



UNMIS

Press Conference

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Near-verbatim Transcript of Press Conference by
Director for the Africa Bureau of the United Nations High Commission for Refugees
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UNMIS Headquarters, Khartoum

Opening Remarks

Thank you, ladies and gentlemen.

I have just returned from Eastern Sudan which, as you know, is the centre of one of the longest standing refugee situations in Africa. The East epitomizes this country's long history of hosting refugees. It is a tribute to both the Government of Sudan and the people of the Eastern region, who share land and natural resources with refugees who have nowhere else to go.

I visited Wad Sharifey, Shagarab and Kilo 26 refugee camps. Collectively, they are home to nearly 70% of the 66,000 camp-based refugees in Eastern Sudan.

It is no secret that conditions of camp life are difficult. On visiting the region it becomes evident that refugees are enduring the same forms of hardship as the communities that host them: acute poverty, persistent drought and deprivation, lack of access to health care and education, high levels of unemployment as well as land degradation and shrinking pasture.

More than 60% of the refugees in the East were born in exile. 40,000 people over a forty year period!

Today, there are 15,000 children in the 12 refugee camps in the East. 6,000 of these children lack primary education because refugee schools have not the capacity to absorb them. Many more fail to attend secondary school because families cannot afford the fees. Refugees are thus caught in a never-ending spiral that keeps them and their offspring perpetually dependent on external aid.

I met with local as well as State authorities in Kassala and Gedaref. I interacted with refugee women, men and young people. I was greatly encouraged by the consensus, particularly among refugees, on their needs for support to become self-reliant. This cannot be done by UNHCR alone; nor can it be done by the local authorities alone.

I am pleased to announce that in order to spearhead this process UNHCR will present a comprehensive plan for livelihood activities to donors in 2010.

UNHCR is also embarking on new approaches involving area-based programming that seek to bring benefits to both refugees and host communities aimed at self-reliance. Alongside our traditional counterpart, the Office of the Sudan Commissioner for Refugees, we shall engage State and local authorities, UN sister agencies, development actors and the international community to invest in programmes to improve social and economic conditions in refugee hosting areas.

Time is not on our side. The flow of refugees into Eastern Sudan is continuing at an average rate of 1,800 per month. Such a high arrival rate creates immense challenges in the harsh dry dusty surroundings of Shagarab camp, which is home to one-third of the camp-based refugee population in Eastern Sudan.

Basic services in Shagarab are inadequate. The ratio of persons per latrine is excessive. Reception facilities—essentially open tents—are overcrowded, with very little or no privacy. Procedures for processing refugees are lengthy and cumbersome.

UNHCR staff and local authorities are coping as best they can. However, much more needs to be done. I immediately pledged \$200,000 dollars for urgent improvements to the reception facilities. Also, together with the Commissioner for Refugees, we shall review and streamline registration procedures for new arrivals.

The new arrivals are predominantly Eritrean, with small numbers of Ethiopians and Somalis. I met crowds of them—mostly young, urban, educated men and women. Some of them described to me the issues around their flight from home. It is clear that there is no prospect of an early return. Yet, for many of these young people, the camp environment offers almost no hope of self-actualization.

Such refugees easily resort to travelling to Khartoum or northwards to Egypt or Libya—with the help of smugglers, at great risk and at great expense—in the hope of reaching Europe or the Middle East. Many have lost their lives in this quest for better opportunities. The scale of the problem is unknown. I can only say that the number of incidents involving refugees in clandestine movements that are brought to UNHCR's attention has reached unprecedented levels.

Let me once again commend the Government and the people of Sudan for their generosity towards refugees in Eastern Sudan and elsewhere in the country. Forty years is a long time.

I cannot end without speaking to developments in other parts of the country. Let me start by saying that it is rewarding for UNHCR to be associated with the successful repatriation of close to 330,000 refugees from neighbouring countries—that is, 75% of those who were in exile at the beginning of 2005. This, and the return of over 2 million internally displaced persons to Southern Sudan and the Three Areas, is a convincing indicator of confidence in the peace process.

I will travel to Southern Sudan tomorrow, and will visit UNHCR funded reintegration projects that are benefiting former refugees who returned from Uganda in recent years. I shall also visit Congolese refugees at the Makpandu settlement. Let me say that I am deeply concerned about the continuing LRA attacks that provoked the influx of 19,000 Congolese refugees and has resulted in the displacement, within Southern Sudan, of close to 70,000 IDPs.

Another preoccupying concern is the inter-ethnic violence that has plagued certain areas of Southern Sudan. The imperative of sustainable peace and stability cannot be overstated. We do not wish to see a return to mass displacement; the dividends of the peace process must be safeguarded—at all costs. It is unacceptable for women and children to be losing life and limb to wanton violence.

