



PRESS RELEASE

PRESS CONFERENCE TRANSCRIPT – OPENING REMARKS AND Q&A

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[near verbatim]

Thank you for joining me today. Good morning everybody. It is good to see you all again in person, even with your masks on.

With COVID, it's a difficult time for us, and I appreciate you being here and taking the appropriate precautions. A special thanks to those people who are listening on Radio Miraya who are joining us live.

I want to update you on a few issues, and then of course, as usual, I will be happy to take your questions.

First, I would like to brief you on the increasing violence in the Equatorial areas. You will all be aware of the armed attacks on civilians and humanitarian convoys in the Yei-Lasu and Juba-Yei roads over the past week. On Tuesday, two civilians were killed and four injured during an ambush by heavily armed men belonging to the National Salvation Front, or NAS as we know it. Trucks have been looted and torched during these assaults.

Recently, six of Vice President Wannu Igga's bodyguards were killed in a similar attack near Lobonok, which NAS has claimed responsibility for.

This surge in violence is deeply disturbing and is leading to clashes between those who are carrying them out and SSPDF and SPLA-IO forces. Inevitably, many civilians have been affected.

This week we responded by deploying troops to that area and are setting up a temporary operating base in Lobonok, or near Lobonok, so that we can do regular patrols and try and prevent further attacks and hopefully calm the situation down.

All of these parties, I should emphasize, have all agreed to the Cessation of Hostilities that was signed nearly three years ago and the Rome Declaration earlier this year.

They should live up to that commitment, stop fighting, protect communities – instead of causing harm.

The second issue I wanted to touch on is the issue of Jonglei.

While the security situation has been a bit calmer recently, which is welcome, tensions still remain very high and every effort must be made to ensure that fighting does not flare up again.

The past six months of fighting has killed over 600 people, in our estimate, although that could be quite conservative. Women and children have been kidnapped, and cattle stolen. Thousands have fled the area, homes and villages have been burned.

This fighting was made worse by flooding in the area, with OCHA reporting almost 160,000 people now displaced.

The humanitarians are working very hard to try and help these people who are living in the open without shelter – or without health care, adequate food, sanitation – in the middle of the rainy season.

But for recovery and rebuilding to take place, the cycle of violence must stop.

UNMISS has been, over the last couple of weeks, in touch with many of the leaders, both here in Juba and right across the ground in Jonglei itself. We will be working with all groups – the Nuer, Murle and Dinka – to organize a series of meetings to help resolve these grievances.

We are prepared to put peacekeepers on the ground while the leaders negotiate the return of families and other issues that are underlying the problems. But we also need to address those underlying issues. Education, water, access to markets and infrastructure, and policing, are just some of those issues involved. If people see there is a real benefit to peace, they may also see the cost of going back to war.

All these groups are responsible for the violence. There are no innocent parties. The solution lies with them. And we all have seen so much suffering that we need to bring it to an end now.

Lastly, I want to touch on the POC sites. I would like to update you on the progress that has been happening.

After careful planning going back almost a year, UNMISS has begun to progressively withdraw its troops and police from the Bor and Wau POCs, leading to a situation today where there are no longer any of those uniformed forces inside those sites or in the guard towers around them.

That has occurred because we assessed that any threats that may have existed in the past are no longer in existence today.

Importantly, withdrawing from these sites means that those troops who were occupied at the POCs can be redeployed to hotspots where people's lives are in immediate danger, like in Jonglei.

This process involves two steps. First, as we have done in Wau and Bor, is the withdrawal of our forces from the sites. The second is the re-designation of that site so that it transfers to the sovereign control of South Sudan.

When that occurs, the sites are no longer POC sites but camps for internally displaced people under the jurisdiction of the government.

Nobody will be pushed out or asked to leave when UNMISS withdraws. Humanitarian services will continue. I want to emphasize those points. It's just that the sites will no longer be under our jurisdiction but will be, as I said, IDP sites like so many other IDP sites across the country.

