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Near-verbatim transcript of Press Conference by
Jill Helke, Representative,
International Organisation for Migration (IOM) Sudan
UNMIS HQ, Khartoum

UNMIS Director of Public Information, Khalid Mansour: Today we have with us the chief of the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) mission in Sudan, Jill Helke. This is her first press conference in Sudan because she just came here to assume her functions almost one month ago. Before that, she was with the IOM in its Geneva headquarters for ten years. Prior to that, she had a long career with the British Foreign Service but working on United Nations issues in Geneva as well as in New York.

Usually, I tell you that you can ask your questions in English or Arabic but, today, any of you who can speak Chinese can ask in Chinese because that is one of the languages she speaks fluently. But before I give you the floor, I would give it to Ms. Helke to give some opening remarks.

IOM Representative, Jill Helke: Good morning! It is a pleasure to be with you and to have a chance to talk about IOM's work in Sudan. I am grateful to UNMIS for providing this opportunity, which I hope will be the start of an ongoing dialogue with the media here.

I have been in Sudan for just over a month and have had a chance to see what IOM is doing here, and to meet many of our partners in Government, the UN, the UN agencies, donors and other stakeholders. I have been to Juba, where I attended the inauguration of the new IOM office building into which we have recently moved, and I will be going to Darfur next week.

Although many of you may already know a little about the International Organization for Migration I would like to mention a few things about what we are and how we work, as it is important for you to understand this before I tell you what we are doing in Sudan.

IOM is an inter-governmental organization founded in 1951 and is the leading international organization in the field of migration. It currently has 127 member states and 90 observer states. IOM is not part of the UN, but works very closely with the UN and is part of many of the UN mechanisms and processes, including the UN Security system, the Inter-Agency Standing Committee, the UN Country Team and its planning processes, and the pension fund, to mention but a few.

IOM is committed to the principle that humane and orderly migration benefits migrants and society. It acts to

- Assist in meeting the operational challenges of migration,
- Advance understanding of migration issues,
- Encourage social and economic development through migration, and
- Work towards effective respect for the human dignity and well-being of migrants.

The Government of the Republic of the Sudan became a Member State of IOM in 1998. The Cooperation Agreement signed between the Government of Sudan and IOM in October 1998 refers to areas of cooperation including:

- Return and reintegration of internally displaced persons,
- Technical cooperation on migration management,



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- Research and information on migration,
- Migration assistance to refugees and other persons in need; and
- The return and reintegration of qualified nationals.

IOM opened an office in Khartoum in 2000. The focus of its activities at that time was the resettlement of refugees from Sudan to third countries, in collaboration with UNHCR – and we are still assisting with resettlement now. Since 2004, IOM's activities have increased both geographically and in scope.

IOM is probably best known in Sudan for its work with the Sudanese Government and the UN in providing transport assistance to help IDPs return home following the signing of the CPA in 2005. As part of this joint programme, IOM provided direct transport assistance to more than 116,000 people to return to their homes.

In addition to this, IOM has also sought to support the Government of Sudan in the area of internal migration on a wide range of programmes promoting safe, dignified and sustainable return. Thus we have been:

- Finding and keeping track of where displaced people are, and where they are returning to,
- Assessing living conditions in areas of return and how far basic services - such as water, health care and education - are available,
- Providing assistance in communities of return to help both the returnees and the communities,
- Providing assistance to other people returning, including refugees from neighbouring countries, highly qualified Sudanese, and Sudanese migrants stranded abroad.

More recently we have been providing assistance in the areas of:

- Migration information,
- Research,
- Data collection, and
- Helping to build national capacities in migration management, including in the regional and international context.

IOM currently has around 500 staff, of which around 430 are national staff. In addition to its head office in Khartoum, IOM has offices in Juba and nine sub offices: in Wau, Bentiu, Malualkon, and Tambura in the South; Kadugli and Abyei in the Protocol areas; and Nyala, El Fashir and El Geneina in Darfur.

It might be helpful if I give a little more detail. In Southern Sudan and the Transitional Areas IOM - working hand in hand with the Government - has identified over 1 million returnees in their places of origin in three states of Southern Sudan (Northern Bahr el Ghazal, Warrap and Unity) and in Southern Kordofan State. We have assessed the living conditions in over 7,000 villages in these states. Knowing the location and numbers of returnees and assessing the gaps in basic services and living conditions in the regions most affected by returns enable us to provide assistance both to returnees and their communities, and help prevent secondary displacement in a context of already fragile social and economical conditions. The forms of assistance we provide are the building or provision of hand dug wells, boreholes, latrine blocks, livelihood centres and health and education facilities. In addition, we give trainings in topics such as hygiene awareness and help people gain skills or get equipment to earn a living.



