

**REMARKS BY H.E. DENIS FRANCIS, PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED
NATIONS GENERAL ASSEMBLY**

Juba Conference Room, Tomping, Juba

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As delivered

Dear Friends and Members of Media,

Good afternoon to you all. I thank you all for joining me here today – and importantly for your kind interest in engaging and learning more about the work we do at the United Nations, including here in the Republic of South Sudan and the General Assembly which I am privileged to serve as President.

Allow me first to thank the Government and people of the Republic of South Sudan – for the warm reception extended to me personally and members of my delegation since our arrival in Juba.

My appreciation also goes to the leadership and staff of the Department of Peace Operations and other departments in the UN Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) and the UN Family in the Republic of South Sudan for facilitating a very comprehensive programme for my visit.

I have looked forward, with great anticipation, to this visit since the early days of my Presidency of the General Assembly – seeking to demonstrate my full support and that of the General Assembly for ongoing concerted efforts to consolidate peace, security and development in the Republic of South Sudan and the region.

I believe taking the United Nations to the people – beyond the comfort of our offices and conference rooms in New York is the right thing to do, to avoid that us in the leadership positions remain too detached from the glaring reality faced by the people we must effectively serve on the ground.

In any case, as you may be aware, the Development of Africa is among the eight (8) strategic priorities of the United Nations as approved by all the 193 Member States.

It is without any doubt in my mind that the Republic of South Sudan – and the African continent at large – have special needs and must be prioritized as they urgently need, and

deserve, peace and stability, strong governance mechanisms as well as sustainable development.

As President of the General Assembly, this visit is therefore an important opportunity for me to come and to learn firsthand about both the progress and challenges faced by its people of the Republic of South Sudan as well as what more in terms of support the UN and the international community can offer.

As we all know, the Republic of South Sudan is the UN's newest member – admitted in 2011 by the General Assembly at a historic moment of solidarity – entrenching the country into the community of peace-loving nations, with equal rights and responsibilities, and in turn, enhancing the values and principles enshrined in the UN Charter.

Since independence, the Republic of South Sudan has undoubtedly faced challenges – but has persevered and in recent years made significant progress in its efforts to build lasting peace and achieve sustainable development. A trajectory which – as I said – that has not been without its challenges, because:

- Peace and security challenges persist – including persistent intercommunal conflict and the risk of spillover from Sudan.
- As a result, humanitarian needs are soaring.

The Republic of South Sudan also finds itself on the frontlines of climate change – amid the worsening impacts of flooding and drought, and their myriad implications for vulnerability.

For these reasons, I express my fullest support for the Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan (R-ARCSS) – forged in 2018, thanks to the efforts of South Sudan's leadership with support from the United Nations, the African Union and its sub-regional bodies, as well as other partners.

The Revitalized Agreement is – indeed – a landmark achievement. And I firmly believe that all it now needs is for the parties to faithfully rally behind it to ensure its full implementation – and I repeat, its full implementation.

Here I must emphasize that there is inspiration to be drawn from Mahatma Gandhi's apt words of wisdom that: "There is no way to peace. Peace is the way."

The message of peace is the message I came here to deliver – as I did during my courtesy call on His Excellency Mr. Salva Kiir Mayardit, President of the Republic of South Sudan, and in my bilateral meeting with Honorable Mr. Ramadan Abdalla Goc Ayuel, Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation.

I also had the privilege to interact with the leadership and staff of the United Nations Mission in South Sudan and the UN Family in the Republic of South Sudan – who enlightened me on the exceptional work they are doing, as One UN, in support of the efforts of the Government of the Republic of South Sudan.

During my visit I also interacted with the young people and will be interacting with some young people today as well, I hope – who are the leaders of tomorrow – and civil society members, as the third estate, about their vision for a peaceful and equitable future in the Republic of South Sudan.

I also visited an internally displaced persons camp – where I underscored my unwavering support and that of the General Assembly and the United Nations system at large.

As you all know – when societies and countries take the lead and are proactively involved in building peace – there cannot be any shortage of support for the process as a whole, both internally and from the international community.

That is why the Republic of South Sudan's nationally led path to a brighter future must be an all-inclusive one. It must showcase the full, equal and meaningful participation of its women. It must embrace the active involvement of its civil society organizations and the youth.

And in so doing, it must fully acknowledge the challenges and opportunities for realizing the rights of all children in the Republic of South Sudan and elsewhere on the continent – as the International Day of the African Child which is coming up on 16 June calls on us all to do.

This is why I felt it essential to hear directly from children here in the Republic of South Sudan – who while they face the biggest brunt of many challenges but also represent our hope and aspirations for a brighter future peace and prosperity in this country.

Given the theme of the Day of the African Child is focused on galvanizing support for the right to education, it's important to note that the Republic of South Sudan has one of the world's youngest and most vibrant populations.

