year, which would have been July 2009. There have been several changes to the elections schedule since then. And we now face the uncertainties of parties calling for elections to be held after the rainy season; other calls for suspension of various parts of the elections and so on. All this complicates the work of the NEC. If there is discussion of elections being postponed in Southern Kordofan, should the ballots go to the printer or not? And the NEC reaches a point that if ballots are to be ready, the political conversation could go ahead but they have to issue the order to go ahead and print the ballots in order for them to be in place in time. This is what I was referring to.

Al-Ahram Al-Youm: I would like to inquire about the new conditions that may come to play with a possible peace deal with Abdulwahid and the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM). Has the UN discussed the issue of bringing in the armed movements of Darfur into the elections?

Ashraf Eissa: Unfortunately, we could not take this question because we are not the mission of the mandate. The mission of the mandate is UNAMID. It is therefore for them to take this question.

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