

***UNMIS Press Release No. 3/08*****Top UN official in Southern Sudan speaks on Abyei, LRA, census and refugees**

Speaking at a press conference in Juba on 5 March, UNMIS Regional Coordinator for Southern Sudan David Gressly urged all parties to recent conflicts in the Abyei area to use non-violent means to advance their goals.

“The UN stands against all forms of violence and deplores the killings that have occurred in the Abyei region in recent days,” said Mr. Gressly, referring to clashes that had occurred near Abyei over the weekend.

He clarified that no killings had occurred within Abyei town itself, although there had been reports of fighting in the adjacent area. Details on the clashes and death toll could not be confirmed by the UN because its access to the area has been restricted, he said.

Mr. Gressly also serves as Deputy Resident Coordinator for Southern Sudan, coordinating operations of all UN aid agencies in the region.

Providing an update on the census, he said it was largely on course, although challenges lay ahead. Mapping of “enumerator areas” had been completed, census materials were ready for distribution to all 10 states of the region, and 40 “Principal Trainers” had completed a preparatory course in Juba.

UNMIS had flown the first planeload of census materials, mainly enumerator kits, from Juba to Malakal that day, Mr. Gressly said. It expected to deliver the materials to remaining state capitols 13 March. Once the census had ended, UNMIS would also assist with retrieving the completed questionnaires from county headquarters.

UNMIS was also assisting with publicity and education on the census, conducting workshops in towns across the region and broadcasting public service announcements and educational programmes on the census over Miraya FM, he said. “UNFPA (UN Population Fund) with support from donors is also working on an initiative to bring staff from census offices in neighboring countries to assist in more training work here.”

On return plans for 2008, Mr. Gressly said the total return target was 438,000 returnees, 188,000 of them organized and 250,000 voluntary. Of the 188,000 organized returnees, 108,000 are internally displaced persons (IDPs) and 80,000 refugees.

“The return operation from South Darfur to North Bahr-el Ghazal started yesterday. We expect to be moving 500 returnees per convoy twice a week to Aweil North and Aweil East Counties,” he said. Since January, the UN had been moving up to 1,000 returnees per week and the momentum was expected to pick up in the weeks ahead.

Responding to a question, Mr. Gressly said the UN was aware that IDPs had occupied lands belonging to refugees returning from Uganda to Nimule and Magwi. He added that many of the IDPs were being assisted by the UN to return to their places of origin, mainly in Jonglei.

On peace talks in Juba between the LRA and the Ugandan Government, Mr. Gressly said he expected a final agreement by the end of the month. "My understanding from what the parties have conveyed is that there are no outstanding substantive issues to work out, only administrative ones."

The monthly press conference, broadcast live on Radio Miraya, was teleconferenced with reporters in Khartoum, Wau and Malakal.

Note: A full transcript of Mr. Gressly’s press conference will be posted on www.unmis.org on 6 March.