It will be the government's responsibility to find other land for these people to settle, or to help them to return to their homes or assist those whose houses are occupied by others.

The South Sudan National Police Service will be responsible for law and order. UN police officers have been working closely with the national police for several months now to help build their capacity, and we look forward to doing so in the future. In Wau, Bor and Juba, for example, criminal activity in the POCs is already being reported to local police and those arrested are handed over so that they can go through the judicial system and action can be taken.

The Transitional Government of South Sudan has primary responsibility for protecting all its citizens and they will, of course, extend that protection to those in the former POC sites. Where this protection is missing, UNMISS still has a clear mandate to protect civilians and intervene.

But again, it's important to stress that the newly named IDP camps will not be closed, nor will people be forced to leave.

Instead, it's my expectation that, over time, careful planning with the government and humanitarian partners will lead to the safe and voluntary return or relocation of many civilians living in IDP camps, which were previously designated as POC sites.

The POC sites were set up to protect people in imminent physical danger. They did so for many different ethnicities and for many years. But today, many people are staying there so they can access services.

With that, I would like to thank you very much, once again. And I'm happy to take your questions.

Media Q&A

BBC World Radio: First, just to thank you for hosting us after several months of the COVID-19 pandemic. I have two questions. Firstly, on Central Equatoria, I would like to know, after the recent violence in this region, how many people have been killed and how many people have so far been displaced? Still on Central Equatoria, you said that you are deploying your forces in Lobonok. Does this mean the forces to be deployed will have the right to confront the forces, in the simple words the people of South Sudan know to "shoot and kill"? Will UNMISS forces have the right to shoot and kill anyone who threatens the lives of civilians?

SMSG Shearer: Thank you. I will take a couple of questions and come back to you.

Radio Community: A lot of concerns have been raised by the citizens about the delays in implementing the peace agreement. There has been slow implementation in the formation of the Parliament and delays in forming the state governments, and this made people not leave the Protection of Civilians sites. What hope do you think can encourage some of the civilians to leave the POCs and build their lives in their houses? My second question is on the UNMISS protection of those who are living in the POCs. A lot of reports have said that there have been weapons in the sites and civilians feel unsafe from others, which has been proven by the recent

killing of young boys in Bentiu POC. Are you sure the civilians in the POCs are safe among themselves?

SRSB Shearer: Thank you. We'll take one more.

Dolku Media: I have a question about the set-up of the Lobonok base. I would like to know what the criteria is for setting up the base, which I understand is short of setting up a POC site, and whether your plans depend on the fluid security situation?

SRSB Shearer: Let me address the issue of Lobonok first. The reason for going to Lobonok is the request from people on the ground who feel under threat at the moment. They are caught between two warring parties, the National Salvation Front, who are carrying out a number of these attacks and, of course, the follow-up retaliation by the SSPDF. We have forces down there at the moment. We are negotiating with the SSPDF to have them stay longer on the ground and to have regular patrols to the area after that. There's been some reluctance from the SSPDF to allow us to do that, and I am appealing to them that this is what people on the ground want, and it's important that we are able to work together in order to set that base up. I don't have actual numbers of displaced and deaths at the moment. We are doing some investigations on that and I don't really want to say anything until we have more accurate information. It's not a POC. I want to be 100 per cent clear on that. This is really about – as we have done on many occasions, in Jonglei, in Tonj, Warrap, up in the north – establishing a TOB or Temporary Operating Base, which is simply a number of troops who stay there for a period of time, engage with the local community, see what some of the issues are, and see if we can try and bring some calm to the situation. From that point on, we can see if we need to do anything further. So that's the reason we are there, and hopefully we can bring calm to the area while these two groups get back to the negotiating table. I understand that Sant'Egidio is engaged behind the scenes, trying to bring them together to sit down and work something out. We hope that is successful.

