



UNMIS

Press Conference

08 July 2009

Near-verbatim transcript of the Press Conference by UNMIS Regional Coordinator for Southern Sudan, David Gressly.

David Gressly: Good morning, ladies and gentlemen and welcome to this morning's press briefing. I've been asked by the mission's Public Information Office to speak about the recent tribal violence in some areas of southern Sudan and its implications for the region's overall security situation.

Some news media accounts about that violence have spoken of more than 1,000 deaths since the beginning of the year, and while UNMIS is unable to verify independently that figure, we believe such estimates to be credible. There are clear grounds for concern about the security situation in and around the city of Malakal, eastern Jonglei State and the Sobat River corridor where some of the worst clashes have taken place this year. We have also seen more fighting in Lakes State between the Agar Dinka and Beli tribes than had been the case in previous years.

But the media spotlight on those areas has distracted attention away from some areas of genuine improvement in security conditions in southern Sudan. The annual migration of the Misseriya across Southern Kordofan State seems to have gone quite peacefully this year. Eastern Equatoria State has witnessed a sharp drop in violence between rival communities like the Toposa and Latuka, and the fighting that has taken place in Unity and Warrap states in the first half of 2009 is not worse than the levels we've seen in recent years. The opening of two temporary operating bases (TOB) in the Jonglei State counties of Akobo and Pibor in May has helped avert renewed violence in those areas of southern Sudan and has been favorably received by local authorities and community leaders.

While it may not fall into the category of inter-tribal violence strictly speaking, the security threat posed by units of the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) in Western and Central Equatoria states has diminished substantially since the initial weeks of this year. I'm also happy to report a significant decline in common crime in the regional capital of Juba in comparison to 2008.

We need to get beyond the headlines and take a longer-term perspective on the overall security situation in southern Sudan. The continuing violence in some parts of the region is a direct consequence of two civil wars, a very high level of armament among the civilian population and continued frictions between neighboring communities over vital resources like water and pasturage. A weak judiciary and fledgling institutions like the Southern Sudan Police and Prison Services don't make the task of consolidating peace and stability any easier, and there's no question that the region's woefully inadequate infrastructure is inhibiting its economic development.

But tangible progress is being achieved on a number of fronts as I have already noted. All ten southern states have functioning governments and legislatures, and the fiscal crisis facing the Government of Southern Sudan earlier this year has been eased somewhat by the recent rise in world oil prices.

As part of our ongoing support to our southern Sudanese partners at the regional and state government levels, UNMIS works very closely with the Prisons Service in the areas of capacity building, structural reform and the development of institutional frameworks. The mission's Rule of

Law section trained 250 prosecutors and legal advisors in 2008 in conjunction with the Government of Southern Sudan's Ministry of Legal Affairs and Constitutional Development, and a similar number will be trained during the course of this year. Our U.N. Police colleagues have scheduled 225 training courses for members of the Southern Sudan Police Service over the next 12 months, and they visit dozens of police stations on a regular basis to provide mentoring and professional advice.

Resolving some of the most challenging issues in southern Sudan will require a sustained and concerted effort by the international community for the foreseeable future, and UNMIS stands ready to continue playing a robust role in this regard.

Thank you.

Questions & Answers

Reuters: *I just have three questions: looking at the violence in the south, it seems to be quantitatively different from the past years especially with women and children being killed; just the numbers of people being killed. Is this a dramatic game change or is it more of the same with more arms?*

Secondly; there are reports in the state media of a food crisis in Southern Sudan arising from the tribal violence. Could you give us a way of understanding how serious the food crisis is – is this again same as usual during this kind of year or is that an unusual crisis?

Thirdly; a quick look forward to the blooming political events that are coming in the south – obviously the elections, the referendum, the tensions over Abyei – do you think this is going to have an impact on tribal violence?

David Gressly: Thank you very much. Just to start up with the scope of the type of violence that we have seen in Southern Sudan this year. In certain respects, the answer to your question would be “yes”. Certainly along the eastern Jonglei State areas, certainly on a line from Nassir to Akobo to Pibor; what you described is accurate. That is a new level of violence that this year in particular has seen also includes targeting of women and children. In that sense it is new and a larger scope. It is not the first time we have seen violence targeted against women and children but this is a little bit different scale. This nature or this kind of violence has been largely confined to that part of the state. What we see in general throughout Southern Sudan really continues along typical lines that we have seen in the past. I think we need to understand it in the context of four decades of war where basic institutions have never had an opportunity to take root – whether it's the judiciary, police, etc. - and where there is a large influx of arms into Southern Sudan. These conflicts can often be best understood in very local terms – tribal terms, clan tribes, sections within clans – and not necessarily in the larger dynamic context of the CPA itself.

