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PRESS CONFERENCE

Below is a near verbatim transcript of the press conference by Assistant Secretary-General of the UN for Peacekeeping Operations, Mr. Hedi Annabi, and SRSG Jan Pronk held on 19th March 2006 in UNMIS Headquarters, Khartoum.

Khalid al-Hitti, Spokesperson, a.i.: Good afternoon ladies and gentlemen and thank you very much for coming in such large numbers ... we really appreciate that.

Without further ado, I would like to give the floor now to Mr. Jan Pronk, the Special Representative of the Secretary-General.

SRSG Pronk: Thank you very much. I will be very brief because you see next to me the Assistant Secretary-General of the United Nations, Annabi, who is the deputy to Mr. Guehenno, whom you have met here a couple of months ago, leading the Department of Peacekeeping Operations of the United Nations in New York and is here on a special visit to Khartoum at the request of the Secretary-General of the United Nations.

After a couple of comments which I am going to make on a couple of issues, I will give the floor to Mr. Annabi.

Briefly; first, we are quite concerned about bird flu. It is an issue which is affecting many countries and seems now to have reached Sudan. I can assure you that the UNMIS, together with the other UN agencies - that clearly is the FAO and the WHO - have offered our assistance to the Government of Sudan and we hope that indeed the government will be able to contain the consequences of this as soon as possible. Experts from the agencies which I just mentioned have already come to Khartoum in order to offer the assistance of the United Nations agencies to Sudan as well.

Secondly; of course, speaking about concerns, it is important to express our concerns about the developments in Sudan's neighbor, Chad. Everybody knows that the situation in Chad was politically not very stable during the last couple of months. You also are aware of the fact that the international community is very concerned about any overthrow with violent means of a specific political regime. We are concerned about this for those obvious reasons.

We are particularly also concerned because of possible consequences for peace and stability in the region and that refers, in particular, to Darfur. I am pleased to note that a major reason of concern which I expressed a couple of days ago when I issued a public statement, namely the possibility that the Sudanese refugees presently in Chad would be expelled – there was that threat coming from the Government of Chad in retaliation to supposed political intervention – is no longer there. We are very pleased that the pressure of the international, including also of the UNHCR and members of the Security Council, on the Government of Chad to reconsider this inhuman threat was responded to positively. So that threat is no longer there but of course it is quite uncertain what the situation would be in the eastern part of Chad given the political and military developments in the country. Very often refugees and IDPs are the first victims of new instability and I would like to repeat what I said a couple of days ago in that statement that refugees are already victims of a previous conflict and should never be again new victims of a conflict which is none of their making.

We hope that international discussions in New York and also in the framework of the African Union and also following up the Tripoli Agreement will lead to necessary restraint from all sides in the interest of the people in Chad but living in Khartoum; living in Sudan and in particular also in the interest of peace and stability in Darfur itself.

Thirdly; speaking about Darfur, we are pleased about the present stage of affairs in the talks in Abuja. Presently Mr. Salim is in New York reporting to the Security Council about the present state of affairs in the talks. There may be a deadline soon. You remember the deadline of the 31st of December was not met; since then, the African Union set a new end-date – they didn't call it a deadline but in my contacts with Sudanese authorities, they, on their own, mentioned the word “deadline” so that is quite interesting. So the end of April is being considered by many Sudanese themselves as a kind of a deadline. And you see quite an active approach at the moment on all sides; in Khartoum and also in Abuja itself and the level of the Sudanese delegation to the talks in Abuja has increased. We are very pleased that Vice-President Taha did travel to Abuja, not just for a day or two, but in order to have very substantive talks. We are receiving our daily information at him at the talks which he is having with both parties. He did have talks regularly with Minnawi and his wing and also with AbdelWahid and his and also had discussions with JEM – this augurs well. Of course there are still major issues. The major issue being the compensation for the victims which is one of the claims of the parties and still the issue of the region and the third Vice-president and then of course everything related to a good ceasefire agreement including the final status of the forces of the rebel movements.

We understand that the atmosphere is improving and the fact that, for instance, the negative developments in Chad did not have an impact on the quality and intensity of the talks in Abuja – which could have been the case – is also auguring well. I just heard that, and I deplore that but I hope it would not have negative consequences, that, again – I think it is the 5th time in a couple of weeks – the meeting of the joint committee has been postponed again. I am indeed very concerned about the disconnect between the positive atmosphere in Abuja and the ongoing and intense fighting in Darfur itself not only at the border which is an extremely unsafe area but also in South Darfur and also in the area between South and North Darfur where SLA wings are fighting with each other, I am concerned about that and really do hope that if a peace agreement is going to be reached in Abuja, that on the ground that really would make a difference. If the fighters just continue despite an agreement reached in Abuja, then there is a built-in failure right from the beginning. There should be a bridge between Darfur and Abuja.