On the POCs and the peace agreement, the peace agreement is an ongoing process. I think what we have to recognize is that, over the past three years, we have had a Cessation of Hostilities in 2018, we've had a peace agreement signed that is still in progress – it's nearly two years old to the day – we now have a transitional government which Dr. Riek Machar and others have joined. So I think we're well down the track at looking at the situation and saying it's completely different to what it was three or four years ago. That's not to say we don't have problems. As you pointed out, there are delays with the implementation process, but we have a different situation to what we had before. We have obviously done assessments, talking to the local people on the ground, talking to humanitarians, and assessing the security risk, which we believe is low. What it means for us is that we can say to the people that we don't think there's a need for UNMISS to be here on the ground in the POCs. But what we do need is to be in places where there is ongoing violence, like Lobonok and Jonglei. It's much better that we are in the places where there is the greatest need for us to be rather than places where there is not really a need. So that's effectively what we are doing, re-assessing that and making that transition.

Media: We understand that it is important to deploy forces to areas where there is violence, like Lobonok. Obviously, violence is not just limited to Lobonok. We have attacks on civilians

and humanitarians on roads across South Sudan, like Yei, and it is also happening in Bahr el Ghazal. Why have you prioritized Lobonok instead of other roads in South Sudan? This violence which has been taking place in greater Jonglei – why have you taken long to ensure the violence is stopped?

VOA: One question on the peacekeeping posts. I would like to know, besides one that is going to be stationed in Lobonok, how many peacekeeping posts across South Sudan does UNMISS have? You described the situation as to why the deployment of peacekeepers in Lobonok is needed is because it is disturbing. We know very well that these attacks in this area are not new. In 2016 we had reports in the media about how disturbing insecurity has been in this area. Can you shed more light on reports describing the situation as being disturbing?

Eye Radio: Just on the withdrawal of UNMISS troops from Bor and Wau, how many troops are you talking about here? When did you start withdrawing? Are you planning to apply the same in other parts of the country, especially in the POCs here in Juba?

SRSB Shearer: First of all, we haven't prioritized Lobonok. It's an ongoing role that we play in terms of setting up TOBs (Temporary Operating Bases). So, if we look over the past few months, we've set up TOBs in Tonj, in Romich, in Northern Unity, in Gumuruk and Likongole, in Pieri and I can go on and on. There have been a number of places. The idea behind setting up a TOB is that enables us to be on the ground for a longer time. A few months ago, we had a TOB that stayed for about three months in Maper, which is just north of Rumbek. While there was a lot of violence there, a lot of people being killed, what it did was that it brought the temperature down in the area on a lot of issues, and allowed the various communities to begin talking together, and that's really the function of what we see our role as being. It depends exactly on the situation. But we try to reduce the temperature and bring people together to reconcile the situation so it doesn't continue on and create casualties. The violence you mention in Jonglei, we have been engaging parties on the ground there for several months. I have to say for many of them there was no appetite from any of the three communities involved there to stop fighting. That doesn't mean it was 100 percent unanimous. It was mainly among the younger portions of the groups, but we tried extremely hard and put our people in harm's way to try and bring about reconciliation there so that it didn't get out of hand. We flew senior elders and community leaders around the area in helicopters so that they could meet with people. We put our forces on the ground. We were conducting patrols. We were engaging with people the entire time. I don't think we could have done much more. But you can only do so much when people are determined to continue fighting. That was the situation in Jonglei up until now. I think we have an opportunity now with the groups pulling back to their regions. At the same time, that coincides with a lot of rain. So there's flooding and it's very difficult for people to move around. For that reason, we have redoubled our efforts with the leadership here in Juba and also talking to those in the area in Jonglei to try and bring about peace, or at least a truce, so that people can address the underlying issues. That's what is going to happen in the coming days.

In terms of the disturbing violence in Equatoria, there was, as you say, in 2016 some terrible violence in the area between the main political groups at that point. That has been largely resolved between the opposition and the government, but now what we are seeing is a resurgence of other groups becoming involved. NAS, as we had hoped, had signed an

agreement – a cessation of hostilities agreement – and was going to abide by that. It appears they are not. Likewise, the SSPDF has obviously moved against them and what we're seeing now is civilians caught in the middle. What we don't want to see is a return to what we did see in 2016, 2017 and 2018, when from that area nearly a million people fled. So it's time to stop it now, not to let it go on, and that's why we are prioritizing that at the moment.

