



Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs

**UNDER-SECRETARY-GENERAL FOR HUMANITARIAN AFFAIRS AND
EMERGENCY RELIEF COORDINATOR, STEPHEN O'BRIEN**

STATEMENT TO THE SECURITY COUNCIL ON SOUTH SUDAN

New York, 19 December 2016

Checked against delivery

Mr. President,

I offer my condolences to the Russian Federation over the death of its Ambassador in Turkey.

My thanks to the Secretary-General for his powerful statement and his clear ask to this Council and Government of South Sudan to which I fully align.

Thank you for this timely opportunity to brief the Security Council on the humanitarian situation in South Sudan. In my last briefing to the council on 22 June, and in the written submission jointly with OHCHR in August, I highlighted the spread of violence to new areas and its humanitarian consequences. Six months later, the humanitarian situation has deteriorated dramatically. This will not come as any surprise to any one of you as you have heard and have been following the reports, as I have month upon deteriorating month. Violence and attacks against civilians have continued. Hundreds of thousands of people have been driven from their homes, and hunger has deepened. There are numerous accounts of horrific gender-based and sexual violence, with most perpetrators walking free.

Last week, the conflict in South Sudan entered its fourth year. Since December 2013, civilians have borne the brunt and faced increasingly appalling humanitarian conditions. We are now witnessing a scale of need for assistance and protection that demands our urgent, relentless attention and action. This year, some 6.1 million people required humanitarian assistance – half the population of this young nation. The humanitarian community expects this number to rise by a staggering further 20 to 30 per cent in 2017 – due to the destructive violence on the ground, forced displacement, compounded by food insecurity, economic decline, destitution, and a breakdown of basic services.

Some 3.1 million South Sudanese have been forced to flee their homes – 1.3 million of them across borders as refugees, and more than 1.8 million internally. Many South Sudanese have been displaced multiple times, failing to find the safety and security they so desperately need.



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Since July alone, more than 383,000 people have gone to Uganda while the others have moved to Ethiopia, Sudan, the Central African Republic and the Democratic Republic of Congo. People flee with almost nothing, just the clothes on their back, and whatever few belongings they are able to carry. Their journeys are mostly perilous, due to insecurity, leg-sapping marshland to slog slowly through, or desiccated, inescapable heat, and all the time a lack of food, water and shelter. I have received more and more harrowing reports of families being separated with little to no provisions; of the sick, disabled and elderly simply terrifyingly being left behind to a unhuman – or sadly a too well-known – fate; and of attacks, including killing, rape and abduction of young men.

Mr. President,

For children – as ever the future of this young country – the cost of protracted conflict continues to be particularly brutal. Children make up around half of all those who are displaced and over 9,000 children are registered as being unaccompanied, separated or missing. Over 17,000 children are believed to have been recruited by armed actors since the conflict began. Less than half of primary school-aged children are currently enrolled in schools. One in four schools are closed, primarily due to insecurity, and learning in general has been disrupted by displacement of both teachers and school children. A lost generation, and another – and a lot of capacity lost to rebuild South Sudan one day somewhere ahead.

Hunger and malnutrition levels are disconcertingly high, and encompass communities in places that were considered to be relatively food secure less than a year ago. More than one million children under the age of five are now estimated to be acutely malnourished. Recent screenings in Torit, Lafon and Ikotos in Eastern Equatoria have found proxy global acute malnutrition rates above the emergency threshold. At the height of the lean season in 2016, some 4.8 million people – more than one in every three people in South Sudan – were estimated to be severely food insecure. This number will increase in 2017 because of the continued conflict, economic decline and poor agricultural yields.

Basic services are severely stretched and in many areas only partially functioning, if at all. Less than half of the country's health facilities are operational, and even when operational, these have the capacity to provide only minimal services given chronic lack of essential medicines. Since December 2013, 106 health facilities have closed, while at least 29 have been looted or destroyed. As a result, the sick or wounded, including survivors of rape, often have nowhere to go to get treatment.

Women and girls continue to face heightened risks of sexual violence, particularly by armed actors, with rape used as a weapon of war. In Wau in February and June and in Juba in July this



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year, hundreds of women reported rapes and gang rapes. Other reports have come in from Bentiu, Leer, Malakal, Yambio and other locations across the Equatorias, including of abductions and rapes. These reported attacks often occur at armed checkpoints. There have also been multiple reports of sexual violence perpetrated against women and girls who leave Protection of Civilians [PoC] sites to gather firewood and food. With reference to the prevalence of gang rape, the Commission on Human Rights in South Sudan said last week that it is “running out of words to describe the horror.”

Mr. President,

At the very moment when needs are growing and deepening, the ability of humanitarian partners to provide timely and effective life-saving assistance is diminishing at an alarming pace. National and international organizations continue to work tirelessly to provide assistance in one of the most dangerous and challenging operating environments in the world today. I want to express my deep respect and admiration for their commitment and courage. But everyone needs to know that this comes at a high cost. So far, at least 67 humanitarian workers have paid with their lives – 12 of them since July. The humanitarian community is also being targeted in other ways. During the horrific attack on Terrain Hotel in July, humanitarian workers were sexually assaulted, raped and murdered. Over the last months, reports of harassment have become very numerous and routine.

