



United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS)

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NEAR VERBATIM TRANSCRIPT

UNMISS ASG VRA MEDIA BRIEFING: NEAR VERBATIM TRANSCRIPT

Near Verbatim Transcript of Press Conference by the United Nations Assistant

Secretary-General Victims' Rights Advocate Ms. Jane Connors

Juba Conference Room

UNMISS Topping Site – Juba

07 December, 2017

Introduction by Francesca Mold:

Let me start by briefly introducing the UN Assistant Secretary-General Jane Connors, before handing over to her to make some introductory remarks about her role and her visit to South Sudan. We will be happy to take your questions, if you please state your name and the news agency you represent when you ask your questions we would appreciate that.

Jane Connors was appointed by the UN Secretary-General as the first victims' rights advocate for the UN system. This puts her at the forefront of the UN's efforts to prevent, respond to and ultimately end sexual exploitation and abuse. Her role ensures that the rights and dignity of victims are at the center of UN's efforts in this regard. Ms Connors was previously a prominent lawyer and a long-time human rights activist. We welcome her to South Sudan and I hand over to the Assistant Secretary General now to make some opening remarks and we are then happy to take your questions.

ASG VRA Jane Connors:

Thank you very much. It is a pleasure for me to be with you here this morning and it's a pleasure to speak to everybody beyond this conference room. I want to say at the outset that thousands of women and men who work for the United Nations uphold its values, uphold the values of the UN Charter; frequently they work in situations of great personal risk and sacrifice, and some indeed lose their lives in this enterprise. However, some, especially in the field, have engaged in sexual exploitation and abuse. Sexual abuse incorporates crimes while sexual exploitation incorporates activities such as transactional sex, harassment etc by UN personnel. It is conduct which is absolutely abhorrent, and a conduct which is extraordinarily painful to its victims, and undermines the UN itself and, of course, dents the trust that communities should have in the UN.

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There have been many efforts to address this and, let me underline, it is not an endemic scourge, but it is something to be addressed. Recently the Secretary-General at the beginning of the year, introduced, out of his own personal commitment and deep pain with regard to this conduct, a new approach to the elimination of sexual exploitation and abuse. This new approach puts victims at the center, puts their rights and dignity at the center. In order to put their rights and dignity at the center, he created this victims' rights advocate. It's not an advocate as a lawyer might be, although law might be involved, but a role which accompanies victims, which seeks to prevent at the outset sexual exploitation and abuse, and, if unfortunately it occurs, to make sure that the victim is worked with, her or his rights and dignity, what he or she wishes is at center stage from the allegation, the taking of the complaint, throughout the disposition, and the ultimate resolution of what has occurred, and hopefully in a context where it is very much in the victim's interest and what the victim wants.

I have been extremely privileged and very humbled to be appointed to this role. It is an enormous responsibility and, for me, it's something that I believe in. I really empathize with people who have suffered this sort of trauma, this sort of experience, and I hope through my work, which is working across the UN system, working with communities, and I have been meeting here with communities, I went to Malakal and I met communities, this afternoon I will do so also. I have been meeting with members of the Mission, with the SRSG, the Force Commander, and other very high-level people in the Mission and the broader UN system, as well as NGOs. I also had the opportunity to speak to a young woman who did experience this very disturbing conduct at the hands of those who were affiliated in some way into the UN system and spoke of her needs and what she wished for, her aspirations to the future. My view is this conduct is not inevitable, it is something that emerges out of imbalances in power relations, those who engage in the conduct are in a position of power and those who are subject to it are in a position of vulnerability.

I will stop there at this moment because I believe I have said enough and I am very happy to take questions over the period of time that I have with you, and again thank you so much for your interest. This suggests to me that there is a commitment from you to elevate, to make clear to the community, that sexual exploitation and abuse is absolutely an area of zero tolerance, and that zero tolerance isn't just a phrase, it's not only words. It is what the Secretary-General really believes in and he has put in place measures to bring about the zero tolerance. So, as I said, I am happy to take questions and thank you for being here.

Question: You had time to meet some of the victims of sexual exploitation, like you said, you were in Malakal. How can the problem be addressed?

