

UNITED NATIONS
**United Nations Mission
In Ethiopia and Eritrea**



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UNMEE PUBLIC INFORMATION

Near verbatim transcript of the press briefing chaired in the Ethiopian capital Addis Ababa by Acting Spokesman and Deputy Chief of Public Information George Somerwill, via videoconference linking Asmara to Addis Ababa.

MEDIA BRIEFING NOTES – 15 JANUARY 2004

POLITICAL

On 7 January, the Progress Report of the Secretary-General on Ethiopia and Eritrea of 19 December 2003 was discussed in the Security Council. In its press statement, the Security Council expressed “concern about the lack of progress in the demarcation process and “reaffirmed the final and binding nature of the Boundary Commission’s decision”. The Council members also “expressed support for the Secretary-General’s intention to consider additional measures to move demarcation and the peace process forward”.

On 9 January, the Deputy Special Representative of the Secretary-General (DSRSG/OIC) Angela Kane met with the Eritrean Commissioner for the Commission for Coordination with the Peacekeeping Mission, Brigadier-General Abrahaley Kifle. They exchanged views on the current situation in the peace process.

On 12 January, OIC DSRSG Kane briefed the UN Country Team in Asmara on the status of the peace process.

On 13 January, OIC DSRSG Kane met with Ambassador Ghirmai Ghebremariam Director General, Americas and International Organizations Department at the Eritrean Ministry of Foreign Affairs. They discussed the recent SG’s report and the Security Council consultations.

On 14 January, OIC DSRSG Kane met with the Canadian High Commissioner and Ambassador to Kenya, Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi and Eritrea, His Excellency Mr. Jim Wall. She and the FC briefed him on the current situation in the peace process and exchanged views on the way forward.

MILITARY

General Overview

During the past week, UNMEE conducted 781 ground and 7 air reconnaissance patrols throughout the Area of Responsibility. The general situation in the Mission area

continues to remain tense, yet importantly it is assessed as remaining militarily stable. There have been no significant changes in troop locations reported over the past week.

In all sectors, UNMEE peacekeepers continued to provide medical assistance to local civilians, including Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), along with supplies of bulk water to civilian communities in the Temporary Security Zone (TSZ) and the Adjacent Areas.

Mine Action

While demining in Sector West along the roads Wodas to Tselim Kelay to Deda Lala, Shilalo to Maykokah and from Mukuti road junction to the southern boundary of the Temporary Security Zone, the Bangladesh Engineering Company found 24 rounds of live small arms ammunition about 500 metres southwest of Sheshebit, which were later disposed of.

The Slovak Engineering Company, while demining an area of 1750 m² in the Adi-Hakin–May Hbey minefield found and cleared four POMZ-2M anti-personnel mines.

The Kenyan Engineering Company found and later destroyed thirty-nine POMZ-2M anti-personnel mines while demining at the minefield near Mai Hbey.

Meetings & Visits

On 6 January, the Deputy Force Commander and Chief Military Observer, Brigadier General Walid Kreishan, accompanied by the Sector West Commander, Colonel Abdallah Khriesat, and Senior Sector Military Observer, Wing Commander Babatunde Adekoya, visited the Sheshebit Platoon of the Jordanian Battalion in Sector West.

On 7 January, the Force Commander, along with Ms Sally Healey from the British Foreign Office, visited the Indian Battalion posts at Keskesse, Adi Keyh and Camp Dunn in Sector Centre.

On 9 January, the Force Commander met the Ethiopian Armed Forces (EAF) Commander of the 107 Corps, Brigadier General Teklay Asheber, at Mekele and discussed various operational issues. Sector Center Commander, Colonel Anand Singh Rawat, and Senior Sector Military Observer, Lt Col Ljuban Orec, were also present.

Troops Rotation

During the week, the Jordanian Battalion (JORBATT6) has commenced its planned rotation. To date, a total of 369 members of JORBATT6 have departed the Mission area to be replaced by the incoming members of JORBATT7. The rotation will be completed next week.

Today (15 January) in Barentu, the Force Commander Major-General Robert Gordon is attending the handover parade involving JORBATT6 (outgoing) and the JORBATT7 (incoming).