In Darfur, UNHCR along with the authorities, UN agencies and NGOs, are working towards building conditions that are conducive to promoting durable solutions. In 2010, we shall be engaging in a more delivery-oriented fashion, seeking to close gaps in basic services as part of our continued protection focus. Our programmes will target displaced persons as well as sedentary and nomadic groups. We will work with the Government to ensure that necessary conditions for the safety and security of civilians are met.

We have preoccupying concerns about the security of humanitarian workers, and particularly our abducted colleagues from UNAMID and the ICRC. We pray for their safe return. Apart from jeopardizing the security and wellbeing of staff, such attacks serve primarily to isolate war-affected civilians from vital protection and assistance interventions.

Let me close by saying that there is only one alternative to peace: more human suffering. Sudan needs the commitment of every citizen to choose peace as the only way to lay foundations for a bright future for all.

Thank you. I wish you all a Happy Eid. Eid Mubarak.

Spokesperson Ashraf Eissa: Thank you very much Mr. Okoth-Obbo for the very comprehensive presentation of the issues that UNHCR is dealing with. It seems to be a task of mammoth proportions.

Before I open the floor to your questions, I would like to draw the attentions of our guests and audience attention to the presence with us today of Mr. Peter De Clercq, the UNHCR Representative in Sudan. I am sure that some of the questions may refer to him if Mr. Okoth-Obbo so decides.

Now we open the floor to questions.

Q & A

Khartoum Monitor: I have two questions. I would like to know mostly from which countries do those refugees come from?

Secondly, do you think they are still coming in?

George: Thank you very much, let me concentrate on the refugees' situation in the east. As I indicated, the refugees are mostly from Eritrea. I am referring here to the refugees that have been in the eastern part of

Sudan for several years and also the new group that is arriving. Now the figure that I gave you of almost 1800 people is the new arrivals from Eritrea. There are also smaller populations of refugees from Ethiopia and from Somalia.

Will they stop coming? I would very much hope so. Certainly that is what I would wish, because forced displacement is a painful experience. I indicated in my overview some of the risks that these groups are facing but for now we are seeing people who are prepared to move. But we are also very concerned that if the current factors causing displacement are compounded by the drought which, as we visited, I kept hearing about from the local authorities, then we are looking at a future in which there could be even more people coming, in other words, a more mixed movement. While I would wish to be able to tell you that these movements will not occur in the future, I think it is important that in the work that we do we not only address the situations and the conditions and the situation that we face now, but also be very mindful about what would happen in the future, i.e. an aggravation of these movements, and also to prepare for them.

Akhbar Al-Youm: In January 2009, there were reports that a convoy heading for eastern Sudan was bombed from the air or sea and it was said that the convoy was engaged in trafficking people, refugees in particular. What is your role as an organization to stop such practices?

Secondly, why doesn't the UNHCR make efforts to rectify the conditions that cause refugee movements in the first place?

George: The specific incident involving a caravan, I must say that I am not aware of that specific incident.

You are absolutely correct that in the movements such as what we are witnessing now - and this is a pattern that is repeated in other similar movements - one of the greatest risk factors in such movements is the exposure particularly of young women and young girls both to smuggling but even more seriously to trafficking. Trafficking, as you know, is the incident that attaches to the risk of sexual abuse in particular. As I mentioned to you, we could witness for ourselves among the group that we saw and talked with in camps, young girls, a number of them, who themselves were telling us that they needed to be protected and helped to be safe from the risk of becoming victims of these negative influences. I can confirm to you that it is a very important objective of the protection work of UNHCR. In every thing that we do that starts from the point of reception of new arrivals who are seeking asylum, how their claims are determined, how services are made available to them including counselling, including education, including fostering - which is one of the programmes that are implemented in Sharifey camp, that one of the most important policy priorities of the Office is to protect women as a whole but particularly young girls to the risk of being trafficked or other forms of sexual abuse, sexual exploitation or sexual rape. This is one of the things that we are doing in this programme. I have to say that I would like to see that it strengthened very much. On this visit one of the things that I have discussed with colleagues, one of the things that I have discussed with the Government - just a short while before I came here we were meeting with the Minister of the Interior - I underlined that all of us working together with the Government, with the other partners, within the UN and NGOs that this is something that must continue to receive our high priority, not only in the concern that we have for it, but in the programmes that we must multiply so as to protect these group of persons of concern to us from the high risk to which they are exposed in terms of both trafficking and other forms of sexual abuse.