ASG VRA Jane Connors:

Thank you for your question. I think the problem in that context is that we are looking at response; we are looking at response to a particular situation because efforts regarding prevention have not been successful. What we want to do is to have those preventive efforts in place and they should essentially have two elements, to make sure that those who are in these positions of power know that this conduct is absolutely intolerable and to change their attitudes with regards to those to whom they owe the highest standard of conduct. The second issue is to make the community aware of what they should expect from those who work with the UN. These people are there to protect them. These people are there to, hopefully, improve their lives. It is not for them to consider that this is normal conduct that they engage in. So that's the prevention element, and it has many prongs of course a sort of long-term attitudinal change, more short term training, putting in place the cards which you see around "this is zero tolerance", the T-shirts and so on, put it in people's faces, because I come from Australia and saw

that attitudes can change through consistently putting the messages out there that this is not to happen. The other thing is the engagement of the community; the community must be totally convinced that this is not to happen and, of course, having community-based complaints mechanisms, which are of a particular standard, reach the standard, is the best thing possible. In terms of the issue when it happens, in essence many of these victims are very young and what is required is immediate medical attention, immediate psycho-social attention, and psycho-social attention, not only for the direct victim, but also those who are victimised are the families of the victims, so psycho-social care of those members of the family - mothers, fathers, brothers and sisters - and then to look at short-term and medium-term and long-term issues with regards to what the victim might want. Ideally, the victim would like justice, would like to move through a process whereby there is some resolution, there is some justice given in terms of the perpetrator being punished in some way but many victims don't want that, well they might not want that, many victims are focused on their lives, as you know, legal processes take a long time and many victims wish to move on, they are interested in justice, but at the same time they wish to rebuild their lives, move into a scenario whereby they feel valued, they are not stigmatized, and that is the approach that we need to take. We need to ask the victim what she or he wants and not substitute our judgment, not say you need to do this, you need to do the other. So those I've met with, and not only here, I've met with people in the Central African Republic, they have been very keen on justice but they are not waiting for justice. It's a sort of heaven can wait type situation, they are moving on with their lives, they are hoping that there will be justice, which we believe is associated with ending impunity. I don't know whether there is any proof of that, but I think it's logical that, if perpetrators are punished, others will look and say, well I can't proceed in this way with impunity, but I am more focused upon what the victim wants. So a convoluted answer, but I think you get a flavour of what I am talking about. You ask that person, the person who is an expert with regard to her situation is the victim; we are there to assist, we are there to use what we know to work on the basis of what the victim really wants.

Question: Voice of America

I want to be specific about sexual exploitation in exchange for jobs. This has been common and we hear reports about it, so can we know about the statistics in Sudan specifically?

Let's go to the second point about the message that has been put forward - there is no kind of message for these victims to report. For instance, I get exploited sexually in exchange for job and I get employed is there any way I can report in secrecy so that I don't lose my job, and then I will be able to get justice in return, or perpetrators could be punished? Is there any message put in place to report these cases so that people could be made aware of it so that they could be able to report it?

ASG VRA Jane Connors:

Thank you, I have to say I am not a statistician, and I don't have statistics of sexual exploitation you are speaking of - sexual favours in return for employment - that's very specific, I don't have that statistics on me. The reports or the allegations that have come from South Sudan are not numerous but, I consider that those that are on the books may not reflect reality, and I am sure they don't reflect reality, because of what you speak, that people who are exploited are fearful of what they are given in return for the exploitation, that they will lose their jobs, they will lose, perhaps, access to food, things of that nature. And they are also fearful of stigma, they are fearful of the approach of the community. Certainly there are measures put in place by the UN system, here by the Mission and by other parts of the UN, UNICEF you know, it's a big family, we are all together but there are certain different systems. But the conduct and discipline website provides all the structures and we can make that link available to you, so you know how to proceed. There are also confidentiality assured in these contexts. The processes, and what happens next, depends on the nature of the abuse or the alleged

abuser, and we are always hopeful that there will be a resolution and justice and so on and so forth, but just as in any domestic system that can be a long-term pursuit and hopefully results positively. We are very conscious of the fact that some people are unaware of how to report and how to go about it and certainly we will be looking at ways of disseminating things further but, at the moment, the website has all of the statistics and the website also gives you an indication of how to proceed here with regards to your complaint.

