



PRESS RELEASE

STATEMENT OF THE SPECIAL REPRESENTATIVE OF THE SECRETARY-GENERAL DAVID SHEARER

TO THE SECURITY COUNCIL ON THE SITUATION IN SOUTH SUDAN

3 March 2021

Madame President and Council Members.

Thank you for the opportunity to brief you today on the situation in South Sudan.

Last week marked the first anniversary of the transitional government. There have been some positive steps forward.

The presidency and the Council of Ministers have been formed, the full complement of state-level leaders is in place, and lower-level officials have been announced. Overnight, the President delegated power to the Governors of all ten states.

These are welcome steps. But after a year, progress has been slow. The Transitional National Legislature still waits to be reconstituted and there has been minimal progress on constitution-making, transitional justice, and economic reform.

Most significantly, unifying forces is yet to occur despite multiple self-imposed Government deadlines. Thousands of troops fester in cantonment sites without adequate shelter, health care and food.

Slow implementation comes at a cost. The power vacuum at a local level has opened opportunities for spoilers and national actors who have exploited local tensions and fueled violence.

We saw the impact of that in Jonglei last year. Today, in Warrap, there is a worrying surge in violence between various heavily armed community militia that government forces are yet to contain.

For the moment, conflict in the Equatorias has diminished. Meanwhile, reconciliation initiatives in Jonglei have reduced violence to an occasional outbreak.

The cost is also borne in humanitarian terms. Sub-national conflict, combined with the devastation of flooding, has created places of critical need like Jonglei and Warrap.

Humanitarian agencies are providing critical assistance despite nine aid workers losing their lives last year while courageously carrying out this work.

It is estimated that most of the country requires food aid. More encouragingly the latest FAO assessment shows a year-on-year increase in cereal production and a marked lift in land cultivated back to levels last seen in 2016.

Across the country, UNMISS continues to protect and support South Sudanese in need despite many challenges.

Our engineers from seven different countries are exploiting the dry season to build and improve 3,200 kilometers of roads, including between Bor and Pibor which we hope will aid reconciliation between Murle, Dinka and Nuer communities.

Work on a road linking the Sudan border to Bentiu and south to Rumbek is aimed to increase trade and prosperity for citizens in the impoverished areas that it passes through.

I can't overstate the tangible impact of this work – it is an often-overlooked legacy of our peacekeeping. In a country with just 400 kilometers of paved road, improving roads boosts communication, increases trade, jobs – and most critically, it builds peace through linking communities.

The follow-on from the re-designations of the Bor, Wau and Juba POC sites has continued smoothly.

Camp residents, for example, initially voiced opposition to the South Sudan Police entering the sites. Today they report crimes directly to nearby police posts and welcome their intervention. Just last week, local police entered the Juba IDP camp to quell a fight between youth gangs and arrested several suspects.

UNPOL is still right there alongside the national police service, providing support and even co-locating with them in some areas.

This is all indicative of a changing context. The Independent Strategic Review, commissioned by this Council, as well as our mandate renewal will guide us on a course that is more fit for purpose.

Protection of civilians through our peacekeepers is just one means of providing protection. More important in the long term is to create a protective environment where all citizens benefit from the rule of law.

So, we are looking to redeploy staff and resources to build the capacity of important institutions, including the courts, justice system and national police.

Individual Police Officers will train and mentor local police. We are also looking to build on the success of the mobile courts by making them permanent so that all victims have access to justice.

It means putting South Sudanese in the hot seat to tackle the impunity that has plagued this country – particularly sexual violence – so we will ultimately have fewer victims.

We are also prioritizing technical support for Security Sector Reform and looking ahead to elections.

Our forces have been more mobile in recent months, establishing new temporary bases and increasing patrols to hotspots – these efforts are bolstered by troops previously confined to static duties at POC sites.

Most of these initiatives are integrated – involving civil affairs and human rights staff – to also bring communities together, deter violence and address underlying causes.

Over the next two years, Force numbers will gradually diminish by about seven percent as we shift resources from troop numbers to assets that will further boost our mobility. Our intent is to do more with less.

These are just a few examples of our work. Of course, we are not alone in our efforts. As always, we partner with RJMEC, IGAD and the AU – with whom we work as colleagues and share a written memorandum.

Madame President.

This will be my last briefing to the Security Council as SRSG as I depart next month. So, I beg your indulgence to speak for a couple more minutes to share some personal reflections.

