



United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS)

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NEAR VERBATIM TRANSCRIPT

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Near Verbatim Transcript of
**Media Briefing by the Special Representative of the Secretary-General of the United Nations
and Head of the United Nations Mission in South Sudan**
Mr. David Shearer
Juba Conference Room
UNMISS Tamping Site – Juba - 24 January 2018

Opening Remarks:

Good morning everyone and thank you for coming along today. We appreciate your interest.

I would like to run through a few issues with you first relating to the ceasefire and UNMISS' peacekeeping activities around the country. Then I am happy to take questions on those issues or anything else you would like to raise.

First, UNMISS welcomes the cessation of hostilities agreement signed in Addis Ababa just prior to Christmas. This is a very important first step in revitalizing the peace process – which has stagnated for far too long – with the result that the people of South Sudan have suffered immensely.

It is vital that all parties now work together so that armed groups lay down their weapons and comply with the agreement.

We are seeing many claims and counter-claims about alleged breaches of the Cessation of Hostilities. CTSAMM is an independent agency tasked with monitoring and verifying breaches of the Cessation of Hostilities Agreement and reporting these to JMEC and IGAD in a timely manner so that action can be taken.

It is also important to understand the different roles of CTSAMM and UNMISS.

CTSAMM monitors and verifies the implementation of the Agreement. Our role at UNMISS is to support CTSAMM to access locations so it can carry out its work. At UNMISS, we have stepped up our efforts and will continue to do so in line with our Memorandum of Understanding with CTSAMM.

In terms of the next phase of the High Level Revitalization Forum, we have an UNMISS team in Addis Ababa right now working alongside CTSAMM and armed groups mapping the location of forces and ensuring that contact information for commanders and troops on the ground is collected.

You know, three months ago, I would have thought reaching a Cessation of Hostilities Agreement was unlikely. But we have made good progress thanks to the leadership shown by IGAD. I want to commend them and the parties to the Agreement for that.

It is now important that we continue to take advantage of the momentum that has been created.

On that note, on the 5th of February, I will travel to Addis Ababa with an UNMISS team for the second phase of the forum which is likely to focus on governance and security arrangements.

In relation to UNMISS' role in protecting civilians, we have a couple of significant announcements.

First, additional troops arriving with the Regional Protection Force are enabling us to extend our presence to more remote parts of the country where people are in real need.

Tomorrow, I will officially open our new permanent peacekeeping base in Yei.

The community and local authorities asked us to increase our presence there and we have responded.

Our troops have already been on the ground for a couple of months and construction of the base itself will be fully completed soon. But what is important is that we are not just sitting in the base. Our troops are out regularly patrolling around the region.

This has already helped build the confidence of the local population with many civilians reportedly returning to Yei. It has also enabled the reopening of the long-closed Yei-Kaya road.

Our field office has supported local leaders working to put a stop to fighting in the region and to kick-start peace talks between the armed groups. We have also vigorously engaged with commanders of the organized forces in the area to improve their relationship with the local community.

And our engineers from the Bangladeshi company that arrived as part of the RPF are busy rehabilitating key roads. This included fixing the Juba-Yei road before we opened the Yei base. As I've said before, roads not only enable local motorists and traders to travel safely, but also support the ability of communities to come together for peace talks at grassroots level.

In Akobo, we have decided to take a very different approach to extending our presence. Rather than investing huge resources and time to build a new base, we are putting in place a light and nimble peacekeeping footprint. We will install basic infrastructure to support troops who will rotate in and out on a regular basis. They will be there on the ground every week but not every single day of the week.

By being proactive in this way, we can support humanitarian agencies, maintain relationships with local authorities and the community as well as monitor the situation.

Extending our peacekeeping presence in places like Akobo and Yei as well as engaging in and supporting the revitalization of the peace process will continue to be a core focus for UNMISS in the coming months.

I will finish there now and I am happy to take any questions.

Q & As

Q: Since the signing of the Cessation of Hostilities Agreement (Cessation of Hostilities) in late December, there have been several violations in which both parties are blaming each other for these violations. Should this trend continue, what do you think is the future for the implementation?

SRSG David Shearer: I think it is important that we let CTSAMM do its work. As I said, that is the agency that is tasked and mandated to look into and investigate all of these alleged violations, but we ultimately also depend on the parties themselves to pull back and to refrain from any engagement.

I am hoping that the work they are doing in Addis Ababa this week will be able to establish where the positions of various groups are so that CTSAMM will be able to monitor that more closely and see whether they are moving from there and are advancing in any way.

All peace agreements ultimately depend on the parties themselves. We can monitor, we can enforce rigorously, but, at the end of the day, we all have to agree to work in peace and I think that is the spirit in which the next phase of the revitalization forum is held in.

