

**Statement by Mr. David Shearer,
the Special Representative of the Secretary-General and Head of the United Nations
Mission in South Sudan
at the Meeting of the African Union Peace and Security Council on South Sudan
17th March 2017**

Mr. Chairman, Excellencies and distinguished delegates,

I would like to thank H.E Ndumiso Ntshinga, the President of the African Union Peace and Security Council for providing me the opportunity to address this august body for the first time. The United Nations maintains its partnership with this organisation to advance peace, security, human rights, as well as social and economic development on the continent, particularly in South Sudan.

Mr. Chairman,

I arrived in Juba less than two months ago and have prioritised travelling to almost all parts of the country. Juba is not South Sudan, I've been repeatedly told on my missions. I am astonished by the complexity of issues and inter-ethnic conflicts across the regions. The United Nations Mission (UNMISS) has a broad presence across the country, with 12,000 peacekeeping troops, 2,000 police and more than 2,000 civilian personnel present in more than 15 different locations. From where we are based, we protect hundreds of thousands of civilians, address issues of reconciliation amongst local communities, monitor human rights and support humanitarian activities.

I have no doubt that these efforts have saved the lives of tens of thousands if not hundreds of thousands of South Sudanese.

Yet, the situation in South Sudan continues to deteriorate and generate profound human suffering for the population of that country – suffering in which local and ethnic divisions have been exploited for political ends.

Security

Conflict is apparent across the country. Virtually no part of the country is immune. In recent weeks there has been a recent escalation of fighting in Equatoria and Upper Nile regions. Both have led to significant and additional displacement of civilians. The Equatorias in the south were once the most peaceful of all South Sudan's regions. They are now no longer. Each month of this year, more than 60,000 people have sought refuge in Uganda. Full-scale military operations by the SPLA against opposition forces and other armed actors have typically resulted in torching of houses, looting of shops and almost invariably the rape and killing of civilians.

Displacement of populations in the Equatorias has serious implications for the country as a whole as it is considered the food basket of South Sudan where it is possible to harvest two crops a year. FAO estimates the loss of 100,000 metric tonnes of locally produced food because of insecurity or because farmers have simply fled. This food was once traded with other parts of the country and is integral to the nation's economy.

Intense fighting in the Upper Nile in February, including the reported use of heavy artillery and attack helicopters, led to the town of Wau Shilluk being taken by SPLA forces which then proceeded further south. Wau Shilluk is now deserted and analysis from satellite imagery shows that approximately 40 per cent of the town's structures are destroyed. A CTSAMM / UNMISS patrol was only able to gain access in early March, following weeks of denial for the Government of South Sudan. Approximately, 27,000 people have fled the area northwards towards the town of Kodok where aid agencies have provided minimal support.

Sadly, these two regions are just part of the picture. There are other clashes in former Jonglei state, the displacement of 40,000 people in the west around Wau, sadly the list goes on.

Humanitarian

The humanitarian situation is alarming. The declaration of famine on 20 February 2017 is the latest evidence of the dramatically deteriorating humanitarian situation in South Sudan. There are an estimated 100,000 people facing starvation and a further 1 million others

classified as being on the brink of famine and 5.5 million may be severely food insecure by August.

This crisis is entirely man-made, the result of conflict, unlike the drought that faces other countries in the region. More than 1.9 million people are displaced internally and 1.6 million have sought refuge in neighbouring countries. Put simply, one-third of South Sudan's population is displaced and one-half needs humanitarian assistance.

Some people have sought protection at UNMISS bases and we have opened our gates to enable them to seek refuge. Today, UNMISS together with humanitarian organisations are taking care of 225,000 people in six different locations across the country. The 125,000 people in the Bentiu camp now makes up the second largest urban area in South Sudan after Juba.

Where people have been forced to flee their homes, leaving livestock, crops and their coping mechanisms behind they are left most vulnerable, depending on food aid. In the famine areas of Leer and Mayendit counties in former Unity State, three years of conflict have eroded people's basic livelihood, preventing farming and harvesting, while cattle have been looted on a large scale and local economies have collapsed.

I want to particularly praise the courage and efforts of humanitarian organisations which despite massive logistical hurdles, are managing to provide lifesaving support to the most isolated communities. In the past two weeks, there have been three attacks on aid workers, other NGOs in Mayendit County were forced to evacuate due to impending clashes despite it being one of the areas hardest-hit by famine. Humanitarian compounds and supplies have also been repeatedly looted, including most recently in Waat and Yuai during clashes and mounting tensions in former Jonglei State and in Kajo-Keji town in Central Equatoria.

As has been emphasised many times before, there are repeated denials to access areas to both humanitarian organisations and UNMISS even in the face of such enormous suffering.

I am alarmed at the lack of any response to the plight of these from South Sudanese leaders of all sides.

Human rights

Mr. Chairman,

The United Nations continues to monitor and report on serious human rights violations and abuses committed by the SPLA and other armed groups. We must make every effort to end the cycle of impunity. The African Union holds an important role with the establishment of its Hybrid Court as well as providing support to national authorities to establish credible and independent national judicial mechanisms to hold perpetrators accountable.

Unsurprisingly in this insecure environment, the political process has stalled. President Kiir's statements supporting a National Dialogue are welcome and present an opportunity. Yet despite the many statements movement on the Dialogue has been slow.

Nevertheless, there has been some progress. In his speech to parliament he emphasised that the National Dialogue is a process not simply a single meeting. In recent discussions with me, he said he agreed with the advantage of a convening panel of the National Dialogue that can operate independently from the political structures thus genuinely encouraging people to participate. He also agreed with the principle of inclusivity – ensuring that all constituencies are represented.

A circuit breaker is desperately needed. Fighting is ongoing, new armed groups and actors are emerging and the society is deeply divided. While the National Dialogue may offer an opportunity, it cannot function in the midst of war. It is, therefore, imperative that we collectively call for an immediate stop to hostilities.

To help create political will for the parties to cease hostilities and build peace, the international community must speak with one voice; the African Union Peace and Security Council, the United Nations Security Council and IGAD must be united in dealing with the belligerent parties in South Sudan.

The United Nations stands ready to work hand in hand with the African Union and IGAD, and is ready to increase our support to the AU high representative, President Alpha Oumar Konaré, to the JMEC Chairperson, President Festus Mogae, and to the Ceasefire and Transitional Security Arrangement Monitoring Mechanism (CTSAMM) within existing resources and capabilities. We have supported these efforts with aircraft and logistics and stand ready to offer further work alongside them.

Mr. Chairman,

To pull South Sudan back from the abyss and from a growing famine, we must collectively focus our energies on four objectives:

1. Achieving an immediate cessation of hostilities;
2. Restoring the credibility of the peace process by ensuring the representation and consultation of all South Sudanese stakeholders, including the opposition and civil society in the proposed National Dialogue and for it to be led independently;
3. Demand unrestricted humanitarian access;
4. The establishment of the Hybrid Court.

Time is not on our side. I urge the AU Peace and Security Council and the leaders of IGAD to support these objectives – which repeat those stated by President Mogae – and press the South Sudanese parties to implement them.

Standing together is the only way to move forward.

Thank you.