



UNMIS

Press Conference

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**Near-verbatim transcript of the Press Conference
by the Director of the United Nations Mine Action Service,
Maxwell Kerley
UNMIS HQ, Khartoum**

UNMIS Spokesperson, Ashraf Eissa: We are very pleased today to launch our new series of Spokesperson's Briefings with a very special guest coming from New York, Mr. Maxwell Kerley, who is the head of the United Nations Mine Action Service (UNMAS) currently visiting the country.

Allow me also to welcome the Special Representative for the United Nations Mine Action Office (UNMAO) in Sudan, Mr. Nigel Forrestal, who has been with us in Sudan – some of you know him - for almost two years now.

Before I hand over to our distinguished guests today, I would like to give you a brief background on our guest and his extensive experience in the field of demining and mine action in general. Our guest graduated from the prestigious Sandhurst Royal Academy in the UK. He started his career in the British Army in the Royal Ordnance Corps and then he had several commissions from the British Army dealing with mines and demining issues. He then went to the UN mine action system and in 2005 was the Acting Director of the Logistic Support Division of the UN and then went to the UNMAS in 2009.

Throughout his career, he helped many nations get rid of this terrible outcome of conflicts – mines – that actually affects civilians drastically. He was in the former Yugoslavia and many other parts of the world.

Without further ado, I would like to hand over to Mr. Kerley who will give you a few remarks about mine action work in Sudan and then the floor will be open for questions from journalists.

UNMAS Director, Maxwell Kerley: Ladies and Gentlemen, thank you very much for joining us for this briefing on the work of the United Nations Mine Action Service. My name is Max Kerley and I am the Director of UNMAS. I would also like to introduce Nigel Forrestal, the Director of the UN Mine Action Office in Sudan.

UNMAS has been here in the Sudan since 2002, when an emergency mine action programme was established to support mine action activities in South Kordofan. Since then, UNMAS made steady progress towards removing the threat of landmines and explosive remnants of war (ERW) throughout the Sudan. Implementation of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) has also resulted in the expansion of UNMAS activities throughout the country.

I am pleased to be here in the Sudan at this important time ahead of the upcoming elections and the referendum. Over the past 10 days, I have visited Blue Nile State, Kassala State, Juba and Darfur to review our activities including survey, clearance, mine risk education and victim assistance and to identify means by which UNMAO can be of better support to the government of Sudan in meeting Ottawa Treaty obligations. I have also held several meetings with implementing partners including national mine action authorities in both Northern and Southern Sudan.

UNMAS achievements are outlined in the enclosed fact sheets, so let me highlight just a few of them along with findings I made during my visits.

In Blue Nile State, UNMAS has worked with implementing partners to open approximately 13,000 km of routes, thus facilitating socio-economic development in formerly contaminated areas along with the

movement of internally displaced persons and refugees. Humanitarian aid workers are also able to better provide vital support to needy communities. During my trip to Damazine, I met the Deputy Governor of Blue Nile State and informed him of this major achievement. While he was pleased to learn of our success in Blue Nile State, he also stressed the importance of continuing this important work as many communities are still contaminated by landmines and ERW. He guaranteed his full support in order to continue to facilitate our activities.

While in Kassala, I observed the work of the Joint Integrated Demining Units (JIDUs) with support from one of the UNMAS implementing partners. The JIDUs will be accredited soon so that they can conduct demining operations to an international standard. This development in mine action is particularly encouraging as UNMAS is working with the national authorities to hand over all mine action responsibilities by June 2011. The transition which is in keeping with the UNMIS mandate, will equip JIDUs and other national capacities to deal with residual threats of landmines and ERWs after June 2011.

UNMAS is not only a proponent of the capacity building of national authorities but also of our own national staff. For instance, a staff member in our Kassala Sub Office joined UNMAO as a driver. Because of his hard work and determination to advance himself in his career, he has since been promoted to a Quality Assurance Assistant in which he ensures that UNMAO demining teams are operating safely and efficiently.

