



# UNMIS

Press Conference

27 October 2009

## Near-verbatim transcript of the Press Conference UNICEF Representative, Nils Kastberg, UNMIS HQ, Khartoum

**UNMIS Director of Public Information, Khalid Mansour:** It's nice to see you again after a few weeks of not having press briefings. We resume today with a new-comer, or not exactly a new-comer to Sudan because Nils Kastberg, the new Representative of UNICEF to Sudan has been to this country before in the 1990s. Nils comes with a very long experience in UNICEF, UNHCR, the WFP, as well as other organisations either national Swiss organisations or international organisations. He started his assignment in Khartoum this time only last month and within only a couple of weeks we asked him to face the media but I am sure he is up to the task.

Mr. Kastberg joined UNICEF in April 1998 as Director of the Office of Emergency Programmes in New York. Before that and during the period from 1992 to 1995, Mr. Kastberg was Counsellor with the Permanent Mission of Sweden in Geneva, Switzerland, where he also led the task force on HIV/AIDS coordination. Prior to joining UNICEF, Mr. Kastberg, from 1980 to 1988, was with UNHCR and served in various capacities and in various places and I think he most likely served in the four corners of the earth.

So with his expertise and his new challenging task, I am sure we would have an interesting press briefing. The Opening Remarks of Mr. Kastberg will be distributed after the briefing and, as usual, late in the afternoon we would also distribute a transcript of the press briefing.

**UNICEF Representative, Nils Kastberg:** Thank you very much. I am very pleased to meet you all and will make a few opening remarks.

I start with the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA). Four years ago, there was a lot of progress in terms of human development that still needed to really make people feel that the CPA is generating tangible progress for people. There is some good news. We had millions of children across Sudan who were reached in terms of measles and polio. We have distributed millions of bed nets which will reduce malaria – I will come to that shortly. We carried out nutrition education – we recently launched a global hand washing campaign, etc. All of these things are saving the lives of children.

But still, I would say, that we have three tremendous life or death challenges:

One: we have 305,000 children under five years of age that die every year from preventable causes, which could be just a matter of arriving in time. Of those, 110,000 die in their first 28 days of life. We are arriving four weeks late to save their lives. It is not a question of what we do in five years; it is a question of what we do in those four weeks after the birth of a child.

The second point is that this is one of the more dangerous places to be a mother. About 26,000 women could die every year because of bringing a new Sudanese to life. As a comparison, in the entire Latin America and Caribbean region with 550 million people, less than 10,000 mothers die giving birth. Here in Sudan, we are talking about 26,000 women dying because of giving birth. Preventable ... it is a question of reaching in time; it is a question of stopping the bleeding in time; it is a question of having the health staff where they should be; it is a question of the health staff washing their hands it is a question of her being close to a place where she can receive care that could save her life at the moment of giving birth.

I would like to use an image: if 26,000 Sudanese soldiers die of a strange disease every year, what would the Sudanese President do? What would all the cabinet members be asked to do? What would every state governor and all the ministers be asked to do to help reduce the death of 26,000 soldiers? What would the Government of South Sudan do if 26,000 SPLA soldiers die every year? It doesn't happen to soldiers; it happens to women who are not armed but are just bringing into world a new Sudanese life. I think it is very important that we start getting our priorities right. I was recently in a town where there were 20 tanks but only one ambulance which could only operate six months of the year because in the other six months, it rains too much for the ambulance to move and there were no boats that could function as ambulances. So it is our priority to look after Sudanese lives ... or what is it that we are looking after?

A third element is that there are almost six million kids who are in school but almost three million are out of school (I am rounding the figures so that it could be easier to remember). I just came from the launching of a campaign that I hope would have a big impact which is trying to pay the debt for those that did not receive education in time and it will look at the question of education to those that missed out school and hope to reach one million over the whole country. But we are lagging behind because every year there are three million children that should be there that are not there.

I think that it is possible over the next three years – and that certainly is a commitment on my part – to see how we can reduce the below-five mortality rates by one thirds – from 305,000 to 200,000. I think it is feasible to do so. What are the reasons? Malaria for instance is a huge killer. If we can get the bed nets distributed and get them to be used – there are many that have the bed nets and are not using them. We could get better quality of water, and so on. I think that in three years we could significantly reduce mortality rates, I hope, from 305,000 to 200,000 – but it calls for collective efforts. Secondly, I would hope that we could make a strong effort to reduce maternal mortality rates from 26,000 to at least reduce it by a third.