In terms of the questions about numbers of troops being withdrawn, I don't have exact numbers to give you at the moment because it depends on any given day, but generally a company of soldiers is involved in protecting the POCs 24/7, which means at least 150, but often more than that depending on what's going on. In addition to that, there are one or two companies of police which are 150 strong in each company. So it's a significant withdrawal of numbers for us. When it comes to Juba, yes, we are having discussion on Juba as well. We are looking at all of the POCs, but not all of the POCs are perhaps as ready as Wau and Bor are. But we're not taking anything off the table.

Eye Radio: When did you start withdrawing them?

SRSB Shearer: From Wau, mainly from the end of last year, beginning of this year. We reported to the Security Council last year. They asked us to do a report on the POC sites and the future of them. That involved discussions with the Government and with the humanitarians and, from that point on, we have been progressively just pulling people out, so it's been over a period of time.

Media: Number of peacekeeping bases across South Sudan?

SRSB Shearer: 17 bases across South Sudan, and, in addition to that, there would be during the dry season, anything from five, six, seven TOBs. TOBs would be temporary bases where there would be basically tents. Soldiers would be on the ground for a little while – two or three weeks – and then they'd move on.

Al Jazeera: What are the challenges facing humanitarian work in South Sudan especially after achieving peace now? What is the kind of humanitarian work being done in the country?

Radio Miraya: You spoke about the withdrawal of uniformed personnel from Bor POC. I just want to know the status of the POC after UNMISS uniformed personnel are removed. Does that mean the police will come in? Also, on peace, what role can the Mission play so that the parties adhere to the Cessation of Hostilities agreement and the Rome Declaration?

Media: How is UNMISS going to carry out patrols? In most cases the attacks happen in the bush. Your forces patrol up to where the attacks take place?

SRSB Shearer: First of all, the humanitarians here I think do a remarkable job, and that's both the national South Sudanese and international staff that are here and have had a really tough time recently with COVID restricting their ability to move around. We welcomed last week the announcement that there would no longer be a need to do 14 days quarantining in Juba before people are allowed to go up into the other areas, which just means that they can respond much more quickly to areas where there is flooding and things. Otherwise, they sit here for 14 days while people are suffering before they are allowed to be able to get up there. So that's been good. We're still seeing some denials of access. That's a real challenge. And obviously the

flooding itself is a real challenge, where they base themselves. Many of these people, their bases have been flooded out. And in some areas, notably Jonglei, once again the humanitarian stores, offices, have been looted and destroyed. So, they have a lot of problems.

I've said this before, but I think it's worth saying again. One of the big challenges we have is that while the whole world, including South Sudan, is trying to come to terms with COVID and how COVID affects us, what we really want to make sure of is that the health workers who are dealing with all the preventable diseases – whether it is malaria or tuberculosis or HIV – are able to continue functioning. What we don't want to see is COVID stopping health workers from continuing. That's really important for me. We looked at the example of Ebola in West Africa a few years ago. About 10,000 people died from Ebola in West Africa, but a lot more died from preventable diseases because all of the health workers were concentrated on doing something to respond to the Ebola. So, we've got to make sure that that doesn't happen again. The good news is, as of yesterday and today, we are receiving more than 70 metric tonnes of supplies of PPE. This is going to be distributed right across the country so that health workers and all of these clinics around the place are going to be able to be protected so they can continue doing their jobs vaccinating children, helping children, helping mothers – whatever they need to do – and will be more protected against COVID-19. Today is a very good day to be asking that question. We're seeing finally the first really big shipments of PPE coming into the country, which is very welcome.

