



# UNMIS

7 October 2009

---

Press Conference by Peter De Clercq, Representative

## United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees in Sudan

*“UNHCR operations in Sudan”*

UNMIS HQ, Khartoum

### Opening Remarks

Welcome, ladies and gentlemen of the media.

I thank you for making the time to come to this briefing, and I thank my colleagues at UNMIS for all the good work of organizing it.

I arrived in Sudan one month ago and have had the opportunity—over the past few weeks—to visit UNHCR operations in the East, in Darfur and in Southern Sudan.

Whilst we count on the Government of National Unity and the Government of South Sudan to make every effort towards reconciliation and recovery, the international community has a key role to play in supporting the nation to bring about lasting peace and stability throughout the country. The scale and scope of what needs to be done to address humanitarian challenges is daunting. Yet, at the same time, I see windows of opportunity to support meaningful solutions to the plight of the refugees, returnees, internally displaced and the communities around them.

Firstly, we are very eager to see the various peace processes remain on track and succeed: be it the Comprehensive Peace Agreement, the Eastern Sudan Peace Agreement, or the Darfur peace process. It is our experience in many parts of the world that long term solutions to displacement are seldom accomplished unless there is a political solution.

We stand ready to play our part to contribute to the peace processes alongside our governmental and international partners, particularly on the return of the displaced and on the self-reliance of our beneficiaries. In particular, we will pursue solutions alongside our sister agencies WFP, UNICEF, UNDP and other local and international partners.

Sudan is a party to the UN and OAU Refugee Conventions and, as such, has assumed vital international obligations to protect refugees. Currently Sudan shelters some 181,000 refugees on its territory.

As you may know, Eastern Sudan is one of the oldest refugee situations in UNHCR's history. In fact, UNHCR has been in this country working in the eastern region for 40 years now. As yet there are no viable prospects for refugees in the region to repatriate voluntarily. Indeed, the flow of refugees into eastern Sudan from neighbouring countries continues at an average rate of 1,800 per month. The overwhelming majority are from Eritrea, with smaller numbers from Ethiopia and Somalia. Many move northwards to the Middle East and Europe.

Traditionally, refugee programmes tend to be inward looking, with beneficiaries receiving protection and assistance in camp settings. In eastern Sudan, I would like to see UNHCR shift towards a more inclusive approach. I strongly believe that, in the eastern region programmes should be implemented that bring benefits to refugees as well as host communities. After all, refugees are experiencing the same forms of hardship as the majority of nationals who reside in the region—notably acute poverty, persistent drought and famine, lack of access to health care and education, high levels of unemployment as well as land degradation and shrinking pasture.



# UNMIS

7 October 2009

However, unlike Darfur, Southern Sudan and the Three Areas which are under the mandate of massive peacekeeping missions and receive solid world attention, no forum for deliberation on issues affecting this part of the country exists.

UNHCR is therefore keen to partner with other actors in a concerted effort to develop comprehensive and integrated approaches that will improve the social and economic conditions of local communities while allowing refugees to become self-reliant pending the identification of viable durable solutions.

In Darfur, the reduction in open armed conflict is a welcome development and we remain hopeful that this trend will continue. However, it should not blind us to the continuing challenges faced by civilians who continue to live in displacement, not least of which insecurity from isolated attacks and banditry.

For UNHCR's part we shall be working towards building conditions conducive to durable solutions in Darfur. We shall be engaging in a more delivery-oriented fashion and aim at meeting basic gaps as part of our continued protection focus. Our programmes will not only focus on displaced persons, but include sedentary as well as nomadic groups—and in this respect we will work with the Government to ensure that the necessary conditions for the safety and security of civilians are met.

We have preoccupying concerns about the security of humanitarian workers, and particularly our abducted colleagues from GOAL and UNAMID. We pray for their safe return. Apart from jeopardizing the security and wellbeing of staff, such attacks serve primarily to isolate war-affected civilians from vital protection and assistance interventions.

In Southern Sudan, the successful return of nearly 2.5 million displaced persons—including 328,000 refugees from neighbouring countries—is a powerful indicator of confidence in the CPA process. We are proud to have contributed to this important positive peace dividend through our organised return programme. However, as you well know, significant challenges remain. Among the most preoccupying concerns for UNHCR are the sporadic violent inter-ethnic clashes that have marked the first three quarters of 2009.

Long-term stability is essential for sustainable return, along with access to such essentials as health services, education and jobs. As many returnees are coming back to find their land and properties occupied, it is essential that there are effective channels to find solutions. In this connection, as UNHCR goes forward, more engagement with development actors is foreseen alongside efforts to build strong protection institutions to support the rule of law.

Naturally, we will continue to stand ready to provide additional support for displaced persons as we have done for Congolese refugees over the past year. Continuing attacks by LRA fighters have caused 18,000 refugees to flee into border areas of Central and Western Equatoria from the Democratic Republic of Congo and the Central African Republic, along with some 68,000 internally displaced persons.