On your second question relating to the food crisis and whether that is real or not and if it is due to insecurity; we certainly are concerned that there may indeed be a food crisis in Southern Sudan this year. Insecurity may be one of the factors that had inhibited some crop production. I think the larger factor may simply be the weather this year. Anybody who has traveled to Southern Sudan this time of the year in the past would have seen a great deal of rains. We are not seeing the kind of rains so far in Southern Sudan as is typical. So there is concern that multiple factors maybe leading to the crisis. There is an assessment that is being launched by the Government of Southern Sudan (GoSS) in certain states to determine how severe the crisis might be. This includes the states of Northern Bahr-el-Ghazal, Jonglei, Eastern Equatoria and Upper Nile, among others. Those four states in particular are an area of concern and we are hoping in the two or three weeks we would come up with an accurate assessment of how severe that might be. But, certainly at an anecdotal level, it does seem to be an indication of a crisis.

Finally; the impact of this type of violence on key CPA milestones such as elections, referendum, Abyei, etc. I would simply say that I think it is in everyone's interest that the security situation in all ten states needs to be as stable as possible as we go into the electoral period, certainly in the referendum period. There is a pattern of violence in the south that typically peaks in the period of March, April and May. This is also the time when we expect elections to take place next year. So it is critically important that the GoSS and state governments and, of course, UNMIS in support of them, work to try to stabilize those states to reduce the violence there so that these milestones can be carried out peacefully. These are very important factors in the next two years.

Sudan Radio Service: I have something like two to three questions. I would like to start with a very positive aspect: what do you think are the states that you think are stable in terms of security in Southern Sudan?

We sometimes hear in the media of the conflicts in Southern Sudan being blamed on cattle raiding and so on. Can you or have you as the UN identified the main causes of these tribal conflicts?

What could you comment about allegations by the Sudan Peoples' Liberation Movement (SPLM) that the tribal conflicts in Southern Sudan are being caused by the National Congress Party (NCP) so that the CPA is dishonored in Southern Sudan and to cause instability and consequently spoil the referendum and the elections? Is there any fragment of truth in what the SPLM is saying?

What could you do within your mandate as UNMIS to prevent further tribal conflicts in Southern Sudan and do you think that the GoSS or has it failed to contain the situation? Thank you.

David Gressly: I was asked to start on a positive note on the states that seem to have less conflict. There are problems in all ten states, but I think I would like to be honest; the areas of concern right now are truly Jonglei – particularly upper Jonglei State, the Sobat River corridor which goes along Jonglei and Upper Nile State. Lakes State is an area of concern right now, and then, as I mentioned in my opening statements, along the Western Equatoria border with the Democratic Republic of Congo and the Central African Republic is also an area of concern - that is a very fairly narrow band of just a few kilometers on that border. Those are the primary areas of concern. In other areas it is relatively stable. I have to say I have been in southern Sudan about five years. Since about 2006, we have seen relative stability as compared to the war period and that continues today. I will just give two statistics to give you an example of direct impact to our operations: when I first came to Southern Sudan, we were relocating our staff on the average of four times a week from problems due to conflict. These days maybe that happens once every two months. So that is a quantitatively different security situation. That is why I keep saying we need to take it into context what we read and what we see on the ground.

In terms of the second question of our colleague, causes of conflict are always multiple and, as I said, are best understood in terms of local terms and there have been long terms conflicts that preceded the two civil wars in these areas as well. I personally think it is a question, a struggle over resources - land, water, pasture – those are very real. They can also be triggered by other acts of individual members of particular tribes, clans, etc. murder and other things can be a trigger. Sometimes something very small can trigger a larger outbreak of violence. Cattle rustling are a key part of this. It is a traditional activity among many groups and it does cause similar kinds of violence. We see it in neighboring countries such as Uganda and Kenya as well along the Southern Sudan border. These practices that are often of long standing are really a result of a lack of institutions of police, of courts, prisons, etc. and of the rule of law. This is why I think we would take time before these changes. It is also due to a lack of infrastructure. If you look at Jonglei State, it is the size of a country like Bangladesh and yet there is only 30 miles of roads, unpaved roads that are not useable during the rainy season – very inaccessible, very difficult for the government to access these areas. That is another factor.