Having said that, the present atmosphere is positive and I do not exclude - but I am just following the lead now of Mr. Salim Ahmed Salim - that an agreement could be reached around the end of this month and the beginning of next month. I am planning myself to go to Abuja towards the end of this month and next week before I go again to New York.

Finally; another positive development is that talks now could start soon and I understand within about two weeks in Eritrea between the government and the Eastern Front. You know we have been very active on that front discussing with the government as well as the Government of Eritrea and the Eastern Front. The talks in Tripoli never got off the ground. That delay was not very conducive to stability over there in the east. Time is running out because before mid-June SPLM would have left the eastern Sudan part of Sudan. The postponement after the original date of the 9th of January until the mid of June will not be extended with another period. There should be no void. That means there should be political discussions and the fact that these discussions now can start after a change in delegations in Khartoum and Asmara under the auspices of ... or to use perhaps better language ... facilitated by Government of Eritrea is auguring well.

We are not participating in the talks. Maybe we will be invited as observers, maybe not – it is not at all necessary; the fact that the talks are taking place is the result of quite some international pressures and I am pleased that a start is being made and I hope that parties will continue talking until they reach an agreement and that on the ground in the east the situation will be stable and that there will be no attacks against each other. There have been some incidents during the last couple of weeks but they were not repeated which makes it possible indeed to have such talks.

I stop and would like to give the floor to Mr. Annabi to introduce the major issue.

ASG Annabi: Thank you Mr. Pronk.

Ladies and gentlemen, I have been in Khartoum since last Friday and have come here to meet with President Bashir and other senior Government officials to discuss the situation in Darfur and to deliver a message from the Secretary-General of the United Nations with regard to the possibility of a transition from the African Union to the United Nations in that troubled region.

I have of course, since I arrived, also been meeting with our colleagues in UNMIS and I traveled to Juba the day before yesterday to take a first hand look at the work of our colleagues on the ground and I have been able to see that they are doing a good work although they still have institution processes at their disposal but they are doing their best with what is available to them to help with the implementation of the Naivasha Agreement.

My trip began with a visit to the African Union Head Quarters in Addis Ababa where I had a series of very productive meetings with Mr. Saeed Djinnit, the AU's Commissioner for Peace and Security, and his staff. We discussed on the 12th and 13th of April the implementation of the recent African Union Peace and Security Council Communiqué which, you remember, was adopted on the 10th of March. We also discussed Security Council resolution 1663 which was adopted on the 24th of March and which requested the Secretary-General to prepare for a possible transition to a United Nations operation in Darfur and to develop recommendations for such a transition.

During our discussions in Addis with the African Union we agreed to work together to strengthen the African Union Mission in Sudan so that it can better respond to the challenges it faces in Darfur. We also agreed to work closely together and to establish joint mechanisms to prepare for the envisaged transition to a UN operation in Darfur.

I then traveled to Khartoum and was grateful to be received by the President of Sudan, President Bashir, on the day after my arrival last Saturday. My message in that meeting and in the meeting which I have had with the foreign minister and other senior officials of the Government has been a very simple one and I hope it was a clear and simple message. And the message is that the United Nations is not in the business of forcing or imposing itself on anyone or imposing itself on anyone. The United Nations is here to work with the people of Sudan to achieve peace and stability in Darfur. We have no other ambition or agenda. We hope therefore that we will be able to proceed with preparations for a possible transition to a United Nations operation in Darfur with the support and the cooperation of the Government of National Unity and of all other parties concerned.

The purpose of the UN operation in Sudan would be to assist the parties in implementing what we hope will be an effective peace agreement. We are hopeful, as you just heard from Mr. Pronk, that such an agreement would be finalized and concluded in Abuja soon.

This prospect, the prospect of an early agreement in Abuja, makes it all the more important, in our view, to undertake the necessary preparations on a contingency basis in order to determine what a possible United Nations peace operation in Darfur would look like and how it would carry out its mandate. Good preparations would require a visit to Darfur by a technical team, which would consult with the Government and the other parties concerned while also assessing the requirements for a possible transition.

It is important to emphasize here that this assessment visit and all other planning activities would be carried out without prejudice to the decisions that would need to be taken in due course by the Government of National Unity of Sudan, by the African Union with regards to the future of its mission and by the United Nations.