Question:

Thank you very much my name is Denis from Reuters news agency, I have only one question, I just wanted to ask why you are here in South Sudan this time and what specific message did you have for the government and the people of South Sudan thank you.

ASG VRA Jane Connors:

I'm here at this particular time because it is a very important week. This is the end of the 16 days campaign, which starts from 25 November annually and ends on 10th of December annually. And 25th of November marks the United Nations Day to Eliminate Violence against Women, and you may or you may not know that day was the day that three sisters were murdered under the dictatorship of the Dominican Republic. So that not only relates to elimination of violence against women but just marks the pain of, I mean, obviously the deceased women, their families but the country as whole in regards to those women. And, of course, the 10th of December is Human Rights Day and we are looking forward to Sunday which is Human Rights Day. So that's why am here at this particular time, but I'm here because I want to learn more, although I would have come at any time, but this is a very good time to come, not all violence against women is sexual exploitation and abuse in terms of the roles that I have. I wanted to come to South Sudan because I wanted to see how things are going with the people and I wanted to have some opportunities to speak to those who are in the government, which I did yesterday. I spoke with somebody in the Ministry of Gender Affairs and we were talking about issues relating to sexual exploitation and abuse and gender-based violence against women and men generally.

The message I gave was centrally with respect to sexually exploitation and abuse, to make sure that the communities are aware that this is totally prohibited conduct, and they should feel free to come forward and complain to the United Nations system. I also wanted to know what was being done at the community level and, for that reason, I travelled to Malakal to look at the PoC camp and also today I will be visiting the camps her. So the message is absolutely no, zero tolerance with respect to sexual exploitation and abuse. Please report and do not approach those who experience this horrific conduct in a way that stigmatizes them, discriminates against them, isolates them and realize that, in the broader sense of things, it is very important for the UN to maintain a very high level of standards because we cannot talk about other violations that go on which are gender-based violence unless we ourselves are free from this sort of scourge.

Question:

My name is Sworo Charles from Radio Miraya, comparing South Sudan and other countries, how serious is the issue of sexual exploitation in your assessments so far?

ASG VRA Jane Connors:

I'm not keen on comparing countries, you know, in particular when dealing with something like this. If we were talking about could you compare South Sudan and other countries with regards to murder rates, for example, I think you would find there's clear statistical and other, well...it mightn't be, but

most countries have clear statistics on wrongful deaths but it's difficult with this sort of thing and conduct, people are very loathe to report, it's very shameful for many people and it shouldn't be – it should be for the alleged perpetrator - so am not keen on that comparison. I have been recently to another country in a similar situation, Central African Republic, there it seems the reported cases are higher and one would wonder why that is the case that the reported cases are much higher. The allegations here are lower, but I believe there is - we may find that is because of the stigma of the discrimination - and so I am very much encouraging these community-based reporting mechanisms as long as they fulfil the standards required of confidentiality, ensuring that the victim is not re-traumatized in any way, and that there are real pathways for that victim through that complaint mechanism, then I believe that we would have more cases. Just to say it's hard to categorise which country has more of this sort of conduct than another but, suffice to say, my eyes are on South Sudan rather than comparative analysis of countries in the region.

Question:

Of course, you have confirmed there are allegations of sexual abuse or exploitation in South Sudan. I'm just interested to know where are these cases majorly happening? Is it in the PoC camps or outside? And you did say you don't have statistical information regarding some of this cases in South Sudan? Can I know also maybe if there any statistical data globally, like in the recent past or this year alone, how many cases have your office at the level of the UN documented in relation to sexual exploitation by UN officials or people working with the UN perhaps thank you?

ASG VRA Jane Connors:

Thank you very much for pointing out and making it clear that we are talking with respect to my role, the sexual exploitation and abuse which is allegedly perpetrated by those associated with the UN. Those are the troops and the UN civilians, including contractors and others also associated with the UN and I know that often there is confusion when we talk about that and we are comparing countries we sometimes look at, well for some it goes beyond the sexual exploitation and abuse. As I say, the numbers that we have globally available, they are available and updated in real time and I think in 2016 there was something in the region of 103 globally which doesn't seem many but the statistics can be more complicated in that it might relate to some victims, some more victims, some more perpetrators, so it's worthwhile for you to look at the website. So that's what we have and, in terms of South Sudan, that information is available to you.