Miscellaneous

At about 1040 hrs on 11 January two Eritrean civilians crossed the Southern boundary of the TSZ through the Indian Battalion (INDBATT) checkpoint at Zela Ambessa. The two civilians, confirmed to be mechanics working in Senafe, had stolen from a local garage a white Toyota pickup (Registration Number 0012), belonging to the Eritrean Police in Senafe. The vehicle crashed through an Eritrean Police checkpoint and then the INDBATT checkpoint. The Ethiopian Police in Zela Ambessa removed both civilians and the vehicle from the area. UNMEE understands that the two civilians are now in Ethiopian Police custody in Adigrat. UNMEE is trying to facilitate the return of the police vehicle to Eritrea.

Questions and Answers

Q (From Asmara): It is saying on the briefing notes that there has been no significant changes on troop locations over the past week. A month and a half ago you were saying that some troops had moved to Sector West from Sector Centre to do some harvesting and that you were keeping an eye on them. Have you seen them moving back, have they finished harvesting because you told us that they have to be finished in December?

DCPIO: Not that I am aware of. I have spoken to the Force Commander and he has not specifically mentioned this as an issue. So I am not aware of any particular movements in either direction that have been noticed.

Q (From Asmara): So you have not seen any troops go back?

DCPIO: The original movement was from Sector Centre to Sector West for harvesting and there has not, to my knowledge, been any movement in the other direction. I know that sometimes there has been movement but as far as I know not recently. There has been movement in both directions.

Q (from Asmara): So do you find it worrying as they were supposed to finish harvesting, apparently harvesting is over now?

DCPIO: If this was worrying, then the Force Commander would have let us know. So I do not think that this is specifically worrying to UNMEE at the moment.

Q (From Addis Ababa): Can I just ask a follow up to that? Do UNMEE confirm or can they confirm that, it was 20,000 troops that moved from Sector Centre to Sector West on the Eritrean side?

DCPIO: I cannot confirm that. I personally cannot confirm that. I am not aware of any figure that has been mentioned.

Q (From Addis Ababa): *Can I just ask another thing on the checkpoint? You know where they have crashed through the checkpoint? Did anyone open fire or did this vehicle just drive straight through the Eritrean checkpoint and then through the INDBATT checkpoint?*

DCPIO: The story that I have heard is that there was no firing involved. I know on some occasions in the past there has been [firing], but I am not aware of any at this point.

Q(From Addis Ababa): *How far are the checkpoints from each other, do you know?*

DCPIO: No I would have to find that out for you but as far as I know they are very close. I mean they are a matter of some several hundred metres, three, four hundred metres may be. But I can find out exactly for you if you need to know.

Q (from Asmara): *What is UNMEE's reaction to the Eritreans imposing travel restrictions on the movements of international organisations in this country?*

DCPIO: UNMEE has not been informed [formally] of this. I think probably to get a better reaction to that, about the UN's response, you would probably do better to talk to the UN Country Teams.

Q(From Asmara): *So this has no impact on UNMEE's activities whatsoever?*

DCPIO: At the moment, no.

Q (From Asmara): *So the new regulation does not apply to UNMEE?*

DCPIO: We have not been informed of any changes in our movement.

Q (From Asmara) *So you have not received the fax that all the other UN agencies, Embassies received on the 9th of January?*

DCPIO: Correct.

Q (from Addis Ababa) *We heard that three UNMEE members, who are based in Asmara have defected and they arrived yesterday in Addis Ababa. Could you tell us more information about them?*

DCPIO: I have no further information about that at all. Even if there had been an event like that which had happened, obviously it is something which we would have to check into and make further inquiries to find out exactly what might have happened. But at the moment no I have nothing further to add.

Q (From Addis Ababa): Have you heard....(inaudible)?

DCPIO: I had heard a report on that and all I can say is that an inquiry is taking place.

Q (From Addis Ababa): Who is the report by?

DCPIO: I have not even heard as much detail as you are giving me. I did not know the number of people who were involved. I had heard, informally, that something had happened like that and further investigations are being carried out. That is all I can tell you.

Q (From Addis Ababa): So you don't know?

DCPIO: No I do not want to say anything about what I hear, until there is [a statement] officially released by UNMEE.

Q (From Addis Ababa): No, no, you just said you heard a report that three UNMEE people had defected from Asmara to Ethiopia yesterday. Where did you hear that report?