In Juba, despite the size of affected areas and difficult environment, UNMAS has been able to make significant achievements. In September 2009, for instance, there were 1,436 Dangerous Areas (DAs); since October 2009 up to now, 587 Dangerous Areas have since been closed. We are confident that most of the remaining 849 DAs can be closed by June 2011 with support from all parties, so that we can leave minimal residual threat to national capacities to deal with them.

I also visited Mine Risk Education and Victim Assistance projects that are also very important component of mine action. Mine risk education serves to mitigate the risks of death and injury to people living in contaminated areas. As a result, fatality rates have declined as community members are better able to keep themselves safe. Victim assistance is also an important component of mine action. Even after all threats from landmines and ERW are removed, landmine survivors continue to live with the injuries they have sustained as a result of having been hurt by a landmine/ERW. Victim assistance projects empower landmine survivors to become active and productive members of their communities through on-the-job training and provision of equipment such as generators and welding machines which allows them to have their own businesses. In this sense, UNMAS is trying its best to support these landmine survivors and also encouraging national authorities to integrate them into the overall support system towards people with disabilities.

These are just a few examples of the achievements that I was able to observe during my visit. However, I believe that the overall achievement in mine action can be attributed to the implementation of the CPA. I must note that these great achievements could not have been made without support from the people of the Sudan, national and local authorities, donor countries, UN missions and agencies, mine action implementing partners and local and international NGOs. I would like to personally thank them all as we continue to operate until the end of our mandate.

Q & A

Reuters: Have you seen any sign of new mines being laid in Sudan, particularly in the border areas?

UNMAS Director, Maxwell Kerley: Thank you for your question. We have seen no evidence of new mines being laid in Sudan. However, all conflicts result in increased contamination by Explosive Remnants of War (ERWs) and the ongoing conflicts through various parts of Sudan means that contamination is continuing.

So no, we have not seen any examples of an increase in the landmines laid but we have seen contamination and re-contamination by Explosive Remnants of War.

Reuters: Could you clarify what landmines and Explosive Remnants of War are?

Maxwell Kerley: Of course I should have done that.

Landmines are both anti-personnel and anti-tank mines. Explosive Remnants of War are munitions which fail to operate the way they are supposed to operate and therefore remain on former battlefields are hazards for civilian personnel. So they are basically unexploded bombs.

Citizen: What are the most dangerous areas in Sudan in terms of dangers from land-mines and why have these areas not been cleared of landmines?

Are there people in some areas who would not be able to go to the polls come the elections because of the risk of land-mines?

Did the government and the SPLA meet their obligations to provide the maps of the mine-fields they planted during the war?

Maxwell Kerley: Thank you for the very good question. The most dangerous areas in the Sudan, as far as I have been briefed, are in the eastern part of Sudan around the south of Kassala and also around a number of major towns in the south of Sudan – around Juba, Malakal and Wau. Those are the most dangerous areas. We are actively removing these mines from all these areas. There are no areas, down where we are, where we know there may be contamination where we are not operating and removing mines.

As far as I know, and I will check with my colleague on the right, I do not think that there are any areas where the ability to vote is being seriously hampered by the presence of mines. We have cleared the majority of major routes throughout Sudan and the routes we are now operating on are what you might call secondary routes. All the major routes of communication throughout Sudan have been cleared of mines and Explosive Remnants of War.

In terms of the clearance of mines, both the Government and the SPLM have cooperated fully with UNMAS in these clearance operations. As I said, Joint Integrated Demining Units are operating here in northern Sudan and we have a very close relationship with the National Mine Action Authority here in the north and the Southern Sudan Demining Commission. And we draw information from all sources from maps but also from military and former military who may have been involved when the mines were laid.

Let me just check with Nigel to make sure that my answer on the elections was accurate.

UNMAO Director, Nigel Forrestal: UNMAO will be working very closely with the electoral commission. We have done our utmost to make certain that the process would be as safe as possible. What we are not so certain about is the migration of people back to their particular areas because it is going to happen countrywide. But certainly the roads to every voting location have been cleared to the best of our ability. I am confident that we have done our utmost to make certain the electoral process will be safe as it possible can be from the Explosive Remnants of War and mine threats.