On the withdrawal from POCs and looking after things, basically the way it works is, over time, we have been re-deploying people from the POC sites to other areas. And so, we have been downsizing our presence. At the same time, we have been working with the SSNPS as we have gone on. We have built, I think, over the last couple of years 26 police stations to support the SSNPS. We are looking to co-locate in many of the areas near the POCs so that we are working together. That gives us an ability to provide some technical support and logistics support – if that's what's needed. So that part of the work is ongoing. When these POC sites are re-designated as IDP camps then the SSNPS has full responsibility for these sites and UNMISS steps right back. We'll continue to support them, but we will step right back. The first responders and the ultimate responsibility lies with the SSNPS at that point.

In terms of patrolling to protect people, we can't perform miracles. We are putting ourselves on the ground there as best we can. We will continue to do patrolling. We will continue to listen to people. We will take evidence from people. We will hear what they've got to say. We will report that back to IGAD and various others that are involved in terms of what they are doing, and we will try and bring people together on the ground. But we can't be behind every tree in every single village. It's impossible for us to do that. But we will do our best to try to bring some calm to the area.

Media: This growing insurgency: Does UNMISS look at it as causing a threat to the peace agreement? And just a clarification: Do the 17 peacekeeping bases across South Sudan include Lobonok?

Media: Could we have an update on the COVID-19 situation, especially in the POC sites? How is the situation in Bentiu and Juba? These are the big POC sites.

SRSB Shearer: Good question on the inter-communal violence and whether it threatens the peace agreement. The short answer is no, because I think there is a commitment by the government and the opposition to maintain the peace agreement. However, when you have fighting that's happening between different groups – and I'm referring more to Jonglei than I am to Equatoria now – and you have different groups that are associated with those forces, you will often find that it's not simply inter-communal. It starts to become political as well. And that was the real worry we had in Jonglei, that it would start affecting the implementation of the peace process. Violence is very hard to put a ring around. It's important, first of all, for people who are affected by the violence to stop violence. But secondly, to be very aware that violence can breed more violence, which can then start undermining the very agreements that are being signed. But right now, no, I don't see a threat because I see the main parties very committed to the peace process.

On the bases, the 17 are permanent bases. That would be Bor, Malakal, Bentiu, Wau, etc etc. These other ones – the TOBs – we don't count. They come and they go. They're temporary bases. We move into those area only when there's a need to.

On the question of COVID, it's interesting that nobody had really asked about that. Thank you for asking. My feeling about COVID in South Sudan, at the moment, is that, yes, it's still around, which is why we're all wearing masks. There hasn't been a lot of testing. The testing that has been done – a lot of it has focused on people leaving the country because they need tests in order to leave the country. And I think what we need to do is, with WHO support obviously as well, is to increase the number of tests in what they call sentinel sites – sites that can give a better indicator of what's happening out there. There's a feeling out there at the moment that it's over with, it's done. I don't agree with that. I don't believe that. In the POC sites, I don't think the POC sites are any different from the surrounding areas. The only thing about the POC sites, obviously, is that people live closer together so therefore the risk of spreading is a bit higher. While we are seeing cases in the POC sites, we are not seeing a mass death rate or anything like that. In fact, we are seeing more deaths, at the moment, from malaria and malaria-related issues than we are from COVID. That's because of the rains and what's happening. So, what I suggest, and as I've said before, it's really important we maintain the testing, so we have an understanding of what the situation is. I really do think that it's important that when you go out of here, you might not wear a mask, but I actually do think it's important to wear a mask. Certainly, as you are moving around town, so you don't take the problems back into your home when you go home. And it's really important – and I'm really pleased that this has happened finally because we've been pushing really hard to try and get PPE into South Sudan. Really hard. There's been a massive worldwide shortage of it. And I even imagine who has got the most leverage and who can pull in the most PPE when they need to, and so we've been arguing very hard with suppliers and with people around the world to increase the numbers. Now we have for the first time some really serious amounts of PPE coming into the country. So, we will now be able to make sure that those health workers are properly protected so that they can continue their important work.

Once again, thank you very much to everybody. Thank you to the Miraya listeners for tuning in. I hope you found that interesting. Good to see so many of you. Keep safe. Keep wearing your mask. Thanks everybody.