Finally, could we reduce those out of school by a third? I think it is feasible. But none of this is possible if we continue with the present sense that we are moving towards inevitability of increased levels of conflict. Sudan, more than ever, needs peace; it needs every citizen to feel, "I am prepared to pay the price for peace," rather than continue paying the price for war. We have to remember that most of the violence around the world, most of the wars, most of the misuse of state budgets, is caused by men and not by women. I think we need a call to all Sudanese men to assume a greater responsibility of understanding how their actions cause harm to women and children and I hope that that can make a huge difference. Let's have more ambulances and less tanks.

Thank you very much.

## Q & A

**Reuters:** In the beginning you said that Sudan is one of the worst places in which to give birth. Can you give us any comparison with other African countries? Is it unusually bad for Africa?

**UNICEF Representative, Nils Kastberg:** It is particularly bad in southern Sudan. When we talk about percentages, we are talking about probably in the lifespan of women, probably one in every eight, one in every ten or perhaps even lower, would die during her lifespan because of giving birth. There are countries where the levels could be half or two thirds of that, it varies. But there are very few countries or areas in the world that reach the combined figure for Sudan.

It is particularly severe and serious in southern Sudan. To give you an example, whereas we had 26,000 women dying in the whole of Sudan, about a bit more than half of them die in southern Sudan.

**Reuters:** I just want to clarify your promise in three year's time. I think you used the word commitment. Can you clarify, is UNICEF promising to make these reductions in three years or what exactly were you saying?

**Nils Kastberg:** UNICEF can not by itself reduce this. What we can do is we can mobilise, we can generate greater awareness; we can generate better capacity perhaps at certain levels. I think that the crucial issues are: where is the state governor that is seriously concerned about the fact that they have such high child mortality rates? Where is the minister or where is the local official that is pondering and thinking about how can we reduce maternal mortality? Where are the parts of the state that are thinking that we need to put more state resources into reducing those mortality rates rather than in fuelling and arming themselves? I think it is very important to get that sense of accountability at all levels because this is not just a question of

the north, the south, the east or the west. It is also a mindset of people – of valuing children and valuing women in a different way. It has a lot to do with male behaviour.

**SRS:** You mentioned that malaria is a major killer in Sudan. Are there other diseases that you think contribute to the death of women and children in Sudan?

**Nils Kastberg:** Excellent question. Besides malaria, you have diarrhoeal diseases, you have respiratory infections, you have measles. Overall, it can be estimated that 20 or more percent of the deaths relate to the weaknesses that are generated by their nutritional status. If you are not sufficiently well nourished or not nourished with the right type of food and nutrients, then you will be weaker and more susceptible to these diseases that I mentioned. And once you get them, that makes it even more difficult for you to be well nourished and therefore it becomes like a negative spiral.

**Radio Miraya:** You talked of more than 300,000 children dying every year in Sudan. Do we have figures of how many children die in Darfur alone? How is UNICEF helping Sudan, especially the southern Sudanese community, in trying to reduce the rate of death of women while giving birth?

**Nils Kastberg:** We working on getting figures at the state level and we are collaborating with authorities about the household survey that we hope next year will generate the type of information that we need so that we could go to every single government – Darfur, Kordofan, Red Sea, Kassala, Gedharef, Blue Nile, etc. as well as the south. I don't have good figures specific to Darfur that is officially agreed but we hope, by the end of January, to have that agreed. I hope that the household survey to be conducted next year will generate even more recent information in terms of each of the states. We think it is very important that every state authority is totally clear about where they stand in terms of infant mortality.

In terms of what help we are giving southern Sudan, it is quite massive support. Also in terms of maternal mortality, there are trainings of midwives, and on capacity building of the health system so that the medicines and equipment that need to reach different places reach in time, obviously in close collaboration with other UN colleagues like WHO.