Beyond the ongoing insecurity, aid organizations are now facing increasing levels of bureaucratic obstruction and intimidation, mainly by the Government of South Sudan, but also by parts of the SPLA/M-in Opposition. In the past four weeks alone, there have been four serious incidents in which South Sudanese authorities have arrested, detained or deported senior NGO staff. No formal charges have been presented in any of these cases. In another case, one of the largest South Sudanese NGOs had their office in Juba shut down by authorities, again without documented cause. Despite demarches from the United Nations, there have been no explanations. This is simply unacceptable and these incidents must stop.

To be clear: Our NGO partners deliver around 70 per cent of all humanitarian assistance in South Sudan. Their presence and programming are fundamental to the continued life-saving response. Without national and international NGOs on the ground, food cannot be delivered to scale; emergency medical relief cannot be provided to all those who require it; malnutrition cannot be adequately treated; and life-saving access to clean water to prevent the spread of diseases such as cholera will be hampered.

Despite these immense challenges, humanitarians have delivered life-saving aid to nearly 4.7 million people this year, including nearly 3.6 million who were reached with food assistance or



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emergency livelihoods support; more than 195,000 severely malnourished children who were admitted for treatment; more than 2 million people who were provided access to clean water; more than one million who were reached with emergency shelter and vital non-food items; and nearly 200,000 children who were administered with the Penta vaccine against five major diseases. More than 18,000 survival kits – an inter-agency light-weight package of supplies designed to be easily carried by people on the run – have been dispatched to some of the most remote locations. This assistance has been delivered based on assessed needs, targeting people in most severe need in all areas of the country.

Mr. President,

Against the backdrop of a humanitarian situation which is a relentless descent into this catastrophic abyss of hopelessness, fear, intimidation and irreversible damage, destruction, stunting and death, an increasing number of South Sudanese are looking to humanitarian actors for assistance, yet access to those most in need continues to be restricted in some areas of the country. Last month, *one hundred* reports of humanitarian access incidents were documented – the highest number in any month since June 2015. I am appalled to highlight that around 67 per cent of these incidents involved violence against humanitarian workers or assets. Where towns are controlled by one party to the conflict and surrounded by another, we continue to face major challenges reaching people in need due to active conflict and access denials. This is particularly the case in Yei, Central Equatoria - where we estimate that tens of thousands of people who have been unable to make the long and costly journey to Uganda remain displaced in areas surrounding the town, unable to access assistance - and in Wau, Western Bahr el Ghazal, where tens of thousands of people outside the town have been largely cut-off from aid for months. The recent proliferation of armed actors has increased the complexity of access negotiations and heightened risks to aid workers.

As I have stated before, including in Juba, Wau and Aweil during my visit in August, steps and action must be taken to once and for all remove these obstacles, which are unacceptable and run contrary to the parties' obligations under international humanitarian law. It is critical that all humanitarian organizations are granted free, safe and unhindered access to all people in need, wherever they are. While we welcome steps taken by the Government to address some of these challenges, including the establishment of the Humanitarian High Level Oversight Committee, it is vital that commitments be translated immediately into concrete and effective action.

Mr. President,

South Sudan is on the brink. Decisive action to end the violence is needed and it is incumbent upon this Council to make sure the necessary action is taken.



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My message today is therefore threefold: First if a political solution is not urgently found to stop the violence, the humanitarian crisis in South Sudan will not only grow, but will cascade way beyond anyone's control, not least yours. There must be a cessation of violence. There is no alternative.

Second, collective leverage must be exerted to ensure the facilitation of unhindered access to all those who require assistance, in all areas of the country. Part and parcel of this, there must be real commitment to protect humanitarian workers. Meanwhile, those who killed, attacked and raped humanitarian workers must be prosecuted and held to account, just as the impunity of those who attack civilians must come to an end.

Finally, I draw your attention – as did the Secretary-General just a moment ago, so powerfully – to the recent call made by the Special Adviser on the Prevention of Genocide on the imminent risk of violence escalating along ethnic lines, with the potential for genocide. There is no greater urgency than to prevent this from happening. Millions of women, men, girls and boys are already suffering. It is imperative that all do what is in their power to stop the current trajectory and collectively help South Sudan – above all the South Sudanese people avert a cataclysmic infernal event, and find a path to get back on a track to peace and security for all its citizens.

I was going to stop there. But allow me as your humanitarian advisor to add one more point. The international community and this very Council have repeatedly said: “Never again.” After Srebrenica and Rwanda. Given the clear facts and evidence this evening in South Sudan, how many more lives do you, do we all, need to move from our anxious words to real, preventative action? How many lives, how many women, men and children, can you, can we all, save if you and those with influence over the parties act decisively today?

Thank you.