Q: What is UNMIS going to do after the end of its mandate while the threat of landmines still remain in some areas? What does UNMIS plan to do in order to remove these threats?

Does UNMIS have any plans to help those people who have been affected by landmines or does it only deal with the threat areas?

Maxwell Kerley: We are working extremely closely with the National Mine Action Authority here in northern Sudan and with the Southern Sudan Demining Commission to ensure that they have the correct capabilities to deal with whatever residual threat remains after the end of the UNMIS mandate. We are confident that by mid-2011 we will have cleared the majority of hazards across Sudan so there would not be major minefields or major routes that remain uncleared. We may not get rid of all the dangerous areas. However, we would get rid of those dangerous areas which are of the greatest threats to populations.

As I said, we are also working to develop national capabilities so that those national capabilities which will remain after mid-2011 will go to deal with those issues. That is what we call our transition plan to hand over responsibility – which is the way it should be – to the national authorities.

We also have parts of our programme which assist the victims of landmine incidents. We assist with funding and with expertise in the area of victim assistance. I can mention one particular project where we are assisting with the manufacture of wheelchairs, the manufacture of tri-cycles, with the manufacture of artificial limbs to assist those victims. So we are not only associated or involved in clearance; we do victim assistance.

We also do a significant amount of risk education, particularly for children, to try and ensure they avoid the dangerous areas and therefore avoid falling victims.

Again, working with authorities here in Sudan, we are involved in clearance but also with other pillars of mine action activity.

AFP: I would like to know what is the situation of landmines in the Darfur region and if what we have got on the ground is related to the north-south war or the ongoing conflict.

Maxwell Kerley: I visited Darfur. The major contamination in Darfur is not landmines. As far as we are aware – because we haven't been able to confirm this – if there is contamination by landmines, it is a very small area of contamination. However, the major contamination in Darfur is by Explosive Remnants of War. That is pretty widespread and I think it is as a result of the conflict in Darfur over recent years rather than the north-south conflict.

AFP: So how will you be able to deal with a handover in June next year if the conflict in Darfur?

Maxwell Kerley: We will be able, hopefully, to hand over to government by ensuring they have the capacity and the capability to deal with whatever residual threat is left.

Now, if that residual threat were for some reason to increase significantly between now and mid-2011 or indeed subsequently, and if the government requested us to do so, we could assist them in dealing with that threat.

Dealing with the Explosive Remnants of War is different from dealing with landmines. For landmines you could employ large teams; you could employ machines. Explosive Remnants of War tend to occur much more sporadically. Therefore you need mobile teams that could move out and deal with those hazards. We have those teams in Darfur at present. Those teams will continue to deal with the known or emerging hazards. We will encourage the government to develop those teams but if they request us to remain to assist either as part of an ongoing peacekeeping mission or as a separate kind of programme, we would be very willing to do that.

SRS: Perhaps the people of Sudan would like to know from you the number of landmine victims in Sudan since the war ended in 2005. Do you have any figures from the government or the SPLA on the number of landmines in the risk areas of Juba, Malakal and Wau that you mentioned?

Maxwell Kerley: We have a database which we use to assist in the management of all aspects of mine action. We tend to populate this database including with data of victims. As of the end of December 2009, we have registered 4,263 victims within our database. I can not tell you that is the total number of victims within Sudan. Those are the total number of victims that our officers, our staff have been able to identify and have been able to register in our database. I do however think that there would be landmine victims across Sudan that we have not been able to capture and enter into our database.

In terms of residual hazards, it is very difficult to be specific about the number of landmines. We are however pretty confident that the 849 remaining dangerous areas are the majority of residual hazard within Sudan. We do not know how many mines might be in those dangerous areas. We would only know when we are able to get to them and do a proper survey of those dangerous areas.

However, I do not think that there are a significant number of additional danger areas within Sudan. Our survey process has been very thorough in terms of identifying where the areas are although I can not be as accurate in identifying what is in those areas. We would do that when we come to clearing these areas.

Thank you.

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