On the third point you raised on allegations that is being somehow manipulated, I would simply say, once again, that these are best understood as local conflicts. We have seen no direct evidence of these allegations. The SPLA has the opportunity to raise such allegations directly through the Ceasefire Joint Monitoring Committee (CJMC) and such allegations would be investigated – that is the appropriate channel for such allegations to be put on the table for investigation.

What can the UN Mission do? I think we can do a lot to support the government. I want to reiterate that this is a very young government and we need to understand that it is at a very early stage in its own ability to reach all these communities to provide security. One thing that we can do and that we do is to provide logistical support to the government so that they can travel up to these locations. Often the only way they can get there is by our assistance. We can help get the right people on the ground at the right time to deal with reconciliation issues. Reconciliations are very important in terms of what needs to be done to stabilize the situation. We could be on the ground in more presence as we were at our operating bases in Akobo and Pibor to better understand the dynamics of what is going on and try to be in a position to preempt violence before it escalates. And certainly the institutional development of the police, the prisons, the judiciary, are vital to the long-term development of security in southern Sudan and we would continue to reinforce our capability to provide that kind of support.

And the GoSS has the responsibility to fully step forward and assume its responsibilities for the security of its people. It does see disarmament as a key part of that but we also believe it needs to demonstrate a clear ability to protect its citizens, to protect civilians, in order for the disarmament campaign to be effective. They do have a certain distance to go before that becomes a reality.

Khalid Mansour (D/PIO): If I could use the privilege, if you can give the people here a little more information about what we did in Jonglei as an example of how the UN helped with the situation then?

David Gressly: No problem. Basically, like everyone, we were quite concerned with the violence in Jonglei State – in particular the attacks where large numbers of deaths took place. So we put together a support plan to support the GoSS and particularly the State of Jonglei. Including that was the deployment of our military forces to Akobo and Pibor, our police and a large number of civilians working on the ground. The intent was to, first of all through our presence, calm tensions down, to have a better understanding of what was going on, and to start moving our officials and traditional leaders of the state around to start cooling off the tensions that existed. And I have to say that so far since their deployment, no significant atrocity and violence has taken place in the state. Our presence seems to be well appreciated by the county and state officials. We are now drawing down our military forces there and moving into a second phase. We are moving out now because this is a period when this kind of violence tends to decline and we will be emphasizing more of the political aspect, and particularly the reconciliation part, trying to drill down to those communities that are in conflict during the rainy season so that when they come into the next dry season and the electoral period, hopefully through these efforts, many of these issues would have been resolved through the communities and we are more likely to see a more peaceful dry season in 2010. So we are now entering that phase and will be aggressively working on the ground in Jonglei State and also on the Sobat River to ease tensions before the electoral period.

Xinhua: Has tribal violence affected voluntary returns to Southern Sudan?

What is your take on the DDR program for Southern Sudan?

David Gressly: In some areas such as Jonglei, very definitely it has had an impact on returns of IDPs and refugees out of Kenya, in particular, to Jonglei State. In other areas that I described which have conflict, it has had an impact – the Upper Nile State is another area. And yet in other areas, we have seen a very good return of both IDPs and refugees. I will give you an example: Magwi County on the Ugandan border; historically an area where the LRA operated that is basically free of the

LRA at this point and has been so for some time, large numbers of refugees from that area have returned and continue to return from Uganda and UNHCR has advised me that they think they can drop the caseload of refugees going into that area in 2009. So some areas are doing very well this year; others, because of the violence that I mentioned, have moved more slowly. So it is a mixed picture.

On DDR, I am very happy to say that DDR is well underway in Southern Sudan. We hope to assist the government to demobilize 35,000 combatants between now and the end of the Interim Period over the next three years. So far, with this program which kicked off in early June – we are just now entering the second month – we are over 7,000 combatants that have been demobilized. I believe we have sufficient money for their reintegration as well which includes opportunities for training as well as financial packages and we believe that this would be a very big success both for the GoSS who wants to draw down the numbers of its forces, as well as for the individual combatants who want to join civilian life.