But, sadly, 70 percent of children are not in school. They are missing out on learning and empowerment – because of prolonged conflict, the climate crisis, displacement, poverty and many other reasons. This affects their right to development, excludes them from future work opportunities – and exposes them to further violence, abuse and exploitation. It puts at risk, not only their future, but also the firm foundation of the country itself.

Here I must commend the UN Family’s efforts – in doing its utmost to enhance access to education for all children across the Republic of South Sudan, including renovating and building classrooms, training teachers, and distributing textbooks.

This reflects the true mission of the United Nations and also positively reflects on the General Assembly’s commitment to children’s right to education – as a viable means in building societies grounded on respecting and promoting human rights, the rule of law and tolerance, and addressing the root causes of conflict.

Dear Friends,

Let me end by saying that – if there is one key and overarching message I came to deliver during my visit – it is this: the United Nations system and the General Assembly, which I lead, firmly stands with the people of the Republic of South Sudan.

We stand with all those living through, or recovering from, instability or conflict. We stand with the people of the Republic of South Sudan - including those who are internally displaced, not by any choice of their own. And we stand with people and communities living on the frontlines of some of our gravest challenges – be it natural, manmade or otherwise.

As President of the General Assembly, my door remains open to help build peace, progress, prosperity and sustainability for all – here in the Republic of South Sudan, in wider region and including in neighboring Sudan where we are witnessing unprecedented escalation of violence that must stop, now; and indeed, around the world.

In that spirit, once again I am happy to be with you today – and I look forward to any questions you may have.

I thank you.

QUESTION & ANSWER SESSION WITH MEDIA

Question 1: Esther, UNICEF Young Reporter

Your Excellency, my name is Esther and I'm a UNICEF young reporter. We as children of South Sudan are facing huge challenges, particularly being able to go to school and later to universities. How important do you think education is for children and what can the UN do in order to improve access to education?

Answer: Denis Francis, PGA

Thank you very much and it's a brilliant question and I'm glad you asked it because education is the key that unlocks everything else. With education you can be whatever you choose to be. In some parts of the world, we move people from working class to middle class in a single generation, because of education. It is possible and it is doable. It takes hard work and commitment, but it does happen.

And so, education is really the key to success, not just individual success, but to the success of the country. It is through education that you create the doctors, the nurses, the engineers, the teachers, the research scientists, physicists, the botanists, the zoologists, the astronauts, everything that creates success.

Now there is a problem in South Sudan. 70% of the of the children in South Sudan are not in school because there is a shortage of school places. There is a shortage of teachers. It means that children are missing out on the very thing that they need in order to be fully successful in life.

We at the UN are working hard. I took my jacket off, but I have a pin on my jacket. Do you know what the sustainability development goals are? One of them is education. It's a top priority of my Presidency because education is like magic. It opens a door, expands your mind. The ability to read and write, as simple as it sounds. if you can read it means that you can assimilate information. You can understand. You can communicate in the world, and these are very basic functions but extremely important, being able to communicate effectively. Education is the ultimate equalizer.

I told you just now about the fact that in some countries we can move people from working class to middle class in a single generation. I know this because this is my own experience. I came from a working-class family. And now, I suppose, I'm in the middle class. Because of education, I went to school, I had gifted teachers, brilliant teachers. I always studied hard. I did my homework. I did all the right things. I went to university and then I went back to university again. And now today here, here are my I'm the President of the General Assembly of the United Nations. You can one day become the President of the General Assembly of the United Nations. You can one day become the President of South Sudan. Only education will take you there. Education.

So, embrace education because it's a scarce commodity, particularly in South Sudan. And we admit that we have to work smarter and harder to spread education so that more kids can go to school. Everyone does not have to be a doctor and a lawyer to be successful. But you must

at least be able to read and write in order to communicate and to navigate the world of the 21st century. It is extremely important. I want to encourage you as young people. Do your homework. Study hard. Education will set you free to do whatever you want to do, to become whatever you dream of becoming every day. If you can dream it, you can make it happen. The job is yours. With our support, the support of your teachers, your parents, the support of the education system to make it happen.

Question 2: Santo, Freelance Journalist

The South Sudan government and the non-signatory parties to the peace pact that was signed in 2018 are currently in negotiations in Nairobi. What is the UN position regarding the process as the country gears towards election and already there are talks in town of a possible extension?

Answer: Denis Francis, PGA

Let me say this: The UN's brand is peace. That is our brand and that will continue to be our brand. The UN does not, never aligns with conflict and war and fighting because that's not the way to solve problems. I'm saying this and looking at these young kids, that is not the way that you solve problems. You solve problems by sitting down with one another and discussing your differences. You don't take punches and fight at all. That does not help, because after you fight, the problems still exist. So, the UN brand is a brand of peace, and the UN supports any initiative that is going to result in internal peace and calm and stability in South Sudan.

