

As South Sudan celebrates, UN envoy cites trust as future 'key ingredient'

Thousands of elated citizens gathered in South Sudan's capital of Juba on Wednesday to celebrate an agreement signed in September between the President and his former deputy, which it is hoped will finally end years of brutal conflict across the world's youngest country.

"To see parties that have previously been divided by violence coming together here in Juba, in a [public sign of unity](#), sends a strong signal to the citizens of this country that you are genuinely committed to end the suffering and building durable peace," remarked David Shearer, UN Special Representative and Head of the [UN Mission in South Sudan](#) (UNMISS).

In a gesture of reconciliation, President Salva Kiir announced the imminent release of former deputy and opposition leader Riek Machar's spokesperson, who has been detained since late 2016 on charges of treason.

Alongside President Kiir and Mr. Machar, other Heads of State, high-level representatives and leaders from other opposition groups attended the event marking the Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict, which was billed as a celebration of "the Dawn of Peace, Appreciating Friends, Cherishing Reconciliation and Unity".

Mr. Shearer also paid tribute to heads of the East African Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) and the governments of neighbouring Sudan and Uganda for their critical role in securing the peace agreement.

We will prove sceptics wrong by sincerely implementing the agreement fully, in letter and spirit – *South Sudan President Kiir*

After several "false starts" to the protracted peace process, which began with an agreement in 2015, some questioned whether the September deal signed would hold. The UNMISS head cited trust as "the key ingredient needed at every step" moving forward.

"The big challenge ahead is to build trust and confidence between the parties – and between the parties and the people," Mr. Shearer said, adding that it was the responsibility of "all of us here today; officials, civil society, religious leaders and the international community" to do so.

The signatories unanimously stressed their commitment to translating peace-promoting words into action while underscoring the need for the international community to politically and economically support the way forward.

"We will stand alongside the parties as they move forward in peace," Mr. Shearer said. "We will use our resources and our presence across the country

to support reconciliation and peacebuilding.”

President Kiir offered the South Sudanese people something of a mea culpa, saying that “as president, I want to apologize to all the parties of the conflict, and to the people of South Sudan, for our betrayal of the promise of our struggle for independence.”

“We will prove sceptics wrong by sincerely implementing the agreement fully, in letter and spirit,” he said.

Killing of journalists ‘outrageous’ and should not be ‘new normal’

In just over a decade, some 1,010 journalists have been killed for reporting the news, and in nine out of 10 cases, the perpetrators are never brought to justice. In 2018 alone, at least 88 journalists have been killed according to the UN.

Many thousands more have been “attacked, harassed, detained or imprisoned on spurious charges, without due process,” Mr. Guterres said in a video message for [The International Day to End Impunity for Crimes Against Journalists](#), marked annually on 2 November.

The truth never dies. And neither must our commitment to the fundamental right to freedom of expression – *UN chief Guterres*

The Secretary-General paid tribute to the reporters in the field “who do their jobs every day despite intimidation and threats.”

And he called on the international community “to protect journalists and create the conditions they need to do their work.”

Truth Never Dies

To mark the International Day, the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization ([UNESCO](#)) is launching an initiative to fuel awareness on the issue of journalists killed on the job. Called “Truth Never Dies,” it encourages people to share stories by and about fallen journalists to keep their legacies alive and to push for investigations into their deaths to be continued.

“The truth never dies. And neither must our commitment to the fundamental right to freedom of expression,” the UN Chief said, highlighting that when journalists are attacked “societies as a whole pay a price.”

A study on [global trends in media](#) published by UNESCO in 2017 highlights that impunity for crimes against journalists remains the norm, and trends in kidnappings, disappearances and torture have shown substantial increases since 2012.

The UN Human Rights Council adopted a [resolution](#) in September, calling on the international community to promote strategies that protect journalists and bring perpetrators of violence against the media to justice.

Hear more on global media challenges from the report's lead researcher in a podcast from UN News [here](#).

[UN General Assembly strengthens call for end to US embargo against Cuba, with record vote](#)

The United Nations General Assembly has overwhelmingly voted in favour of condemning the United States economic, commercial and financial embargo against Cuba – a call it has made every year since 1992.

A record total of 189 UN Member States voted in favour, with Israel and the US voting against the resolution, urging all States to “refrain from promulgating and applying laws and measures” which among other things, in the case of the embargo, interfere with the freedom of trade and navigation. There were no abstentions.

The Assembly [called](#) upon States “that have and continue to apply such laws and measures to take the steps necessary to repeal or invalidate them as soon as possible.”

Through the resolution, the General Assembly also decided to include the agenda item entitled “Necessity of ending the economic, commercial and financial embargo imposed by the United States of America against Cuba,” in the provisional agenda of next year's session.

The vote on the resolution is unenforceable, but the Cuban-sponsored resolution shines a spotlight on the relative isolation of the US regarding the embargo, which was first imposed in 1960, when former leader Fidel Castro came to power, following the revolution.

Speaking ahead of the vote, Cuba's Foreign Minister Bruno Rodriguez Parrilla outlined the impact of the embargo on Cubans, especially due to restrictions on lifesaving medicines. “Incalculable human damage has been caused by the blockade, which is qualified as an act of genocide” he said, referring to the

convention on the prevention of genocide. “It is also a violation of International Humanitarian Law, if it were a conflict,” he said.

