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Press Conference

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Near-verbatim Transcript of the Press Conference by
**Mr. John Holmes, UN Under-Secretary General for Humanitarian Affairs and
Emergency Relief Coordinator**

UNMIS Deputy Spokesperson Kouider Zerrouk: Good afternoon and welcome to this press conference hosting the UN Undersecretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, Mr. John Holmes. He is here with us after a four-day visit here. He will give his opening remarks and we would afterwards take your questions.

I would also like to welcome Mr. Georg Charpentier who is the Deputy Special Representative of the Secretary-General and Residence Humanitarian Coordinator for Sudan.

Without further ado, I give the floor to USG John Holmes. Thank you.

USG ERC John Holmes:

Opening Remarks

Thank you very much for being here to this press briefing. I would first of all like to thank the Government here and the Government of Southern Sudan for facilitating the visit.

The aim of the visit was to have a look, again, at the situation on the ground and to address the problems that still arise from time to time in humanitarian cooperation here which is still the biggest humanitarian operation in the world. I spent some four and a half days here divided between Khartoum, southern Sudan and Darfur. In the south, I visited Wau and Warrap State as well as Juba and looked at, particularly, the food insecurity and malnutrition issues on the ground as well as the effect of the conflicts between tribes and so on. Vice-President Riek Machar was there in Juba. In Darfur, I spent a day in Nyala meeting the Acting *Wali* (Governor) and visiting relocation areas for displaced people as well as the IDP camp. I was to travel to Al-Fashir but the *haboob* (sand storm) in the area made this impossible yesterday. In Khartoum itself, the meeting I have been able to have were heavily affected by the inauguration, the potential changes in the government and the uncertainties related to that. But I had two meetings with State Minister for Humanitarian Affairs and also with Mr. Muttrif Sidiq at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Of course everywhere I went I also talked with the humanitarian actors on the ground – both in the UN, NGOs and representatives of member states.

Just a few impressions before I take any questions. In the south, I think it is clear that we are facing a humanitarian crisis there once again with a combination of poor rains last year, crop failures as a result and poor pasture for the animals. This has been increased with insecurity and malnutrition as well as higher prices in basic foods. The number of severe food insecure people has risen from 1 million to 1.5 million this year with those moderately food insecure also rising up to 1.8 million. That is 3.3 million people altogether. The malnutrition rates in certain areas are certainly alarming with an excessively emergency threshold for acute malnutrition and severe malnutrition.

And all this is exacerbated by tribal violence on a worrying scale with more than 700 deaths so far this year, 90,000 people displaced in states like Jonglei and Warrap, with the issues of cattle raids and disputes on

water rights and then, of course, there is this extra element of the LRA still present in parts of Western Equatoria leading to displacement and deaths there. Unfortunately those attacks have resumed again in the month of May.

All this adds up to a worrying situation against the background of existing variables like poverty, underdevelopment or indicators in basic areas like child mortality and against the background of the political uncertainties which are there with the approach of the referendum. It is therefore vital from all points of view – particularly from the point of view of the welfare of the population itself – that we act to stop this crisis turning into a disaster. I believe that is possible if we all act together in time. I was glad to welcome when I was there a contribution from the GoSS of \$35 million to address the food insecurity problem.

As far as response is concerned, it is complicated by the difficulties in transport and infrastructure and the limited resources and capacity that the humanitarian community there has. But we have been working very hard to make sure we have pre-positioned particularly before the rainy season the supplies of food and also supplies in areas like health, water, shelter and agriculture supplies.

I think we are making good progress but the funding we are receiving is inadequate. We only have 26% of the \$530 million we asked for at the beginning of the year. There are also concerns about security difficulties in humanitarian operations in some areas with attacks on NGOs from SPLA elements in Lakes and Western Bahr-el-Ghazal State [*inaudible*] – an issue that I took up with Vice-President Machar while I was in Juba.

On the broader scale, I am concerned with about the need to invest more in basic services such as health and education and on rural infrastructure and water management, to increase agricultural production, improve livelihoods of the people. I think there is also the need for all sides to promote reconciliation between communities to promote peace and reduce conflicts.