DCPIO: You have much more information than I do and as I said I do not want to say any more basically because I do not even have as much information as you are telling me now and in any case UNMEE will not say anything until there has been a full inquiry carried out. And I believe that will be taking place.

Q (From Addis Ababa): But what had you heard? Because I am really confused now about what you had heard and what you hadn't heard? What had you heard informally?

DCPIO: Anthony I am not prepared to say any more about it at this moment.

Q (From Addis Ababa): Yes, George, we heard that three UNMEE people had defected and they arrived yesterday and the civilians saw them here. So are all the UNMEE members in your office now or did you check the attendance?

DCPIO: No I said there will be an investigation to find out what, if anything, has happened -concerning these allegations. That is all I can say just now.

Q (From Addis Ababa): So what are you having a full inquiry into?

DCPIO: As I have just explained to Anthony I cannot elaborate anymore at this time.

Q (From Asmara): I have been told about 5 or 6 Eritrean UNMEE staff, who crossed the border in an UNMEE vehicle a week ago. Is it the same incident or is it something else?

DCPIO: I have no knowledge of that whatsoever. I have no knowledge of what happened a week ago.

Q (From Addis Ababa): *Well, I mean you are leaving a rather sort of confused impression down here. I mean what you are saying is that the allegation that we are hearing is that three people from UNMEE had defected to Ethiopia; you are saying you don't even know that is the case. I mean that is slightly bizarre, isn't it George? Three people from your offices in Asmara suddenly disappear and end up down here and you don't know that is the case and then you say you are having a full investigation into it but you are not saying what you are having a full investigation into and you haven't heard the information that we have heard so I mean what is the score George? What is the score on the door?*

DCPIO: I said there will be an investigation to find out exactly what if anything has happened. That's all I can say

Q (From Addis Ababa): *Concerning those allegations?*

DCPIO: Concerning those allegations exactly. That's all I can say at this point.

Q (From Addis Ababa): *But I have evidence that an Asmara plate UN car has arrived in Addis Ababa yesterday. Why you escape from this question you know very well? But we appreciate you if you could elaborate more.*

DCPIO: As I have just explained to Anthony, I cannot elaborate any more at this time.

Q (From Asmara) *Yes I have been told about three Eritrean UNMEE staff who crossed the border in an UNMEE vehicle a week ago, is it the same incident or is it something else?*

DCPIO: I have no knowledge of that whatsoever, I have no knowledge of what happened a week ago.

Q (From Addis Ababa): *Just another quick clarification on the UNMEE defectors, alleged UNMEE defectors. Your full investigation is concerning the allegations from yesterday, not concerning the allegations about defectors last week? Is that correct?*

DCPIO: If there are any allegations at any time of that nature, there will be an investigation.

Q [From Addis Ababa]: *Are you going to have investigation, then, into the allegations that have just been made about the one last week?*

DCPIO: There will be an investigation into allegations that are made at any time, let's just leave it at that.

Q [From Addis Ababa]: What is the latest on Axworthy?

DCPIO: As far as Mr. Axworthy is concerned we will let you know. We have as yet heard nothing further from the UN headquarters about his appointment nothing official.

Q (from Asmara): But it is in the post though, is it? You used that expression so it is definitely going to happen?

DCPIO: No I am just saying that we will let you know when we hear anything.

Q (From Asmara): So he is not in the post yet?

DCPIO: Not yet. You'll have to wait until we can tell you something officially. But seriously we are not able to make any comment at this point. As soon as further information on the appointment [is available] we will obviously let you know.

Q (From Asmara): Obviously these briefing notes contain sections on humanitarian, human rights and other things related to the UN general mission in Eritrea and Ethiopia. I was just wondering, obviously you have heard about these travel restrictions, are you concerned about what impact they might have on humanitarian issues here in Eritrea?

DCPIO: Well I think at this point since they do not apply to us I think that I would rather not comment on that. I mean by far the preponderance of humanitarian work done by the UN in Eritrea is done by the UN Country Team. So that you would probably get a more realistic assessment of their impact from the UN country team.

Q: (Addis Ababa): Regarding these two Eritrean civilians that have burst across the border I notice UNMEE is not facilitating their return, rather the vehicle. Have they asked for asylum? Or have they been given asylum? Do you know anything of that?

DCPIO: I have no idea at all. As the statement from our military says, they are currently with the police on the Ethiopian side. So at this point beyond that we have no further details.