Before the resolution was adopted, eight amendments, relating to the [Sustainable Development Goals](#) (SDGs), human rights and rule of law, proposed by the US, failed to pass ([see here for voting details](#)).

Introducing the amendments, US Ambassador Nikki Haley said that the draft resolution “changes nothing” in terms of addressing the problems faced by Cuban citizens. “The United States will continue to stand with the Cuban people, until their rights and freedoms are restored. We won’t back down,” she said.

Member States who [spoke](#) on the resolution over two days, overwhelmingly called on the US to end the embargo and other punitive measures against Cuba.

National representatives said that the nearly six-decades-long blockade imposed on the Caribbean island by Washington impeded its right to development and its ability to participate fully in the global economy. They also urged the US to heed the Assembly’s repeated calls to lift its restrictive policies.

[Looming famine in Yemen could put two million mothers at risk of death – UN agency](#)

The critical difficulties in accessing food in Yemen, and other hardships caused by the ongoing conflict, could lead to the world’s worst famine ever, and place up to two million malnourished, pregnant and lactating women at risk of death, the UN sexual and reproductive health agency, [UNFPA](#), [said](#) on Thursday.

“Lack of food, displacement, poor nutrition, disease outbreaks and eroding healthcare have heavily affected the health and well-being of 1.1 million malnourished pregnant and lactating women, causing numerous cases of premature or low-birth weight babies, severe postpartum bleeding, and extremely life-threatening labor processes,” UNFPA warned, adding that if the situation continues to deteriorate, up to two million mothers could end up being affected.

Since conflict escalated in Yemen in 2015 between non-state armed groups and a Saudi-led coalition in support of the Government, constant shelling and bombing has destroyed key civilian infrastructure across the country. Although targeting medical facilities is strictly forbidden under

humanitarian law, nearly half of the health facilities are no longer operational, including those established to provide reproductive health services. As a result, many of these women go undiagnosed and untreated.

This past August, for example, Al Thawra, Al Hudaydah's largest hospital – the only hospital of the area which provides critical neo-natal and emergency care – was attacked, putting the city's almost 90,000 pregnant women and girls at great risk.

"I felt I was in hell because of what I saw," said midwife Noha, who was working at the hospital's obstetric ward when the attack took place on 2 August. "Now pregnant women prefer to give birth at home, where they are exposed to many risks and problems. They do not come to the hospital out of fear for their lives," she explained.

The humanitarian crisis in Yemen is one of the worst in the world, with three quarters of the population requiring some form of life-saving assistance and protection, according to the UN's humanitarian coordination office ([OCHA](#)). The conflict has rendered civilians' access to food increasingly difficult through a combination of factors, including unprecedented inflation, import controls, and limited freedom of movement.

"There is now a clear and present danger of an imminent and great big famine engulfing Yemen: much bigger than anything any professional in this field has seen during their working lives," UN humanitarian chief, Mark Lowcock [told](#) the UN Security Council last week.

Although the humanitarian crisis in Yemen is one of the world's best funded crises, with 71 per cent of the 2018 appeal funded to date, the needs continue to grow and outpace the response. Working with limited funding, UNFPA's support to the 184 health facilities that offer reproductive health services may stop if additional resources do not become available urgently.

[Fighting 'existential crisis' of encroaching desert sands](#)

In a move described as a landmark decision, the Group of Earth Observations ([GEO](#)) – a UN-backed partnership set up to improve Earth observation data-sharing and availability, to benefit all life – has launched a global initiative to reverse the "existential crisis" created by desertification and land degradation.

The key thrust of the initiative will see so-called "quality data" transferred into the hands of national and local decision-makers, where it can be used more effectively on the ground.

The UN Convention to Combat Desertification ([UNCCD](#)) says that land quality is getting worse in nearly all of the world's countries, 169 in all, with related consequences including loss of wildlife, the internal displacement of populations, and forced migration.

Without urgent global and national climate action, Sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia and Latin America could see more than [140 million](#) people move within their countries' borders by 2050, increasing competition for dwindling space.

In September, the UN body urged the GEO to support them in implementing the Convention: the outcome is the Land Degradation Neutrality Initiative, launched at the 2018 GEO Congress in Kyoto on Thursday.

Land Degradation Neutrality is defined by the UNCCD as the amount and quality of land resources, necessary to support ecosystem functions and services and enhance food security, remaining stable or increasing.

The new commitment brings together data providers from around the world to strengthen monitoring and reporting, allowing governments – at the touch of a button – to access quality data and manage land better.

“Land degradation is an existential crisis. Until now, monitoring it in real time felt like an insurmountable challenge. No longer,” said Monique Barbut, Executive Secretary, United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification.

“With Earth observation datasets and the practical tools to use them readily available, decision-makers and land-users will have immediate and actionable information to scale up sustainable land management and planning. It is a first step to boosting our resilience,” she added.

Working groups have now been set up, to focus on areas such as data quality standards and big data computing platforms.

To date, 119 governments have pledged to take the measures needed to avoid, halt and reverse land degradation to ensure the amount of productive land stabilizes by 2030 and beyond.