At the end of my four years in South Sudan, I look back with a certain level of comfort about how far the country has come.

There is a ceasefire, a peace deal, a transitional Government, a Presidency, Council of Ministers, and local leadership slowly being installed.

The majority of people who flocked to POC sites have either left or now live in newly transitioned IDP camps – a result of improved political security.

Overall, political violence has reduced by a power of 10 compared to the number of people who were dying or displaced from widespread conflict in 2016. A caveat is our concern about the upsurge in armed community militia seemingly in open defiance of state forces.

UNMISS' uniformed and civilian staff make a real difference in reducing this kind of violence and bringing diverse communities together. We are a stabilizing force that extends well beyond our physical presence – and which is welcomed by nearly 80 percent of South Sudanese who we have independently surveyed.

We also continue to push the peace process forward by working closely with all political parties, in coordination with our regional and international partners.

The reality is, though, that the peace process remains extremely fragile. Many citizens are wary about whether the political will may falter – they fear the positive progress may collapse.

It is for those people that we, the international community, must remain united and committed to pushing the peace process forward. We can't sit on the sidelines as spectators. Look back four years. That's what failure looks like and it's in no one's interests to return.

Madame President.

There are two areas I want to touch on that I believe we have not confronted anywhere as well as should have.

The first is the continuing absence of a financial system that works for the people of South Sudan. The wealth of this country – from oil and elsewhere – bypasses its people, siphoned off in secrecy with no public accountability for how it is spent.

Increasingly, people are asking the obvious question: why would key decision-makers benefiting from their current positions hold an election that could put their access to power and resources at risk?

Second, I am struck by the immense pride South Sudanese have in their country.

The massive UN presence will always and inevitably bump up against their hard-won sovereignty.

And that word – sovereignty – is used often. But it holds deeper significance.

True sovereignty means responsibility – being responsible – to really care, in a tangible and demonstrable way, for all the nation's 12 million citizens.

It also means independence. Yet, South Sudan is perhaps one of the most dependent nations in history. Its education and health systems, its roads and infrastructure are provided by outsiders.

And that's where I feel that we, the international community, also have responsibility. We fail to question our role – and we don't acknowledge the influence of institutional pressures and ambitions on our actions.

We have too eagerly stepped in and shouldered responsibilities that should be the job of the South Sudanese – and have added to their dependency – and, in doing so, undermined their dignity.

The President has said to me several times: "David, you are turning us into a nation of beggars". He has a valid point. But it's a two-way street – his government also has to step up.

State-building is a finely tuned endeavour that constantly needs to be re-evaluated and questioned.

Madame President

I have so much admiration for the South Sudanese who I have enjoyed working alongside immensely. They are, without doubt, the toughest, most resilient people I've ever met.

And yet, despite hardship, they can sit, discuss, and not give up. Perhaps above all, I've enjoyed their wonderful sense of humour – their ability to laugh – in the face of huge adversity.

I will miss this young country and I wish it well from the bottom of my heart.

But for me, now is the right time to move on. The transformation of South Sudan from conflict to recovery is underway. The Mission is in good heart, performing strongly, and poised to implement change.

My replacement, Nicholas Haysom, is a friend and no stranger to South Sudan – I am delighted he will succeed me.

Because of the collective efforts of so many – and I applaud those of the region in particular – South Sudan is in a better state. It is inching forward – frustratingly slowly – with still so much to do before the citizens can truly enjoy a peaceful and prosperous future.

I want to thank this Council. I particularly remember the visit to Juba by Council Members during a fragile moment of the peace process in October 2019. You were confronted by – and listened to – the complexities of forging peace in this country.

In your actions, you swung in behind, to push the peace process forward with the full weight of the Security Council and, by extension, the world.

It gives us here enormous encouragement– both me personally and those I represent, and I thank you.

I also thank the UN family in South Sudan for their unwavering support and hard work together with the vast number of NGOs – both national and international who bravely and collectively have helped and saved the lives of so many – and overcome many prejudices towards peacekeeping operations to work collaboratively with the Mission.

I have been proud to work with some very special people in this Mission – people who live in some of the toughest conditions of any UN Mission on the planet, far from their loved ones. Yet every morning, they get up, do their jobs, and do their best. My thanks to them.

My last word is to the people of South Sudan who inspire me with their seemingly endless patience and hope as they fight against huge odds to achieve the much brighter future they deserve.

My thoughts and best wishes are with you always.

Thank you.