As far as Darfur is concerned, it was a very brief visit – one day. The overall situation in Darfur has not changed dramatically since my last visit a year ago although there has been a worrying recent increase in hostilities between the Government and both of the main rebel movements as well as the worrying violence between some Arab tribes. There are also, in certain parts, insecurity for the humanitarian community itself with continued acts of banditry, hijacking and so on but particularly a trend in kidnapping that we have seen over the last year in different parts of Darfur. The latest being the case of the staff member of Samaritan Purse, the American lady, who is still being held although the two Sudanese staff members were released two days ago. We hope for a rapid and peaceful conclusion of that kidnapping; we expect the government to play a role in that as they have in past kidnappings. We also want to see action taken against the perpetrators of these kidnappings so that there are clear consequences for these kinds of actions and not impunity for those who are responsible because this is a trend we need to stop if the humanitarian operations are to continue as we want them to do.

The humanitarian situation itself remains with considerable need in many areas both for IDPs and for the rest of the population too. The main gap left by the expulsion of the NGOs have been [*indiscernible*] but it is also clear that the quality of response and the capacity to respond in some areas and in remote areas in some sectors is not yet as good as before the expulsion as is also clear in the response to the east and in the Three Areas.

There is a real concern that the insecurity we talked about could reduce that capacity further so we need to make sure that the issues of facilitation of humanitarian operations, about a conducive environment including things like the bureaucratic impediments that we talked about in the past, we need to make sure that all these impediments are fully addressed and that we don't ruin some of the progress we managed to make after the expulsion [*indiscernible*] arrangements we had with the Government. All we want to see is a genuine partnership with the Government to address the issues and that is what is important. The High Level Committee that we set up after the expulsion needs to meet frequently and regularly with the state level bodies to address some of those issues.

I had some good discussions with the Government while I was here, particularly with the State Minister for Humanitarian Affairs. We need to see the goodwill we have displayed turned into real progress.

I think overall the humanitarian response is in reasonable shape in Darfur – we have a better supply of resources than we do in the south. The problem is not the 50% for Darfur of the \$840 million that we have been asking for. But there are concerns regarding access in Darfur. Access is a fundamental for humanitarian operations. If we don't have access, we could not help the people we want to help. There are particular concerns in areas where there has been conflict recently like the areas east of the Jebel Marra. The Government has assured us that we have free access, in principle, to where we want to go in Darfur. What we want to see is these assurances translated into reality.

Very briefly on the broader picture, we clearly desperately need to see a proper ceasefire in Darfur and a political settlement so that we could move away as we would like from the focus on humanitarian aid to recovery, reconstruction and development in a generally stable post-conflict situation. The IDPs in many

cases have lived in camps for six to seven years which is not a healthy environment [*inaudible*] and that has obviously severe consequences for Darfur's future. It is clear there is a major investment needed for Darfur in the future in terms of providing basic services for agricultural production, not least to help reverse some of the environment losses there that is very worrying indeed in light of the environmental changes. [*inaudible* ...].

Let me stop there but I have to say that overall it is not an optimistic a picture as I would have liked to be able to paint on what could be my last visit to Sudan in my current role but that is the reality I found on the ground but clearly we would continue to work closely with the government to address these problems and make sure that the humanitarian needs are fully addressed.

Q & A

Saut Al-Umma: Just a few questions: on the situation in southern Sudan, Mr John Holmes said that the situation is still bad. With the wave of violence that took place during the past few months, what recommendations have you made to the Government of Southern Sudan and the Government of National Unity on this?

Have you contacts with other international organisations or UN agencies to address this humanitarian situation?

You also said that the situation in Darfur has not progressed since last year when you visited the region. Who is responsible for the deterioration of the situation in Darfur?

Finally, the leader of the Popular Congress Party, Dr. Hassan Al-Turabi, has been detained by Sudanese authorities. His family has complained so many times that his health is deteriorating. Have they contacted you?

