

South Sudan peace deal a 'big step forward': UN mission chief

There was jubilation in the streets of South Sudan's capital overnight on Sunday, as residents celebrated a new agreement that the top UN official in the country has described as "a big step forward" towards ending nearly five years of brutal conflict.

President Salva Kiir together with his chief rival and former deputy, Riek Machar, signed the deal on Sunday in neighbouring Sudan, alongside members of other opposition factions.

David Shearer, head of the [UN Mission in South Sudan \(UNMISS\)](#), explained that it centres on the issue of governance, with Mr. Kiir retaining his position while Mr. Machar will be named the first of five vice-presidents.

"The deal is a big step forward in terms of bringing peace in South Sudan," he told UN News, speaking from the capital, Juba, on Monday.

"What it has as yet to do – and the negotiations are ongoing – is how are they going to organize the security on the ground for all of those people, and how is the army going to be reformed: how are they going to bring the fighting groups into the same army?"

He said that there were "a host of other issues" to be resolved, such as future and economic humanitarian policies and programmes. "So, it's very much a starting point but it's a starting point which I think a lot of us didn't think we would see perhaps two months ago."

At just seven years old, South Sudan is the world's youngest nation. However, a December 2013 political impasse between the two rivals, plunged the country into deadly conflict.

Tens of thousands have been killed while more than 4 million have been displaced, some 2 million of whom have fled to neighbouring States.

Mr. Shearer pointed out that the negotiations in Khartoum were led by Sudan and Uganda: two countries he described as having "the greatest to gain and to lose", depending on what happens in South Sudan.

Previous peace talks were spearheaded by the East African regional body, IGAD – the Intergovernmental Authority on Development.

Asked about the prospects for this latest deal, the UN mission chief sided with the optimism expressed by citizens in the capital, including nearly 40,000 displaced people at a UN protection camp near his home who were "partying" on Sunday night.

"Our job in the UN is to be as supportive as we possibly can to this

agreement,” he stated.

“There’s only one agreement on the table. It’s this one. And we’ve got to try and make this work,” he added.

[As Hiroshima observes 73rd anniversary of atomic bombing, UN notes ‘stalled’ progress on nuclear disarmament](#)

The 6 August 1945 bombing of Hiroshima by the United States, killed tens of thousands of people, many of whom succumbed to their injuries in subsequent months. Those who survived the bombing there, and at Nagasaki a few days later, are referred to in Japan as *hibakusha*.

“It is a privilege to pay tribute to the citizens of Hiroshima and all those who perished in the blinding flash of nuclear destruction, and in the weeks, months and years that followed, and to stand in solidarity with the Hibakusha and their families,” continued Ms. Nakamitsu, underscoring that what had occurred on that day in 1945 “cannot and must not ever happen again.”

“The future of our children and of our children’s children depends upon it,” she stressed.

According to the UN disarmament chief, the legacy of Hiroshima is one of resilience: “The city we see today, this bustling metropolis, is testament to that fact,” she elaborated. “You, the people of Hiroshima, are not only brave survivors of the atomic bomb, but courageous activists for peace and reconciliation.”

Ms. Nakamitsu offered her sincere thanks to the people of Hiroshima for their decades of educating the world about “the threat nuclear weapons pose to our global, national and human security.”

[UN development agency provides lifeline to Gaza lifeguards, in bid to keep workers from debtors’ prison](#)

If Bilal Bashir, a Palestinian fisherman and lifeguard living on the coast of

the Gaza Strip, does not get work over the summer months, he risks being sent to debtors' prison.

That's the harsh reality facing many in the enclave, which is blockaded by Israel, as unemployment rates reach as high as 60 per cent, but the United Nations Development Programme's ([UNDP](#)) Assistance to the Palestinian People initiative, is creating jobs as part of an overall effort to relieve the intense pressure on workers and their families during the summer period.

Since Israel's decision to close the Kerem Shalom/Karm Abu Salem commercial crossing into Gaza last month – in response to the flying of incendiary kites into southern Israel – the dire economic situation has worsened, making it even more difficult for people such as Bilal to find work.

The closure of the crossing prohibits the import of everything but food, animal fodder, livestock, fuels and medical supplies, and bans all exports. In addition, the livelihood of fishermen like Bilal has been made more precarious by the restriction of the fishing zone off the coast of Gaza from nine nautical miles, to six.

"Every year, I apply for a job in marine rescue for the three months of summer. This allows me to repay the debts that I've built up over the previous four to five months. It's a big thing for me and I wait for it every summer," he said.

"For the past decade, I have been unemployed and there are no opportunities. I don't have any skills apart from fishing and marine rescue. I support a family of four and I need to find money on a daily basis," he continued, adding that "if I don't work, I rely on credit and sometimes shop owners don't want to give us any. When that happens, my debts increase significantly, and I can end up in prison."

The summer lifeguard job that Bilal desperately waits for each year is part of the UNDP's Programme of Assistance ([PAPP](#)), designed to create job opportunities in Gaza and alleviate the impact of the economic and social hardships being endured by most of the population there. The Programme aims to provide work for more than 2,500 people over a 12-month period, with 40 per cent of placements reserved for women.

Tarik Shabat, Coordinator of PAPP, says that the current economic conditions have underlined its importance:

"The programme is an emergency job creation project for the citizens of Gaza, who are suffering from a lack of employment opportunities and financial distress.