Now as to factors which cause people to move, the mandate of UNHCR is primarily a refugee protection mandate. As you know the factors that cause people to move are complex they go into deep-seated questions of governance, of human rights, of conflicts, of war. These mix sometimes with natural factors such as the drought that I mentioned. What the organization does is to cooperate as closely as we can with those entities that have a designated mandate and have the capabilities and expertise that we do not have, to address these issues and to try and influence that through our operations and address particularly those things that can be helped. For instance, improving governance, improving human rights appearance, addressing causes that might cause people to move because food insecurity for example, we collaborate in the appropriate manner but I am sure you will understand that since that is not our mandate and that is not the expertise that we have, UNHCR has a very limited capability to prevent the root causes, if I may call them that. What we try and do very much - and I indicated this earlier on as the key objective of our programme now in the East and it is the same objective that we are trying to achieve in Darfur - is that we will seize every opportunity which occurs which helps us, which allows us to help people to find a solution and work with others so as to make sure that in the case of refuge that we can bring the predicament of exile to an end, and for those who are internally displaced that they are able to return home in safety and hope that other solutions are found for them.

SRS: Previously we were briefed that many refugees are making their way out through eastern Sudan to North Africa and to Europe. We were told that some of them die in the desert or even drown in the river; I do not know you have not shed any light on this phenomenon. Is it still going on or has it reduced to some extent? If it is still going on, I understand that the refugee find Eastern Sudan as an outlet to Europe and

consequently most of them die as we were told in the previous press conference. What could be the efforts to reduce this kind of phenomenon?

Secondly, you have visited eastern Sudan. Were there any complaints from refugees about maltreatment by the host communities in eastern Sudan?

George: Yes, I think this is one of the questions that my colleague here will help me in answering because I believe you must be referring to one of his earlier briefing.

First of all are there movements of refugees going through and out of the Sudan, I think there is no doubt about that. These are clearly movements that for example go through Libya, through the Mediterranean and end up in part on the southern coasts of Europe. I think that there is also part of the same movement that end up in Egypt and even cross the Sinai desert and end up in Israel. I think that is a fact.

There are two things I would like to underscore, though. The first one is that there is a significant number of people that in fact remain in the Sudan and for whom a response is needed in the Sudan. Some of the pictures that we were running earlier on show people who are actually here in the Sudan in some of the most difficult conditions but they are still here with us. This is one group that I am especially concerned about that for them asylum and protection should be a meaningful facility that in fact provide protection to them. I believe that there is a critical failure in protection if people leave risk, they leave danger, and they leave the threat to their basic human rights and dignity only to find that they are in circumstances which are just as exercising of even worse. That is the part that I would like to lay emphasis on.

Can some of these movements, compelled by other factors – whether they be social, economic or natural – can they be stemmed and can they be helped? I am sure they can. Can they be worked on after they have occurred? I am sure they can. As a protection agency we work with others and I think I should mention the International Organization of Immigration IOM, we collaborate with them in the right way to bring about the better management especially the better management from the point of view of human rights and basic safety of these movements that are accompanied by very high risk, whether it is across land, over deserts or over the water. And some of those examples that I gave you earlier on in what we do on the issue of trafficking is a demonstration of that.

Secondly, did I hear complaints? Yes, I did, not only that but I saw them with my own eyes. But what types of complaints were these? There were complaints about serious gaps in the services, and I am really talking about basic services here, I am not talking about luxuries. I am talking about the need for us for example to work on providing better shelter in this particularly camp. In many of the camps that we operate in today, water is provided quite well but we have to make sure that it is sustained. Healthcare services, I mentioned education earlier on, there are many students that do very well to transition from primary to secondary school but there are no opportunities for them to go to higher levels of education even if they have made it to so. I saw with my own eyes and heard with my own ears women who are working very hard in handicraft and producing high value products but they have no markets where they can take them to. So the problems are there, you not only hear about them but they are visible. And I think that is why I was saying earlier on that ultimately the solution has to be that we find a way to avoid that another twenty years from today we will still be handing out relief assistance. We need to work much more to empower refugees to be able to assist themselves and their family members and to do so in a way that overall empowers the communities in which they live today which have supported them for the last forty years and will continue to do so for the foreseeable future.

Now I would like to ask Peter to add some information especially about what he had described in the past.

Peter: Thank you George, just to add to the first question that you asked. Since February last year we have seen at the rate of 1800 per month people coming to this country particularly from Eritrea. Of this many people are trying to find a way out and are trying to reach the shores of Europe.

We can indeed confirm reports that many people in fact do not make it – people do die in the desert, there is no doubt about that, and there are many dead bodies that wash out on the shores. This is an extremely hazardous and risky journey that people embark on as they seek to reach the shores of Europe.

[Rest on possible remedies inaudible]

ENDS