Q (From Asmara): Do you know if these were two men?

DCPIO: I have no idea as it says they are described as two mechanics. I believe they were two men.

Q (From Asmara): Do you know their age?

DCPIO: I do not know their exact age just two adult men. We can find out their ages if we have them. As you can see, they did not exactly stop to talk to our people, so we do not have those details.

Q [From Addis Ababa]: Chris Mullin, the (UK) Foreign Office Minister is in Eritrea and is coming down to Addis, Gerhard Schroeder arrives in Addis on Monday where he meets the Prime Minister and talk about the peace process. Are UNMEE hoping that these diplomatic efforts will have a positive impact in pushing the peace process forward?

DCPIO: I think most definitely yes. In fact I think it is very interesting it is happening now because there seems to be a focusing of the efforts of all the international community. They are focusing very tightly on trying to get some kind of movement in this impasse and I think that all of these developments, all of these people coming in, and including the appointment of a special envoy when he eventually gets here, all of these things are very important in terms of resolving the impasse, the block that we have in the peace process.

Q (From Addis Ababa): When he eventually gets here, so he will arrive

DCPIO: You heard it.

Q (From Asmara): Is Chris Mullin meeting with the Force Commander today?

DCPIO: I am not sure of that. The Force Commander is out of Asmara at the moment. I can find out for you if he has a meeting. I believe that he is but I am not sure whether it is today.

Q (From Asmara): Just about these travel restrictions. Did you ask the government about it? Have you been told specifically that it does not apply to UNMEE or have you just not been contacted by the Foreign Affairs Ministry? Because all the agencies have so?

DCPIO: We saw a copy of what was sent, but if you look at who it is addressed to it is not addressed to us.

Q (From Asmara): Is it because you did not see yourselves when they say UN agencies, embassies?

DCPIO: It is not addressed to us I will just leave it like that.

Q (From Asmara): So you did not receive it either?

DCPIO: We saw copy of it of course.

Q (From Asmara): And then you decided well we are none of those so we are not going to change our way of working.

DCPIO: At the moment we are not going to change our way of working that is correct.

Q(From Asmara): And have you seen any evidence that your travel is being restricted, checkpoints are being rigorously enforced?

DCPIO: Yes there are some areas where checkpoints are being quite rigorously enforced and over the years this is something that has happened occasionally. Other times they are not so strict. Sometimes the number of apparent checkpoints being enforced, the restrictions, go up, and sometimes they go down. There has been, recently, I would say, a slight increase. But I also think that there are definite signs now that things are improving and I think that this is not something we are very concerned about at the moment, or anything like that.

Q (From Asmara): What are the definite signs that things are improving?

DCPIO: Just the number of restrictions, there are signs that those numbers of restrictions are not so great as they have been fairly recently, and we take this as a positive sign. And there have also been discussions. There are always discussions on issues like this. Those discussions go on all the time. There have discussions and they have taken place in a very positive atmosphere, so we are optimistic.

MPIO: Last week I think in a press briefing we indicated that restrictions [had taken place] on the freedom of movement of UNMEE - even look at last week's briefing notes. I would confirm that there has been some significant improvement in the situation now. And I believe that despite the restriction letter you are talking about from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, that issue, which we reported last week, has significantly improved. Just to confirm or corroborate what George has mentioned.

Q (From Asmara): I am sorry to repeat the same kind of question but I do not really get it when you say UNMEE saw copies of the letter I mean did the Ministry of Foreign Affairs send this circular to UNMEE as it did to all the other international agencies, organizations, embassies did it not? When you say we saw copies did you see it from the UNICEF copy or did you get it at UNMEE.

DCPIO: No I believe we received a copy.

[The DCPIO would like to clarify that this statement is not correct.UNMEE did not receive an official copy of the letter.]

Q (From Asmara): And then UNMEE decided it does not apply to UNMEE.

DCPIO: Yes that is the situation at the moment.

Q (Asmara): Is that perhaps confrontational, as they obviously would not have sent it to you if it did not apply to you. I for example have not received a copy.

DCPIO: No I do not think it is confrontational. I think you have to look very carefully at who it is addressed to.

Q(Asmara): *Have there been any discussions about this new regulation between UNMEE and the ministry of Foreign Affairs since you received it.*

DCPIO: I am not aware that any meeting has taken place.

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