The President, the foreign minister and their senior colleagues in the Government have advised patience. They have emphasized to me the importance of expediting the conclusion of a peace agreement in Abuja. At the same time, they have indicated – and it is my understanding – that they would be open to discussions on how the United Nations could assist in the implementation of the Abuja agreement once it is concluded.

As I said at the outset, we are hopeful that an agreement can be reached rapidly in Abuja so that all efforts can be directed towards helping the people of Darfur to establish a genuine peace and to begin to rebuild their lives, free from the violence and suffering they have endured during the past three years.

A copy of these introductory remarks will be distributed to you at the end of the press conference. There are a few typos which I am sure you will correct.

I will now be happy to answer your questions and Mr. Pronk will also be happy to respond to your questions on the issues which he addressed before I took the floor.

Thank you very much.

Q & A

Q: A question to Mr. Pronk: how is the situation on the ground in Darfur at the moment?

A question to Mr. Annabi: has the government of Sudan agreed to a transition of the African Union to a United Nations operation?

SRSG Pronk: I can only repeat what I said, sir. The situation is difficult and there are ongoing clashes. And that is why I said it is important to translate the better atmosphere in Abuja into implementation of the ceasefire promises on the ground. And the clashes are not only between the government and the parties but also militia and parties and also amongst the parties themselves.

In three particular areas: still in the southern part of South Darfur; in the border areas between North and South Darfur; Jebel Marra and also, as you know, of a different character, close to the border with Chad.

ASG Annabi: As I think I indicated in my preliminary remarks, as you well know from what we all read from the press, the government at this point in time is not in favor of a transition to a UN operation. They believe that priority should be given to concluding as quickly as possible an agreement in Abuja and that following such an agreement, they would be open to discussions with the United Nations as to what role the organization could play to assist in the implementation of such an agreement. I think they have pointed out that in their minds this process could be similar to the one we went through – and certainly we have nothing else in mind – could be similar to the process that we went through following the conclusion of the Naivasha Agreement after which the Parties requested the United Nations to come in to assist them implement their peace agreement.

Thank you.

Q: The Security Council is set to discuss today a US draft resolution on sanctions to 4 people – a government official, a member of the militias and two members of the armed movements. At this particularly point in time, does this amount to a translation of the positive climate in Abuja?

SRSG Pronk: There is a discussion in the Security Council not on a trial – I don't think that is a good translation of your proper language – there is discussion in the Security Council on a draft resolution. As long as there is a discussion on draft resolutions, it is up to the Security Council and we can not comment on it. We can only comment on resolutions after they have been adopted.

Q: The SPLM is to mediate between the LRA and the Uganda government – this is the latest news I have heard. I don't know if the United Nations in Sudan is involved.

The government of Chad has accused the Sudanese government of supporting the coup attempt and a report by Eric Reeves mentions that the involvement of the government of Sudan was very clear on the coup attempt on Chad. What is your comment on this?

SRSB Pronk: It is clear that there are contacts at the moment between the GoSS/SPLM and LRA; that is positive. I will go tomorrow to Juba and we will hear more about it. We can report later on insofar as the GoSS would allow us.

It is positive that talks are taking place of course with the aim to diminish the violence. It is also positive to know that since the last two weeks, as far as we understand, the LRA attacks have diminished in the south. Maybe there is a relation between the two developments.

Don't be too positive in advance but talks, unless fired together, is good news.

Secondly; no, I am not in the business of commenting on reports by Mr. Reeves because then I would have to make a comment each two days. However, it is clear that the international community is very concerned about the mutual accusations between the two governments and has asked the two governments to try to solve their disputes by talking and that is the most important issue at the moment. That is a request by members of the Security Council, by the Secretary-General of the United Nations, by the African Union, it is very important that both parties and the other parties concerned will live up to the Tripoli Agreement which was the result of an international mediation in order to bring the countries together. Let's try to stick to that.

Q: My first question is to Mr. Pronk about the result of the investigation into the plane crash that killed Dr. Garang. I learnt that it [*the report*] was released yesterday.

From the very beginning you told us that the President of the Sudan invited the United Nations to be part of the committee and from the report of the Ugandan government. The Ugandan government ended up blaming the pilot who died together with Garang in the plane. According to you being the United Nations, what are the contents of the report and do you, as the United Nations, agree fully with the report?

The second question is just to build on the question of my colleague who was just asking a question about the LRA. Last Sunday the Secretary-General of the SPLM accused the National Congress Party of supporting the LRA in causing stability in southern Sudan – it was during a press conference last Sunday and was reported very clearly. Your presence here is to support the National Congress and the SPLM and the government of national unity to implement the CPA. Now what would be the response of the United Nations to such clear allegations?