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In other support to return, IOM has assisted 435 qualified nationals (IDPs and refugees) interested in sharing their valuable skills and knowledge for the rehabilitation, reconstruction and development of their homeland to return and take up employment in key fields like education, health, infrastructure and finance.

In Darfur, under the terms of a Memorandum of Understanding signed by the Government of Sudan, IOM and the UN in August 2004, IOM is charged with monitoring, verifying and providing assistance to returns in Darfur. IOM's activities include protection monitoring for returns or relocations, registration of IDPs and aid beneficiaries, population tracking and village assessment, and support to returnees to return or relocate in safety and dignity. We are working to ensure that our activities are conducted with due regard to environmental impact and contributing to the humanitarian community's knowledge base on environment and livelihood vulnerabilities in Darfur. The projects are developed in collaboration with the Humanitarian Aid Commission and provide in depth life-saving information about returnees and their host communities, contributing to planning their reintegration in a safe environment.

Since April 2009, IOM has been distributing essential life-saving non food items and emergency shelter materials throughout Darfur and Northern Sudan as part of the Non Food Items Common Pipeline Operation, covering people affected by conflict and natural disasters such as floods.

Since January 2009, Central and Western Equatorial states of Southern Sudan have witnessed an extremely severe humanitarian crisis in the wake of attacks by the Lords Resistance Army and in the context of the joint Sudanese, Ugandan and Democratic Republic of Congo military operations against the LRA. According to UN figures 130,000 individuals in both the Democratic Republic of Congo and South Sudan have been forced to flee. Hundreds more have been reported killed, raped and abducted. IOM assessments conducted in the most impacted areas (Ezo, Andari and Naandi Counties) have indicated there to be some 14,000 IDPs, 3,000 refugees and more than 110,000 impacted host communities, with extremely poor access to water and shelter and other basic services. IOM has been providing non food items (NFIs) and water purification kits, along with two mobile health clinics.

In support to the preparations for the forthcoming national elections, IOM is collaborating with UNDP in raising awareness about democratic electoral processes among the population of Sudan. NGOs have been selected and received training and funding to disseminate information throughout the country. The idea is both to encourage voters' participation in the elections and to build the capacity of local partners - Sudanese organizations - to form a solid foundation for democratic processes in Sudan.

In the area of migration management, IOM has recently provided support to the Secretariat for the Sudanese Working Abroad of the Council of Ministers to open the Centre for Migration, Development and Population Studies (September 2009). The aim is to provide technical expertise to develop a Migration Profile for Sudan, to raise awareness of migration issues among Government institutions, diaspora communities, potential migrants and academics, and to support informed decision-making and policy development. To achieve this, IOM is providing essential equipment and training staff in data collection and analysis, and information management. IOM will also support the Government, through the Secretariat of Sudanese Working Abroad (SSWA) to link all actors involved in migration management in Sudan to support effective information sharing.

IOM is implementing an information campaign in Eastern Sudan on the risks of irregular migration. Posters and pamphlets are being distributed, supported by radio and television coverage throughout the country. The campaign in Arabic, Amharic and Tigrinya languages



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targets not only irregular migrants, but also Sudanese citizens. Workshops and discussions with community leaders and migrants are also being organized. In addition, to enhance communication between border states and the central Government, IOM has provided 5 VHF codan base stations to the Ministry of Interior, for border control. The information campaign and the communication equipment are part of a series of activities developed through the “East Africa Migration Route Programme” supported by the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) and implemented in collaboration with the IOM Mission in Ethiopia and the African Union (AU).

In conclusion, IOM has been engaged in many different areas of activity and across much of Sudan. We hope to continue as a valued and effective partner of Government, UN agencies and the international community in general, providing services and advice as and where they are needed.

I would be very happy to answer questions now. I would also be very happy to see any of you individually in my office or in groups if there are particular topics of interest on which you would like to be briefed on.

Thank you.

Q & A

Al-Sahafa: My first question is on the differences in the figures cited by the Sudan government and by agencies of the number of returnees to villages in Darfur.

My second question is on the issue of returns to and reverse returns from southern Sudan.

Ms. Helke: I am not sure I got the first part of what you said about the return of IDPs in Darfur and the relationship with the various figures that the Sudanese government has been saying. We are in the process of updating our figures for the region as a whole and we will publish them when we finish the updating. The figures we have at the moment are available in package until we have the updated versions. But our particular role in Darfur is less related to numbers than to the process of returns and whether it is truly voluntary and appropriate in terms of sustainability.

As for reverse returns from southern Sudan, I do not know of any figures that we currently have on that. Decisions on returns in any direction are often complex and affected by many different factors. But I don't have figures to give you at the moment.