Q: You said in your statement that there is a need for the coming of the Regional Protection Force (RPF) to Juba and that they are necessary for the establishment of peace in South Sudan while the government thinks that there is no need for the RPF at this time. Some officials in government say there is no need for the RPF at this time. How do you comment?

SRSG Shearer: Two things: first, the RPF is a mandate that is handed to us by the United Nations Security Council and that was part of the Security Council Resolution that was put forward. As I said, we have heard various comments by the government but, overall, the official comment is that they welcome the RPF and want to see the RPF here. What we are trying to do now is to bring it in as quickly as possible. As I said in my statement, with the ability to have more troops on the ground means we are able to do more things. And one of the things that we are able to do, for example, is to move down and open the Yei base. It has also enabled us, for example, right now to have part of the RPF on the road to Mvolo where we are reconstructing the road and they are working on the road reconstruction. So now with the expanded footprint that we have, we are able to do more things on the ground, not just in Juba, but beyond Juba as well. So, I think we just continue on as we are right now. As the RPF comes in, we will deploy either the RPF or other forces to places that we feel are most in need.

Q: There have been reports since the signing of the Cessation of Hostilities deal that the parties have not been respecting implementation of the deal. Is UNMISS concerned over this failure by the parties to respect the Cessation of Hostilities Agreement? As the UN representing body in South Sudan, is there anything your organisation is doing?

SRSG Shearer: Two things. One is who might be violating the Cessation of Hostilities agreement is a matter for the CTSAMM to determine and not us. But clearly if there are violations, yes, we are very concerned about that. We know that there has been fighting in various parts of the country. Some of that fighting is because of communal fighting but some of it is between political and warring parties. As I said before, anybody who is violating the Cessation of Hostilities needs to be

held to account and the CTSAMM would do that. That holding to account will be discussed, I am sure, at the African Union (AU) summit coming up this week and it is also going to be mentioned, I am sure in the discussions in the Security Council later this afternoon, our time, and this morning in New York.

There is a very broad consensus across the international community that this is the best chance that South Sudan has to reach peace and that the various parts of the international community will be working together to ensure that parties adhere to the agreements that they sign. The UN is part of that general consensus that we need to move forward and that the parties adhere to what they do sign.

Q: What is the UN doing for the release of the two Kenyan pilots held by the rebels in Akobo?

SRSB Shearer: This is an unfortunate incident that happened in Akobo. Negotiations are ongoing mainly between the company that owns the aircraft and their insurers. As negotiations are going on at the moment, I don't want to make any further comments as it may jeopardise the arrangements. But we are hopeful that the matter will be resolved and that the people will be able to return as soon as possible.

Q: Once again, we do know that it is the role of the CTSAMM in monitoring how the parties respect the implementation of the Cessation of Hostilities agreement. But again, as the UN body that also has a role in ensuring peace in the country, we would just like to understand from you, what is your assessment on the implementation of the Cessation of Hostilities agreement since it was signed last month?

SRSB Shearer: Our sense is that there has been some ongoing fighting in some places. There have been skirmishes and allegations made by each side about who started the fighting. We are disappointed that this has occurred. I guess in some ways it is not necessarily surprising. But, as I said, the most important thing is the parties to the agreement adhere to the agreement – not just in words but in reality on the ground. And we stand with the rest of the international community in condemning any party that violates the Cessation of Hostilities agreement and we are doing everything that we can as part of UNMISS to support CTSAMM in the job that they are doing. They rely on us for some of their movements, for their logistics for moving around the country and we will continue to support them in being able to do their job as effectively and as efficiently as they possibly can.

Q: There are emerging groups of new rebels who are also trying to derail peace. Now there is a Cessation of Hostilities signed and there are serious violations from the signatory parties while these groups are also emerging and disturbing. What can you say as the Head of UNMISS?

SRSB Shearer: The various parties to the agreement are now in Addis Ababa to sit down and to map where their presence is on the ground and also to ensure that we have the contact details of their various commanders and how to get in contact with them on the ground as well. That is a very important step because it enables a better understanding, a clearer understanding, of where these groups are so if they move from the positions that they say they are in then we know that they will be stepping outside the Cessation of Hostilities agreement. We are helping and supporting the CTSAMM to be able to do that right.

I come back to the same point that I made before. We condemn any group that mounts hostilities that would undermine peace in the country. The peace process has been revitalized. I think there has been enormous amount of effort gone into ensuring that happened. I think most people are very pleased with the progress made over the past three months. As I said, three or four months

ago I do not think people thought that we would be where we are. Here we are now about to start moving down and looking at the peace agreement and bringing it into a 2018 context as opposed to where it was in 2015.

Any party that tries to derail and spoil that process should be called out and condemned in the strongest terms.

Q: A number of parties signed the Cessation of Hostilities agreement in Addis Ababa. You did mention that parties have been involved in fighting. What I would like to understand is who are these parties that are fighting?

SRSG Shearer: About nine different groups are now meeting at Addis Ababa. I don't want to go through the various stories about who is fighting who and who is doing what on the ground. You best address that to CTSAMM.