SRSB Pronk: My spokesman told me that the report with regard to the investigation is going to be read at 11 o'clock today. I am not ready and I can not comment on a report which has not yet officially been published. We will do so when we have received and studied it.

Point number two: to avoid any misunderstanding, we have not participated in the investigation. We did say that the UN would be willing to participate in a truly international investigation on the basis of a truly international investigation on the basis of an invitation of all parties concerned. We expressed that willingness; such an invitation did not take place so we have not participated in the investigations.

Three; the statements made by the representatives of the SPLM concerning supports being given by specific groups to the LRA have been made Repeatedly in public and also in discussions with us and we have also discussed that with the government in Khartoum.

Officially, the government in Khartoum always has denied to continue giving support. They never denied that they gave support in the past. We have said to our friends and colleagues in Juba that such statements would deserve some evidence before we could continue discussing it. It could be more important at the moment, and we have always made it clear, to have a joint approach between the government in Khartoum and the government in Juba; between the SAF and the SPLA in order to stop the LRA. We have worked hard in order to bring them together – to a certain extent with success. It is being discussed, for instance, in particular in the CJMC and, more important than again delving into mutual accusations, it is to carry out an effective strategy. An effective strategy, in our view, is both of a military character whereby SAF and the SPLA – in particular jointly in the JIUs - would deter the LRA from further attacking and, second element, creating a political environment in which members of the LRA would find it attractive to stop attacking and to be disarmed, demobilized and reintegrated in the society where they come from.

Thank you.

Q: I would like to ask Mr. Annabi – when do you expect the full deployment of the peacekeeping force, according to the CPA?

ASG Annabi: The full deployment of United Nations Mission in Sudan?

Q: Yes.

ASG Annabi: We have now about 9,000 troops deployed out of the 10,000 authorized by the Security Council. We are quite hopefully that with the arrival of additional units in particular from the Russian Federation in the coming weeks that we would be able to reach full deployment next month.

Q: My next question is to Mr. Pronk. There is a concern about food assistance and the WFP has reduced the rations. In addition to that, this is the [*referring to the time of year*] before the rainy season. How do you see the situation now? Do you expect more assistance coming in or do you still face constraints in the funding?

SRSR Pronk: I assume that it would be possible to raise adequate resources in order to continue the necessary food assistance. I have not been informed by the WFP that they had to reduce the rations because of financial reasons. There may be sometimes strategic and technical reasons in specific places to change the directions but, at the moment, there is no shortage of food. I am also very pleased to take this opportunity to say that yesterday we were able to organize a meeting between all United Nations agencies concerned and the mission in order to prepare for the possibility that refugees would return from Chad to Darfur. There is enough food at the moment in store to help them. Of course, we don't make a call on the international community to make more food available after they would have come. We hope that it is not necessary but for the first period there is food available and we have prepared ourselves. The main problem is access; security. We can not go everywhere that we would like to go and that means that it is important that good contacts also take place with the people in the camps on the other side of the border – UNHCR in particular – in order to allow streams of refugees if it would be necessary, and we still do hope that it would not be necessary, to those places where we can deliver the assistance which is available.

Q: Now the deadline for the peace talks in Abuja is given; down in Darfur, people are suffering; the United Nations is planning for an African Union to United Nations transition if possible; the government of Sudan is rejecting the transition and the Assistant Secretary-General says that discussions are going to take place between the government and the United Nations. I actually don't understand when will the discussions take place; when will the people of Darfur be rescued and how is the peace going to be implemented? Can you clarify please?

Thank you.

ASG Annabi: As I said our hope and expectation is that an agreement will be concluded soon in Darfur. You have seen the reports of the statement made by Salim Ahmed Salim, the Chief Mediator on behalf of the African Union, in the Security Council in New York. He has said that peace is at hand. In other words, a lot of progress has been made. There are still some sensitive issues on which Mr. Pronk touched at the beginning of his intervention but we hope an agreement will be reached soon precisely for the sake of the people of Darfur; they have suffered long enough and I think there is a duty on all concerned to dedicate themselves to a serious process and to achieve an effective peace agreement that can be implemented in a rational way.

It is also for that reason that we and the African Union have been saying that the sooner the preparations can start, the better it would be because these operations take time to prepare, to design, to deploy and it is important if the United Nations is going to deploy an operation in Darfur after the end of the current mandate of the African Union that is to say on the 1st of October, if we are to deploy in October or before the end of the year, preparations need to start now or the process will be delayed.