The question of the timing of the election is a question for the government and people of South Sudan to decide. We hope, and we encourage that the elections take place, and that adequate preparation is made for the elections in order to ensure that it produces a good, strong result that the people of South Sudan are satisfied with and will not question. But the decision regarding the timing of the election is a matter for the government and people of South Sudan, bearing in mind that the entire international community will have their eyes on South Sudan to see what happens and the future of this country to a large extent will depend on the extent to which the international community feels satisfied that the country is on the right route.

South Sudan needs a lot of support, there's no doubt about it. Yesterday, I had a meeting with a series of cabinet ministers who are really working hard and dedicated to lifting this country up. But as the Minister of Education told me, there's a shortage of schools in the country areas. In order to build a school far away, they can't send the building material by road because there are no roads. It has to be flown in. Very expensive. These are the practical realities that exist in this country that affects its ability to educate young children as much as the desire is there to do it, it cannot be done all at once and right away. So, we have to be realistic, and I suppose the people of South Sudan have to bear in mind that development is a process. You don't get up tomorrow morning and everything is fine. It takes hard work and dedication.

Question 3: Aguek, SSBC

As President of the UN General Assembly, what does your leadership have for South Sudan to make sure that South Sudan as a country that has never been to successful and democratic elections to be able to build the future of the democratic society at the UN General Assembly?

Answer: Denis Francis, PGA

Well, let me say this. Democracy is several things. It's an attitude. It's a way of life and it's a process. Now the premise of your question seems to be that you have some doubt or question about South Sudan's ability never having done it before, to organize and hold a credible election. But South Sudan would not be the first or only country to hold an election that never held an election before. Countries do that all the time and the elections are free and fair and free from fear. People are allowed to go and express their vote - one ballot, one vote. You dip your finger in the ink. Because you only have one shot. You can't vote twice if you do that, you're breaking the law, and you can be sent to jail.

But let me say this: if the authorities in South Sudan believe that they do not have all of the necessary expertise to carry out the election in a way that would give the electors the people of South Sudan the comfort of knowing that the elections are free, then there are mechanisms available to assist and support the authorities of South Sudan to execute the elections. There are international organizations set up that have been doing this for years and years and years, and who if requested, if the government feels the need, I'm sure would be prepared to accompany the government and support their effort in getting a clear, good, strong outcome. That is not questionable.

So those mechanisms exist and are in place. But I encourage you not to doubt the capacity of the local authorities to organize the election simply because it's the first time. I live in a country where, for the first time in 1956, we organized an election and we've been doing it ever since without any problems. The issue is and has to be, and I hope that the people of South Sudan will feel comfortable enough and strong enough to accept and honor the result of the election when it comes. That is what elections are supposed to do. The election of a government is the right of the people to express their will regarding who should govern them. That is their constitutional right. So, not because the political party that you like may not have won, that should not cause you to say irresponsibly that the election was rigged. That is not proper.

So, the mechanisms are there, and it is for the electoral authorities of South Sudan to make those decisions regarding whether it needs any external support.

Question 4: Aguek, SSBC

The SDG targets have been set for 2030 and South Sudan is still behind. What can the UN do to help South Sudan get on track?

Answer: Denis Francis, PGA

Everybody is behind. The entire world is behind on the SDG's. Only 17% of the SDG's are on track. We are woefully off track.

A number of things have happened. There are a number of reasons for this. We have the COVID-19 pandemic. We now have the war in Ukraine, we have the war in Gaza, we have had food shortages. We've had supply chain disruptions, we've had an energy crisis, we've had a perfect storm of problems coming together at the same time making it difficult. And so, all of the SDGs are off-track. We are working now to try to bring them back on track because this is a commitment that the international community gave to the world in 2015.

And this year, it's 2024, in six years, we are supposed to get these things done. Now a lot of work is being done to move forward, but what is required most of all to help and support the process, is the financing office. It costs money to undertake reforms and so far, those funds have not been identified. They have not come forward. So, we continue to hope we have to do what we have to do because kids need to be educated. That's one of the big ones.

We need to reduce the level of global poverty. It is too high. We need to significantly reduce the level of global hunger. 860 million hungry people in the world is too much. It's too much. It's not sustainable. We need to create better health facilities to give people better access to health facilities. These are not just problems of South Sudan; they are global problems. The people of South Sudan may feel them differently because, of course, you are in a situation of conflict.

And because you're a new country, you're only 11 or 12 years old. So, the UN is working closely through the UN Country Office with the local authorities to see how we can make progress on the SDG's. Because the SDG's will help to lift people up to give them hope to create in these young people's minds that they can be whatever they determine they want to be. Whatever their ambition is, once they're prepared to do the work to make it happen because it takes work and dedication. So, the UN is not giving up on the SDG's and the UN is not giving up on service.

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