USG ERC John Holmes: On the situation in southern Sudan, yes it is once again a humanitarian crisis. I think the main reason for that, apart from the tribal conflict, is the poor rains situation last year and in some parts for successive year added to the food security situation and malnutrition that I have already talked about. Obviously with the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA), we had thought that we would be able to move towards more from humanitarian aid to development assistance. Of course that continues at the same time but we need to face up to this new humanitarian situation to make sure that it doesn't have dramatic effects on the population or indeed dramatic effects on the political future. We would be working with the Government to address this humanitarian problem. I think, for the future, one of the recommendations would be that more aid go to basic services and agriculture to improve people's livelihoods. That is probably something that needs to be addressed very fully after the referendum, whatever the outcome of that referendum might be.

Of course we have very good contacts with international humanitarian organisations. I am the coordinator of humanitarian aid in general for the UN and NGOs and we are trying to work also very closely with the World Bank at the same time to make sure that all efforts are integrated.

As far as Darfur is concerned, as I said, the situation has progressed very much. [*indiscernible*] in many years it has not progressed. There is fighting once again between the Government and the main rebel movements. I don't think it is useful or easy to apportion blame for that. I think everybody has to take a share of responsibility. Talks have been going on in Doha for some time now and it appears to be making progress but, at the same time, since we don't have a ceasefire we couldn't make the progress that we would have liked to make. From the humanitarian point of view, we are desperate to see that there is a ceasefire as quickly as possible because this large part of the population living on humanitarian aid is not at all desirable and the resources we are using for that could be better used to give a definitive shift to a post-conflict situation where development becomes the top priority.

I'm afraid I really can't comment on the fate of Mr. Turabi. I know that he has been detained. I haven't contacted him myself and I really can't say anymore on that.

Al-Midan: How does the UN address the problems of water shortage in IDP camps of Darfur following the JEM attacks on South Darfur that led to a hike in fuel prices that has in turn affected the delivery of potable water to IDP camps?

On your last visit to eastern Chad, you stated to the press that humanitarian agencies should try to operate under protection. With the United Nations Security Council's resolution to withdraw MINURCAT, what would be the fate of the Sudanese refugees in eastern Chad against the background of possibilities Chadian rebel forces may shift their military bases to Chad following the thaw in relations between N'djamena and Khartoum?

The Sudan Government has repeatedly said it apportions some blame for the abductions on humanitarian agencies because they move without notifying the authorities. Would the agencies now accept Government escorts and thus defy their principles?

USG ERC John Holmes: Yes, it is true that the reconciliation between Sudan and Chad is very welcome in general and should help to release ease insecurity along eastern Chad. Nevertheless it has had the consequence of greater fighting here in Darfur and the effect you described of roads being effectively blocked and goods not moving around freely and this is having effect already on humanitarian operations making it harder for organisations to move supplies around. Their trucks are not necessarily in the right places, fuel is difficult to find and is rising in price. So there is a problem there and if this goes on for a period of time it could have very serious effects on humanitarian operations. I would like to take the opportunity in this public forum to appeal to JEM to make sure that the effect is not being felt on the humanitarian community. Whatever humanitarian contacts we would have with JEM, we hope to use to that effect.

On the issue of eastern Chad, what I said was that with the decision now, at the insistence of the Government of Chad on the withdrawal of MINURCAT – the peacekeeping operation in eastern Chad – by the end of the year, then the humanitarian organisations would have to adapt to that situation and would have to rely on the assurances which have been received from the Government of Chad that I received again while I was in Chad earlier this week, of full protection from the Government of Chad, from their security forces in Chad, from the army and the gendarme, to make sure that the civilian population, the refugees, IDPs, the local population and the humanitarians are all fully protected. That is the assurance that they gave to us and we would like to hold the Government of Chad accountable for that assurance and we assume that protection would be there. As I said, the key thing is to reduce the level of violence there. Ultimately the reconciliation between Sudan and Chad and the deployment of a mixed Sudanese-Chadian force along the frontier would help to reduce those problems and to improve the prospects for the IDPs and indeed the quarter of a million Darfuri refugees in eastern Chad in the future. We are concerned about this and we are concerned about what to maybe expect after the withdrawal of MINURCAT and we will watch how that situation develops.