At the same time and in the meantime of course since we have already said that deploying a United Nations operation in Darfur takes time because we need to find contributors; contributors need to see the mandate before they decide whether to participate or not; the mandate has to be decided by the Security Council on the basis of recommendations which the Secretary-General has to prepare in consultations with all parties concerned including, of course, the Government of National Unity of Sudan and those recommendations have to be prepared on the basis of an assessment and recommendation that has to be made on the ground by technical experts who can then formulate a concept of operation and make recommendations to the Secretary-General. As you see there is a sequence of sequential steps that must happen before an operation can start deploying and before troop or police contributors or member states that would contribute civilian personnel that would be required because this will be a multi-dimensional operation and not just looking at the military, at the ceasefire and at military disengagement but also looking at helping to bring back law and order, strengthening the institutions and starting a recovery and rehabilitation program so that Darfur can be stabilized and people can resume their daily lives and be provided with the resources necessary to start rebuilding their lives.

In the meantime, the African Union has a mandate to continue until the end of September and, in the expectation that an agreement will be reached in Abuja soon, we have agreed to work together to help strengthen the African Union operation on the ground, to help mobilize additional donor support for the African Union mission since the African Union, as you know, is dependent on the assistance of voluntary funds from donors to carry out its operations. And we will also work with the African Union to assist in whatever way we can

so that they can prepare themselves to begin the implementation of the agreements - on the assumption that they will be concluded quickly – they will have to begin the implementation of the agreement before the UN can deploy an operation.

That is why we hope to be able to consult and work with the support of the government of Sudan to prepare this operation which, as I have said, will be a peace operation. The purpose of this operation will be to help restore peace and to help the people of Darfur to rebuild their lives in a safe environment.

Q: This week, the spokesperson for the SAF said that the SAF has met 100% the obligations required of it for the first two years following the signing of the CPA. And this has been confirmed by the United Nations. He also accused the SPLA of violating the agreement by maintaining commanders in Juba. Can the UN tell us whether it has received any complaint by the SAF of the presence of SPLA commanders in Juba? To what extent is it true that the SAF has met 100% of its obligations while the SPLA is failing behind in that?

On the issue of the Abyei incident of last month, the SAF has rejected the formation of a joint investigating committee in which the United Nations would participate. How far has the issue gone because on the 30th there should have been an agreement in Juba but we do not know what happened? What is the United Nations position as the SPLA was insisting on a United Nations role in the investigation?

SRSR Pronk: Three points there. SAF was obliged to redeploy, say diminish their force, with 31% before the 9th of January this year. They say they have done so – 100% of the 31%. So they kept their obligation.

SPLA did not contest this in the CJMC – they accepted this. So it is in agreement with the SAF and SPLA - both did communicate this to the United Nations. So we say that SAF did what it had to do.

Of course there is a further new benchmark and a new target later on but so far the SAF did what it had to do.

Secondly; there is no complaint by the SAF against the presence of the leadership in Juba. This is very strange; I never heard about it.

Thirdly; you are right, we have a problem in Abyei. There was the – and I explained to you a couple of weeks ago – ambush of the first convoy of the SSDF returning former soldiers and their families, unarmed, on the road from Khartoum to the south through Abyei. 11 people killed or even more we don't know exactly - and more than 30 people wounded. It was a tragedy. We had not been informed of the convoy in advance so we couldn't monitor; the tragedy could have been avoided. And we told the SSDF – well you can't say the SSDF because it doesn't exist any more – former SSDF including Mr. Paulino Matip convoys ought to be announced in advance prior to departure so that they can be monitored. Since then it has not happened. We did monitor, we did accompany, we did facilitate, and no other ambushes have taken place. Still people have to return but more than 50% have returned.

That first attack has to be, of course, investigated. And because it was a convoy of people belonging to the SSDF, former Other Armed Group, returning to the south in order to have the soldiers reintegrated into the SPLA which is a Nairobi CPA agreement, we have to

investigate that. But we have not been given access and we have a problem in Abyei. The United Nations can not move to the northern part of a specific arbitrarily drawn line – arbitrarily by the government in Khartoum/ National Security.

I have protested against this many times. The issue is for consideration in the CPC. And the next CPC meeting we have it in the agenda and we hope it will take place not this Thursday tomorrow but next Thursday next week so that we can really solve the problem of the curtailment of the freedom of movement of the United Nations around Abyei. It is necessary for us to be able to move around to monitor development so that we can help avoid violence and tragedies – that is our main task everywhere in the south; why not Abyei.

Thank you.

Al-Hitti: Any more questions please?

Thank you very much.