Reuters: Have you had any indication that some returns may not be voluntary or that the scale may be different from those we have heard elsewhere?

Would you give us some broad information about where migrants are going from Sudan and also the people who are dying in the process of going to Israel through Egypt and so on?

Ms. Helke: As I said before, all the figures that we had are in the files that we have handed out and our involvement in returns is much more geared to verifying the voluntariness and appropriateness of returns. And our findings are reported not through the media or through a megaphone but rather to the authorities concerned in order to ensure that the response is then appropriate.

On migration routes to, through and from Sudan, that is one of the things that our collaboration with the SSWA and our further work with the Ministry of the Interior is hoping to achieve – to



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produce a migration profile where we see who is coming in, from where; who is going out, to where. Certainly there is a lot of information about different routes and different numbers but we want to pin it down in a much more specific way and we will then publish that and work with the government to address the challenges that those entail.

Al-Wassat: Could you comment on reports from government sources that returnee IDPs in Darfur go back to their camps to benefit from relief distributions?

Do you have enough funds for the operations you plan to carry out?

Ms. Helke: Yes, I think that the movements in Darfur are complicated. As I said before, the motives for returns are very mixed meaning that we do have evidence of people returning more than once.

In terms of the financial position of the organization, we receive core funding from the member-states of which Sudan is on - so Sudan pays a membership fee every year to support the core of IOMs existence. Then everything else that we do is projectised so we receive specific funding to do specific activities. We don't have conventions or treaties that give us the right or the obligation to act in any sense. So we act always in coalition and agreement with the host government and we do what is of interest to the host government and to the donors. If we have both that support and the support in terms of funding, then we would do those activities. All the activities of IOM are subject to guidance from the Council which is the body of the membership that meets every year in Geneva at the end of November of the beginning of December.

Q: *[Indiscernible question on what IOM addresses issues of harsh conditions of sea-faring prospective migrants to Europe, etc]*

Ms Helke: Certainly irregular migration is an issue of concern to a large number of countries. People migrate very often because they have nothing to stay for or because the circumstances are such that they believe their lives would be better if they moved elsewhere. That can be true within the country or in terms of people who chose to leave the country to go to somewhere else.

Yes, we do know that many people lose their lives in trying to migrate. We implement information campaigns to try to warn people about this and that is one of the activities that I mentioned that we are doing in the east. But there are people to exploit vulnerable people and people who have hopes of improving their lives – smugglers, traffickers, and others – who exploit potential migrants, take money from them and abandoning them in very unsafe places. We do what we can to prevent people from setting off on unsafe journeys; we do what we can to rescue them when we find them abandoned in hopeless conditions; we have, in many cases, enabled people to go home when they were abandoned in the Sahara Desert; and we have a fund called the Humanitarian Assistance to Stranded Migrants' Fund to enable us to support the returns. And all the returns that we do are voluntary. IOM doesn't do deportations so if people are willing to go home, we will be able to help them. We also work with governments that may be countries of origin, countries of destination or countries of transit and try and help them work together. We can often provide a forum where countries in a particular migration route or particular migration area can get together and discuss what they can do to avoid death of migrants en route and to prevent these difficulties. We also work in certain countries to try and help create a climate to stop the push factors that make people leave their countries or their regions of origin to seek more opportunities elsewhere because all the time there is underdevelopment and poverty, people will to improve their lives and, in many cases, they see that this is only possible by moving away from where they normally live.



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SRS: It seems that the migration or return exercise supported by the IOM has stopped. I have not seen the return activities that we used to see from north to south Sudan. What is happening? Has the IOM changed its mind?

What is IOM doing towards ensuring that southern Sudanese IDPs residing in northern Sudan move to southern Sudan at least to participate in the elections and the referendum?

Ms. Helke: IOM was involved in the general UN planning of returns with the government and took part in that programme as long as it lasted. As I said, we do not have any treaty or convention that gives us a right or an obligation to do anything in particular but we provide services, advice or support when we are asked to do so.

That applies to both parts of your question. We currently don't have any requests to organize transport returnees from north Sudan to the south. We currently are doing south to south returns and South Darfur to south returns for which we have the agreements and the funding.

Radio Miraya: There are reports of child abductions and displacements during conflicts in southern Sudan. Does the IOM play any role towards returning these abductees?

Is the IOM involved in recent government plans to demarcate IDP camps in Darfur into permanent settlements?

Ms. Helke: We don't currently have any role in the return of abducted children as far as I am aware.

On Darfur, we work within the context of the international community's response with the government of Sudan and the local authorities there. What our role would be in any particular action would be determined by that particular coordinated response and would be subject to the agreements that we have with the government and the UN and the normal coordination processes within the UN for the international community's response.