On your last question about NGOs in particular about changing their principles and accepting Government escorts, different organisations have different views on this. There are some NGOs and other organisations who would not, under any circumstances, accept Government escorts because they believe that compromises their independence, their neutrality and indeed amounts to a greater risk of attack over a long term. What we look to the government to do is to provide security for everybody in the areas they control – of course it is the responsibility of the Government. This would mean that people can move around safely without fear of attack. Of course we understand that there is no such thing as a hundred percent security anywhere in the world, that includes Darfur, but we expect the Government to do their very best to ensure that security. If movements are made without warning, NGOs and other organisations, once they move out of the main towns, are obliged to notify the government of where they are going so that government is aware so that protection could be provided.

Sudan Radio Service: The State Minister for Humanitarian Affairs has said that 40% of the population of southern Sudan is threatened with hunger. Did you manage to verify this information during your visit to southern Sudan? If so, what are the regions affected?

From what you told us, there is a real problem in the south. What are the foreseen challenges that may affect the referendum from a humanitarian view point?

USG ERC John Holmes: I think that what the statement was referring to is that if you add together the 1.3 million who are affected with severe food insecurity and the 1.8 million I mentioned as affected by moderate food insecurity – these are the results of the WFP and FAO evaluations this year – that is a total of about 3.3 million. The population is roughly 8 million. I don't want to get into controversy about the population but that is roughly around 40% and that is where that figure comes from. We are watching very closely and will see how the situation evolves. I do have the rainy season and the lean season still to come. We have been pre-positioning so food – I think the WFP pre-positioned 50,000 tonnes of food for the next few months.

As for which states are affected, I could not give you a full list but certainly Warrap where I was and the surrounding states of Western Bahr-el-Ghazal and Jonglei [*indiscernible*]. But it affects a number of states; it affects different parts of a state.

Will this affect the referendum? Well obviously, in principle, not. The referendum would go ahead on time in a safe and orderly manner because that is a very important part of the CPA. We just need to make sure that the humanitarian situation does not deteriorate to an extent that could affect the orderly conduct of the referendum. I am increasingly confident that we would be able to do that.

Radio Miraya: Tribal clashes in southern Sudan are one of the main reasons behind the humanitarian crisis and the food gap in southern Sudan. Are you satisfied with GoSS' efforts to address the food gap especially against the background of reports blaming Khartoum for fuelling these tribal clashes?

You spoke about an assessment of the humanitarian situation in the Jebel Moon and the Jebel Marra area. Do we have a figure for the casualties there and the status of the humanitarian situation there?

What measures have UN agencies done in Darfur to cater for the implications of the withdrawal of MINURCAT from eastern Chad?

USG ERC John Holmes: On the tribal clashes, this is a complicated subject. I don't claim to be a world expert on the subject but it is partly historic going back a long way but the worse instance could be the kind of weapon being used because water shortages after the poor rains last year have exacerbated these clashes and there may be agricultural reasons as well. There are local reasons why these things happen. I think that the Government had made efforts to promote reconciliation and I do hope that they would do more in that respect. The consequences of these conflicts in terms of deaths and in terms of humanitarian needs are very significant.

As far as the Jebel Marra is concerned, we have had some access in the Jebel Marra over the last couple of months but they have been essentially to the government-held areas where we haven't found particular evidence of humanitarian need. What we need to do is to get into some of the rebel-held areas where the situation may be difficult and that is what we have found evidence of so far. As far as the Jebel Moon is concerned, I don't really have any details and information about the number of civilian casualties caused by that fighting but we certainly have concerns about that. I believe you are right that UNAMID did have a role of medical evacuation for those injured. I don't have details on that but I am sure they would provide you with the information if you ask them.

On the withdrawal of MINURCAT in Chad, I think the consequences would be felt much significantly on the Chadian side of the border – I don't think we expect any significant changes on the Darfur side of the border. The joint border monitoring would, I am sure, help to reduce insecurity along those parts.

ENDS