The primary objective of the operation is to provide an income for a period of between three and six months. When money is injected into the local economy, a virtuous cycle of development can begin."

The scheme is funded by the Islamic Development Bank, to the tune of \$2 million; the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, which provides

\$1.2 million, and \$300,000 from UNDP.

As a result of PAPP and other projects, over 4,000 new sources of income will be created. Additionally, ongoing infrastructure projects related to the reconstruction and rehabilitation of educational facilities and the construction of water, wastewater and health facilities, are also creating thousands of extra shifts every week for skilled and unskilled labourers.

Initiatives such as PAPP are part of a broader UN coordinated international effort to urgently lower tensions and help prevent another armed conflict in Gaza, between Israeli forces and the militant Hamas group, which controls the enclave.

[‘Lots of good news’ but much more needs to be done for the planet, says UN environment chief](#)

Calling 2017 “the first year in human history” that more electricity was generated globally from the sun, than oil, gas and coal combined, Erik Solheim, Executive Director of the UN Environment Programme ([UNEP](#)) has told UN news that “we are on track” but “we really need to speed up”.

Southern India, for example, now has “the first all-solar airport in the world”, he said, pointing out that some of India’s southern states are experiencing “the most rapid economic development anywhere in the world – based on solar energy”.

Moreover, he said that in the United States, “there are five times more jobs in solar, than in coal”.

Speaking about Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) [15](#) – protecting life on land – the UNEP chief was also upbeat, saying that China had recently prohibited all trading in ivory; “very important because it stops the market for those killing elephants in Africa”.

And calling it a “huge, huge achievement”, Mr. Solheim said that Indonesia has reduced deforestation across its peatlands by close to 90 per cent. Peat is partially decayed, dead vegetation, which stores enormous amounts of carbon and, among other things, soaks up water – helping to mitigate flooding – during wet season and releases water during dry season.

“Rwanda, Botswana and African nations are also doing very, very well” with wildlife protection efforts, he said, “but still, it is not adding up to being sufficient for the planet. We need to do a lot more.”

Mr. Solheim explained that UN Environment works with government, civil society and businesses, to turn protecting nature into a business opportunity, which benefits all.

He gave an example of Rwanda charging \$1,500 dollars per person for tourists to view its protected mountain gorillas, whose population is now rising. Acknowledging the large cost, he said that nonetheless it has “created a fantastic economy for Rwanda, for taxi drivers, for school teachers for hotel waiters. And the people around the national park will be the first to defend the gorillas because their livelihood depends on it.”

Zeroing in on SDG [14](#), life below the water, the UN Environment chief shared a moving story of a dying whale in Thailand that had swallowed 80 plastic bags. Adding a silver lining, Mr. Solheim observed that people and governments are now taking action in response to such stark examples of environmental destruction.

India, he noted, has promised to phase out all one-use plastic bags by 2022; while the European Union has announced a new strategy to use plastics in a more environmentally safe and sustainable way. Chile’s parliament has also taken “strong action against plastic”, he said, adding that Kenya, Eritrea and Rwanda had all promised to take more action.

What’s more, companies that had previously refused to act, have now become strong supporters, he continued, citing in the United States, Coca-Cola and Starbucks. But, he underscored, behind the countries and businesses is “the strong movement of people who say, ‘We want to change.’”

Mr. Solheim said that linking sustainable tourism with economic opportunities, jobs, development and sustainable energy was “the way forward”.

“The only way we can really protect the planet is at the same time, provide opportunities to people who are living on this planet,” he added.

He concluded his interview with UN News by emphasizing the goal of making the [2020 Beijing Conference](#) for nature as effective and consequential as the 2015 [Paris Agreement](#) on climate change, where substantial steps will be taken to protect all of the Earth’s wildlife, ranging from insects to the most high-profile vulnerable and endangered species such as “the tigers, the pandas, the polar bears, the lions”.

[UN chief ‘saddened’ by latest devastating earthquake to hit](#)

Indonesian island of Lombok

Following the magnitude 7 earthquake that hit Indonesia's East Lombok on Sunday, the United Nations Secretary-General said he was "saddened by the devastating loss of life, injuries and damage caused", in a [statement](#) issued on Monday.

According to Indonesia's National Disaster Management Authority, at least 91 people have lost their lives, with more than 200 injured and thousands displaced. In addition, thousands of houses have been damaged, and according to news reports around 10,000 have been evacuated from the island.

This latest quake came just a week after a 6.4 magnitude earthquake in the same area, which left more than a dozen people dead, over 150 people injured, and thousands displaced.

"The Secretary-General extends his condolences to the families of the victims and to the Government and people of Indonesia, and wishes the injured a quick recovery," said the statement issued by his Spokesman, who added that "the United Nations stands ready to support ongoing rescue and relief efforts, if required".

According to a statement by the International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC), "the earthquake caused widespread panic. Many people ran from their homes and have stayed by the roadsides overnight. Hundreds of people were treated for injuries, some of them in the open air to avoid the risk of further injury".

Search and rescue activities are ongoing: "As the earthquake happened in the evening and cut power and communications in the area, a full picture of people's needs is still emerging," said IFRC. "Some 132 aftershocks have been recorded in the area."

According to reports, the death toll is expected to rise, with one official telling reporters that 80 per cent of north Lombok has suffered damage.