We know that there have been certainly skirmishes - perhaps not a full-scale operations but certainly skirmishes. Nevertheless, skirmishes can often develop into much bigger conflict. What we would like do is to say is that any kind of conflict is a conflict too many. Let us pull back, let us refrain, exert some tolerance and let us see the peace process make its way towards a future that South Sudan can enjoy, rather than have to endure, as parties go to war.

Q: Assuming the violations continue, do you think it will still be possible to implement the peace agreement?

SRSG Shearer: I do. I am confident that the work of CTSAMM, the work of IGAD, the work of us all and the pressure from the international community will ensure that the ceasefire will remain intact. There is likely to be the odd incident but as long as that is kept under control and tight, then it will enable fuller negotiations around the peace agreement to continue. I do not think that one is necessarily contingent completely on the other. But, if we have an outbreak of full-scale hostilities, then obviously it puts everything in jeopardy which is why we need to be sure that all parties respect the Cessation of Hostilities and that violators are called out and condemned for what they do.

Q: What plans do UNMISS have to instil to the civilian population that is returning to Yei since they have lost trust in the men in uniform that are around the area?

SRSG Shearer: All I can say to the people of Yei is I have made a couple of visits there. Overwhelmingly people have said to me that they want to see UNMISS back. They believe that that is a component of returning peace to the area. That comes from the Governor, the local assembly, the religious leaders, the tribal leaders, women's groups, youth groups ... right across the board they've been a hundred percent in support of our presence there.

I think the important part for us is to ensure that we are able to travel along the roads around Yei and build that confidence. We cannot guarantee peace with a peacekeeping force. What we can try to do is to change the environment there so that people feel safe enough to come back.

It is incredibly important for the country as a whole. The Equatorias grow the bulk of South Sudan's food. If there is a million people from the Equatorias in Uganda who are not farming and if we are able to encourage people to come back for the rainy season, they will be able to plant crops and South Sudan will be start moving from where they are less reliant on food aid and more able to feed themselves.

That is very much what we want to do.

People are unhappy in refugee camps or in any camp and they want to be back in their own home. We will do everything we can to get people back living safely in their own home and starting to lead their lives again.

Q: As a follow-up, do you have any statistics of the population returning to Yei?

SRSB Shearer: We do not have firm statistics. I learnt this morning that around one thousand people had moved into the area just in the last day. That is very encouraging.

Clearly, people are doing this. Coming back slowly, checking out the situation to see if it is safe enough to return. What we hope is that it would remain stable and that they would be able to bring their families back, resume their livelihoods, and get back into their houses again.

I just cannot say enough how important it is for people to be able to move back into their houses and the efforts we are trying to make is to encourage them to do that. We will do everything we possibly can to help people return to their homes.

Q: Last week there was an accusation from the government to your mission here that you don't have any role in bringing stability in South Sudan and are doing nothing. That you are just moving with tankers of water in Juba. That means at the end there is not going to be any cooperation between your mission and the government. They are saying that if you do not have any role to bring peace in South Sudan, then you can take your things and go back. What is your comment on that?

SRSB Shearer: I did not see those comments or if they were made – that's up to the person who made them.

All I can tell you is exactly what I told you today on what we are doing on the ground. My recommendation is that if you want to see what we are doing on the ground, go and see places where we are on the ground and see what we are doing. I am going to Yei tomorrow to open a base where there will be 150 troops there all the time doing patrols in the Yei area. The road from Juba to Yei was renovated and rehabilitated by a Bangladeshi engineering group as part of the RPF. Without that road being rehabilitated, there would not be the traffic and transport that is going on.

Other parts of UNMISS and the RPF are patrolling the Juba-Nimule road. The reason – it is the most important road to get goods into South Sudan.

It is really about you as journalists and anybody else getting out and seeing for yourself what we are doing on the ground. I can tell you but if you do not want to take my word for it, go and have a look for yourself.

Q: A question on those pilots – I didn't understand, the rebels are the ones who detained them? What I would like to understand, as you said negotiations are going on. Have the rebels laid down any terms or demands as far as what they want? Since there is little known about this, can you shed a bit of light as to how the pilots went to that area?

SRSB Shearer: SPLA-IO negotiations with them have been taking place between the aircraft company and their insurers. I do not want to go into any details about this because negotiations are ongoing and I don't want to, in any way, jeopardise those.

But people have been flying in and out of Akobo for a very long time – I was there myself about five or six weeks ago and there are a number of international NGOs there. We make, as I said, frequent visits there, and we are setting up a light footprint in Akobo. So there has been traffic

going in and out of Akobo, there hasn't been a problem with that. Let's leave the other part of the negotiations to the people who are doing it. It's not us, it's not UNMISS, and we just hope things will end up positively.

Thank you very much for your time and all the best for the year.

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