

No one could have predicted scope of South Sudan crisis, outgoing UN envoy says

Special Representative and Head of the UN Mission in the Republic of South Sudan (UNMISS) Hilde Johnson

30 June 2014 – As the top United Nations envoy in South Sudan prepares to complete her tenure, she says that no one could have predicted the horrible conflict that has gripped the world's youngest nation for the past six months and urged the parties to put the country and its citizens above all else in order to restore peace and stability.

“Although I knew it would be rocky and difficult and challenging and we would be under significant pressure, I did not expect what happened in the last six months – the speed, the scale and the scope of what has unfolded before our eyes,” Hilde F. Johnson told a news conference in New York today.

Two and a half years after gaining independence from Sudan through a UN-backed referendum, South Sudan faced its toughest challenge as political infighting between President Salva Kiir and former Vice President Riek Machar turned into a full-fledged conflict between the Dinka and Nuer communities in mid-December 2013.

The crisis has uprooted some 1.5 million people and placed more than 7 million at risk of hunger and disease, according to the UN. It also sent nearly 100,000 civilians fleeing to UN Mission in South Sudan ([UNMISS](#)) bases around the country, leading the Mission to take the unprecedented decision to open its doors to those seeking protection.

In an interview with the *UN News Centre*, Ms. Johnson said that the decision to give shelter and protection to civilians fleeing for their lives was “the most important achievement” of her three-year tenure as the Secretary-General’s Special Representative and head of UNMISS.

“The fact that we opened our gates actually has saved very many thousands of people’s lives... There will be incredible challenges going forward with this decision, but it was the right one. It remains the right one,” she stated.

This decision, she noted, was taken in line with Secretary-General’s “Rights Up Front” initiative, which was launched to ensure that the UN system leverages the full breadth of its mandates to protect people at risk.

“The main lesson learned from the past months probably to me is even though you knew something was going to happen, even though you thought violence could be an outcome, it can be much, much worse than you ever contemplated it could be,” said the envoy.

Ms. Johnson stressed to reporters the need for the peace talks to move forward as well as to ensure accountability for the serious crimes that have been committed and foster reconciliation among the communities.

According to the terms of the peace process under way, the parties have until 10 August to come to an agreement on an interim transitional government. Before this deadline, it is vital for the parties to abide by the cessation of hostilities that they have signed and establish the transitional Government.

“Time is very short, the window is narrow,” said Ms. Johnson. “Within the next few weeks, what is critical is international pressure for the parties to abide with these two very critical provisions that they have agreed on and for the parties to put the country and its people first over and above any individual interests.”

Equally vital, she added, is for a genuine reconciliation process. “We are in a situation where the social fabric of society has almost been torn apart. The conflict has created major rifts in the society and in South Sudan.”

It is crucial that any reconciliation and healing process ensures accountability for the atrocities and grave human rights violations that have been committed during the conflict. It should also be comprehensive and use the different traditions in South Sudan to bring the communities together.

“From my experience with South Sudan, if there’s one thing that you learn it’s that anything can happen and they have an incredible capability of putting things behind them and reconciling,” Ms. Johnson stated. “They have an incredible capability of shaking hands with their former enemies...”

“I think the critical thing is that now the rifts are deeper than they have ever been. And that means that even if you shake hands at the top, there needs to be a very deep, thorough healing and reconciliation process from the bottom up.”

The Norwegian national, who was born in Tanzania and has spent much time in Africa, will complete her term at UNMISS on 8 July. After three years of “almost constant crisis management,” she stated, it was time “to hand over to somebody else.”