This statistics are updated continually and on a regular basis. The UN spokesperson releases the statistics so, if it would be helpful for you, we can provide for you the last press conference where the spokesperson updated the press on the number of allegations that had been received in a period of time. So again, statistics are very interesting, but what do they say? Lies, lies and damn statistics because you can read them in different ways and, I always remember, I did a lot of work on violence against women in my period backwards, and I still do, and what people say, is one woman in three will suffer domestic violence in their lifetime. That is a horrible statistic but, at the same time, you could say two in three women do not. So I know statistics are important in some ways so we need to be able to read them properly and as I said you can find those relating to the topic we are discussing today. But, suffice to say, one case is too many. I mean, we can say it's not a problem because you have only got X number on your website, but one is too many, and the fact that there is one in a context where we are looking for those are required contractually, required morally, to live up to the highest standard of conduct, then that suggests that if there's one, there may be more and what we need to do is make sure that the conditions are there so that people are not victimized and, if they are so, there is a

trajectory that is appropriate and that trajectory incorporates justice and incorporates punishment for perpetrator which hopefully will bring an end to the conduct entirely.

Very frequently this sort of activity occurs where there is closeness between those who are working in UN context and those who are beneficiaries because there it is possible for power to be exercised in a way where there is that close proximity, that opportunity of exploiting your position vis a vis the vulnerable. I have no particular evidence apart from a sense that there is specific vulnerability within the PoC camps and that might be with regards to the, well with regards to those who work with the population most closely. Let me say also that this isn't conduct which, is if it does occur, is necessarily confined to those who work with the United Nations but also those providing assistance to beneficiaries who are in position of power. I think the vulnerability, position of power, proximity, those are the issues to be taken account - the risk factors, and perhaps those risk factors are certainly in existence with regards to camps and those risks must be addressed

Question:

Madam you said you met victims; I would like to know did you meet some victims of rape because what was widely reported on South Sudan in conflict zones, I mean I would like you to tell us if you met some victims of rape and also probably if you met victims of sexual exploitation? We would also want to know, tell us what did they tell you, what is their experience like and what is your office doing about it?

ASG VRA Jane Connors:

Listen, that is a very, very difficult question because the issue of my role is ensuring that those who are victims are treated with the greatest respect and, while I did meet with a young person who experienced conduct within the definition of what I am discussing, I think I would be a bit unfair of me to talk about what went on in a confidential conversation and to go into any form of detail. My role is meeting with people who have suffered, people who are still in pain, to hear what their aspirations are and to hear if there are gaps in what is going on in terms of going forward.

I am not the person who investigates. I am the person who accompanies so I am more as an advocate not as a lawyer, advocate the word is a bit misleading I think, but I am the person who accompanies the victim. So I am sorry to disappoint you by not providing the details of my discussions both in Central African Republic and here but I need to be respectful and put the victim at the center. The whole purpose of me meeting with those people is to recognize their pain, recognize what they have been through, and look to see how we, in the United Nations, can best address this suffering

Question:

You talked about that the victims, their identity should not be released to help prevent stigma, but what I am wondering is, do you also hide the identity of the perpetrators, why I am asking this is because the UN has not been able to release any information on the perpetrators who have been held accountable. Do you have any statistics on that?

ASG VRA Jane Connors:

The United Nations does not hide. When there is an allegation, clearly it remains an allegation. And the disposition of the case, if the case goes further, there are disciplinary measures, only disciplinary measures, because it is not a judicial system. With national staff members, they can be, their disposition can be at the national level, then it will be up to the national level to release the identity of those held

accountable. With regards to the troops, the disposition will be in the country which has contributed the troop and that will be again up to the legal system in terms of whether the identity will be released

The allegations are there, the broad indications of the act that took place, the sort of act that took place, and the nature of the personnel. Those allegations are made clear on the website and we can provide that to you but the names are not.