As my remarks have demonstrated, the importance of continued support for conflict-affected civilians cannot be overstated. More than ever, the international community needs to pull together with the national and regional authorities to ensure that these civilians are afforded protection as well as access to relief and recovery assistance.

Therefore, I am pleased to inform you that UNHCR's principal donors, who are also members of its Executive Committee, have planned a visit to Sudan in the coming days to observe first hand our protection and assistance programmes.



# UNMIS

7 October 2009

You will be invited to a briefing on the donor mission at the UNHCR premises on Thursday, 16 October.

With these few words, I thank you for your attention and will now open the floor for questions.

## Q & A

**Al-Wasat:** Have you carried out any investigations on the reports of the rape of Sudanese refugees in their camps in Chad?

As per the Permanent Court of Arbitration's ruling on the boundaries of the Abyei Area, residents of some villages in the Area will have to be relocated elsewhere. Would the UNHCR participate in this exercise?

**De Clercq:** On the second question, we are currently not active in Abyei.

On the first question, I can assure you that UNHCR is working very closely with Chadian authorities and looking into these issues very seriously. Programmes are underway to support Chadian police that is present in and around the camps to deal with this issue. We would like to assure everybody that this is being taken seriously and is being investigated and is being addressed by a stronger presence of law enforcement as well as following through on these issues.

**Reuters:** What is UNHCR doing, if anything, to help the people displaced as a result of the conflicts in the south? How serious a problem would you describe the violence in the past year in the south?

On Darfur, UNHCR works on protection. How would you describe the effect on the civilian population since the expulsion of the NGOs in Darfur?

**De Clercq:** UNHCR is definitely involved in support to the displaced in the south as a result of the new displacements. We are not doing this alone; obviously the UN is addressing this in the context of the Country Team in the south. We are taking a specific responsibility on protection there as we are in other regions as well. In addition to that, we would try to, as much as possible; also do our bit in terms of sectoral interventions particularly in the relief side. You will see us mostly working on protection – building the conditions that would protect these people and that would prevent displacement from happening and on this, we count very much on the UNMIS capacity in terms of negotiating with the various parties. But we deal very much with the aftermath – trying to protect people with our partners where they are, creating the right conditions, sensitizing local authorities to these issues, having reporting mechanisms if there are cases of atrocities.

Potentially, if you are looking very much at the implementation of the CPA which is extremely important for the overall peace process in the country, yes, we could characterise this as serious.

On Darfur, there is no doubt that we do feel the effect of the presence of much less international NGOs there. We are trying as much as possible to find alternatives. We try to work very much with new partners that do come in, we try to also diversify more towards local partners and even the possibility of implementing some of our programmes using local contractors. So definitely there is an effect and we are trying as much as possible to deal with this.



# UNMIS

7 October 2009

**AFP:** The Sudanese Government keeps on issuing statistics on the number of returnees in Darfur but I didn't see any figures from the UNHCR. Does it mean that you don't believe that there are returnees to Darfur from Chad?

**De Clercq:** I wouldn't say that as a matter of belief or disbelief. There is a joint verification mechanism that has just been put in place and we will be partners to that. That would give us more clarity to be able to officialise the figures that are coming out. The Government would be as much a part of the joint verification mechanism as we are and we would see that in future we would have more confidence in supporting these figures.

There is no doubt that there are people who are returning and there are people who are scouting back and forth to their places of origin and not necessarily returning to stay. There is both returns and scouting going. I can not confirm the scope of returns, though, but hope that the joint mechanism would provide more clarity on that.

**Al-Ayyam:** US Special envoy said that the government has accepted the return of US aid agencies operating in Darfur. At the same time, Government insists it would not allow the expelled agencies to return. Could you brief us on this?

**Spokesperson Ashraf Eissa:** Today our guest is here to brief us on refugee issues and not on the political issues. I would refer this question to a future occasion, I am afraid. Thank you.

**Radio Miraya FM:** You said that you are taking this issue of the tribal clashes in southern Sudan seriously. Could you elaborate more on your concerns over the issue?

**De Clercq:** I think that the answer to that question is very simple: we are a humanitarian agency and if there is a major humanitarian suffering then we would step in and we would intervene. The international Community, and even the Government of Southern Sudan, is taking this issue very, very seriously. I don't think we can just assume that this would go away very quickly and that people would be able to return very quickly if the root causes to these issues are not addressed, if proper negotiations and peace building exercises do not take place. This situation could take a much more permanent character so we really take it seriously. That said, we need to look for not only means to alleviate the humanitarian needs but also to look for solutions or opportunities for people to return, as soon as possible, to the places where they originally came from and to resume their productive lives.

**Spokesperson Ashraf Eissa:** At the end of this briefing, I would like to thank Peter very much for his time and valuable presentation he gave us on refugee issues in Sudan. We also look forward to him coming again in a few months' time and give us some updates on refugee issues.

It remains for me to thank you very much for being here today. We will be looking forward to see you next week when we will have the new head of the WFP briefing us on 13<sup>th</sup> October. Thank you very much.