AFP: You said that there are indications of a food crisis in some areas of southern Sudan. I just want to know why in some regions and not others?

David Gressly: It is a somewhat complicated question but part of it relates simply to basic infrastructure. Some areas are more isolated during the rainy period; food supplies are not available even if they are available in other parts of the south or in the region, they simply can't get there. So infrastructure sometimes is a factor. Sometimes insecurity can be a factor that impedes either the delivery of commercial deliveries or food assistance and that is the case, for example, in Akobo as we speak. UNMIS has airlifted I think nearly 150 metric tonnes just to keep basic food available in the Akobo area. Other factors are local climatic conditions and some areas are more vulnerable to that. Northern Bahr-el-Ghazal, for example, is a state that typically is one of the first states to suffer from this simply because of more adverse environmental conditions – rain was not as regular there as are seen in the Equatoria area where typically good rains and good crop growing conditions exist. It is very important to point to those factors. There are areas that historically have been most affected by food shortages – Northern Bahr-el-Ghazal is one, Upper Nile, Jonglei, are other examples. That is why this food assessment is going on right now. It is focusing on the states that typically are vulnerable and the information that is coming in seems to indicate that we need to get out there and take a look at what is going on to fully understand the magnitude. It is too early to say what that is; we would be able to share that information with you in a couple of weeks.

Khartoum Monitor: Are you optimistic that Southern Sudan would be stable as the country is approaching the general elections?

David Gressly: I am always optimistic. If you look at where southern Sudan was in December 2004-January 2005, it has actually come quite a distance. There were a lot of people who told me that it would not be a very stable environment and that I should personally not move into southern Sudan. I chose to move into southern Sudan anyway. And as I mentioned before, the kind of insecurity that we faced in 2005 no longer exists. We have free access everywhere. Periodically, we had various areas that were difficult to access but generally the situation, I think, has evolved in a positive direction. Nonetheless, the government has some challenges in the more remote areas where it is not able to fully deploy its police and, in some cases the army, to secure. And this is a fundamental challenge. I think, in general, southern Sudan will be able to go through the next two years in relative stability but there will have to be a clear focus on those areas that have experienced violence over the last four or five years so that those areas too can fully participate in the elections and the referendum scheduled for 2011 as well as appropriate DDR programs to take place in the states. So there is work to be done but there is reason for optimism but this optimism would require hard work from all parties and we would be among those working on that.

Al-Ayyam: *On the attacks near Nassir on the aid barges, some people blame the White Army while the SPLA says they were not to blame. What is your opinion?*

How could you support the elections next year without disarming the militias and the civilians in southern Sudan?

David Gressly: There was a horrendous attack near Nassir that killed large numbers of people and stopped a large amount of food from going into a food-deprived area. We have overcome that by airlifts so the food situation should remain secure in Akobo. But it is vitally important that the corridor become open for movement of both humanitarian assistance as well as commercial traffic. It is the lifeline during the rainy season through places like Akobo down to Pibor. What we are going to do is we will have riverine patrols going up-river from Nassir to help ensure that that is indeed achieved. So I think we will see improvement on that corridor.

The question is very relevant. This type of violence is what will disrupt elections or the referendum for 2011. I think what needs to be done is the government needs to take it quite seriously to get the police forces on the ground - I think we can support that - to try to avoid a situation. I think we have a better understanding as time goes by what sparks this kind of violence and we need to all be aware of that and work with those communities that have concerns that the Nassir attack was only the latest of a series of attacks between the Jikang-Nuer and the Lou-Nuer that started actually in January this year. We need to preempt this thing before they get to the levels that they have within the last year. I think that is going to be the challenge in 2010 and 2011, a challenge I think we can meet in support of the government. Thank you.

Khalid Mansour (D/PIO): Thank you very much. David has a flight to catch so will stop here but I would like to remind you that we have the opening remarks both in English and Arabic and I would like to remind you that to keep being invited to these press conferences, put your name on the sign-up sheet so we could add your name. I promise you that we would have David here more regularly to brief you on development in Southern Sudan. Maybe next week or the week after we are going to have Lise Grande who is the Humanitarian Coordinator for Southern Sudan to brief us on the humanitarian situation down there.

Thank you for coming and see you next time.