But this is not just a technical issue; this is not just a question of health workers. Leaders of southern Sudan also need to feel that they have a stake and a responsibility in changing the situation and not just say, "Nils from UNICEF, you need to help us more." Southern Sudan has resources. How is it using that money? Are they prioritising right or are they buying more weapons than ambulances like other parts of Sudan? I think that if we do not generate that awareness that these are the choices, we are not going to change those high levels of mortality in the south. And I think there has to be a sense of accountability in the south, in the north, in the east and in the west between all authorities that these are unacceptable levels and that if they want to be part of a state responsibility structure, they have to do better as a government to reach the minimum level of human rights which is survival.

**Political Advisor for the EU Special Representative:** My question relates to the protection of children and I understand that it is a major mandate of UNICEF. Lately, there are children facing the death penalty despite the fact that there are actually parameters that are supposed to protect children. My question is: What is UNICEF's role at the moment in protecting these children? I understand that there are cases where, had UNICEF played its role, some deaths would not have happened. Could you tell us of your role and commitment to child protection and your venue of liaising in terms of advocating children's rights with the government?

**Khalid Mansour:** I think we would take your question on an exceptional basis.

**Nils Kastberg:** Protection is a fundamental role of UNICEF. Have we always played that role to the full? Of course not, and I think that we should be the first ones to recognise that.

On the question of the death penalty for children, not me, not UNICEF, but the states have established in Convention on the Rights of the Child that is not acceptable. On that, I think, we are totally clear that that is something we should advocate that it should not happen.

Will we do so effectively? I hope we can do it more effectively than in the past not because it is a question of UNICEF saying it alone, but because how can a state engage in killing children? It is bad enough that so many babies die every month in the streets of Khartoum and I think that the media has been good over the past weeks in raising the issues of all the babies that are abandoned on the streets of Khartoum and of those

that survive and are taken to an orphanage where too many of them subsequently die. I think there are a whole range of protection issues.

The five major areas of violence against children are violence at home, violence they face at school, violence that they face in institutions like the one I mentioned that failed to protect them in time, violence in the community and child labour including the use of children as child soldiers. Here we have all sectors of society involved in the violence against children. This is not just the question of government; it is a question of mindset of every single citizen. I think there needs to be effective advocating with every single sector of society for them to change their behaviour not seeing children as objects that can be treated in different ways as the other pleases but rather as subjects of rights. Why do we talk about human rights? Because these are the rights that make us human. Otherwise, we would be like animals in the forest. Now, are we as adults showing children that we respect rights or we act as animals in a forest – whoever is strongest should survive? It is very important that children feel that we adults are ready to protect rights.

What are rights? Human right, in the end, is not a ceiling that we are trying to reach. It is a floor in which we would like every single child to have the same opportunities to a name, to dignity, identity, to survival, to education, to protection and so on. The protection of rights is certainly a fundamental issue that we need to disseminate. And that starts in the context of the family – the context of the parents and how they relate to the child – and then how that family is supported by all the different levels of institutions so that the rights of those children can be upheld.

I hope that we in UNICEF will be able to be a more effective voice in terms of all the protection issues and that includes the most forgotten of forgotten children. I have already been on a number of visits and children with special abilities – many would call them “children with mental disabilities” – wherever I have been, you don’t see these children. They are hidden away in houses. I have been to displaced camps and the health staff tell me that they have occasionally seen someone run out of a house and then the whole family runs out to bring them back to the house. Children with special abilities, whether they are autistic, whether they have Downs Syndrome or cerebral palsy, have a certain disconnect that makes it difficult for them to verbalise. But they have an absolutely stunning and wonderful ability to give love. That is the part that functions in them. You give them one word; they give you a hundred times love back. Not only in Sudan but also in many parts of the world, such children are being hidden away in a corner because the family is ashamed of them. Now tell me, who has the mental disability ... the child, or the parents? I think we need to generate awareness and a sense of the level of exclusion. I am giving you that example in terms of the issue of protection of the rights of the children – it is a very, very broad agenda and I hope that we would be able to monitor all aspects of that agenda.

***Khalid Mansour:*** If there are no more questions, I would like to attract your attention to handouts from UNICEF at the table and also to introduce our new colleague, Amber Henshaw, who replaces Edward Carwardine as the Communications Officer for UNICEF. Many of you asked about contact and other details, I am sure she can be of help. The opening remarks by Mr. Kastberg will also be at the table here on your way out and we hope to get the new director for the WFP to speak to you next week.

Thank you very much for coming.

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