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SUDAN: Interview with Mukesh Kapila, UN Resident and Humanitarian Coordinator



Photo: UN

Dr Mukesh Kapila, UN Resident and Humanitarian Coordinator for Sudan

NAIROBI, 20 June 2003 (IRIN) - Mukesh Kapila is the newly appointed United Nations Resident and Humanitarian Coordinator for Sudan, and recently spoke to IRIN on the current humanitarian situation in Sudan. He told IRIN about recent improvements in humanitarian access to people in need following progress in peace negotiations, and the potential for the UN to help improve the lives of Sudanese people in the context of a post-conflict Sudan.

QUESTION: What is the United Nation's role in the ongoing Sudanese peace process?

ANSWER: The United Nations is an observer in the peace talks and is working with the parties to help them reach an agreement. A particular role of the UN is also to help the parties to sustain the peace. We have offered our support to help them build their capacity in order to meet the expectations of the people of Sudan, of providing peace and bringing relief and assistance. We are helping both sides to prepare for this, otherwise the fragile peace will be undermined and the confidence will be shattered.

Q: What is your overall assessment of the prospects for peace in Sudan?

A: There is a good reason to be cautiously optimistic. We are collectively moving in the right direction and there have been many gains in the last months. However, there is no room for complacency. If the expectations of the Sudanese people are not met, there is a prospect for a resumption of the

conflict. This therefore gives the impetus and urgency of ensuring that a lasting peace is achieved in Sudan. The UN is committed to assisting in any future role it is asked to play.

Q: What is the current status of humanitarian access in Sudan? Are there areas where access still poses a major problem?

A: The good news is that we've got a degree of access which is unparalleled in the history of UN operations in Sudan. This is reflected in an extra million people whom we have been able to reach over the past year. The reopening of the Nile corridor has also significantly improved access. Since 12 May, 1,000 tonnes of food have been transported to Sudan on barges, and for each tonne, we have saved US \$250 in operation costs. It means that extra dollars are available for relief to assist additional people.

The last time that corridor was used was 1998. The agreement to reopen it was brokered by both parties, and both sides have honoured it. There are, however, problems and challenges. We still have difficulties getting cross-line access for our national staff. Getting permits and permissions to travel is still a fairly cumbersome process. There is still a lot more to be done, but I am encouraged by the cooperation from the two sides.

Q: What are the UN's plans for assisting Sudan in the immediate post-conflict period?

A: In terms of the UN's assistance strategies, I see the following: the humanitarian activities that have been there under the framework of OLS [Operation Lifeline Sudan] will continue to be a significant part of our effort. This time, we expect to bring humanitarian support to more people than before. Access to all people in need has been difficult, especially in areas which were cut off by conflict.

Secondly, we have come up with the Quick-Start Peace Impact Programme. This is a rapid mobilisation of resources and activities that will bring tangible results for the country in order to maintain the peace. A peace agreement does not mean peace. The peace has to be made to work.

This programme will include the rehabilitation of infrastructure, training of teachers, and developing skills so the Sudanese people can get employment. It also means supporting and developing the media, because most people in Sudan are either not adequately informed or are misinformed about what is going on. We need to create in the media the positive influence of sustaining peace.

Quick-start activities also are to include restoring public administration in areas where this has been absent. Because Sudan has suffered many years of hunger, poverty, destruction and sanctions, this is a job that will not be done

overnight. But the Sudanese people have to feel its impact in order for peace to thrive.

The UN is well placed to do this, because it is the only organisation with agencies that have established and maintained strong networks in the country over many years. These networks, supported by the activities of OLS, can be re-tuned to build the requirements for peace.

Q: Are these changes likely to significantly affect the OLS humanitarian programmes?

A: OLS has been a remarkable achievement in securing an agreement between the parties - the UN, nongovernmental organisations and other partners - to develop some ground rules on humanitarian assistance in Sudan. Despite ups and downs, it has been stable for many years. OLS activities will continue for as long as is required, and the principles of OLS will be given support more widely.

However, when the peace agreement happens and we make progress towards peace-building, we have to give space to new institutions that will emerge, including the new institutions of governance to take their rightful responsibilities, so we can move to the areas of support and capacity building, which are also a crucial part of peace-building. OLS will reflect new realities and when the time comes, when all those who are part of the OLS framework decide, we should all have a big party to celebrate the success and move on.

Q: The UN assistance plans for Sudan are already moving towards post-conflict Sudan. But what if the peace agreement does not come this year?

A: I am in the optimism business. Sooner or later, peace will come to Sudan. When this will happen, I don't know, but when it does, we will be there to sustain it. Let us not forget that a large part of Sudan is already at peace. A peace agreement is vital, but it should not hold us completely hostage and prevent us from providing motivations to bring peace. There are things we can do, things we must do, and we are starting now. We need to do things that go beyond traditional humanitarian aid. We need to prepare the Sudanese people to gain skills [they can] transfer [to others]. This is something that needs to happen now.

Q: What does the UN need in order to continue to make its role in the peace process and development of a post-conflict Sudan even more effective?

A: We are deeply appreciative of the support the UN has received from member states which have sustained the UN operations in Sudan for many years. In order to continue an effective role, donors need to be consistent and forward-thinking in their support for Sudan and even for the UN wider mandate.

Secondly, member states' political support for the UN is needed to strengthen the UN's role as an impartial facilitator for all sides and all Sudanese people. In substantive terms, this year, the UN system has appealed for around \$270 million for its programmes in Sudan. So far, halfway through the year, we have received around 30 percent. Donors are requested to accelerate their disbursements so we can carry out agreed programmes in a timely manner.

We also have plans under discussion for quick-start programmes to provide peace dividends, so donors should get their own planning in order now so we can start with the peace-building after the peace agreement. Delays in funds disbursements can undermine any fragile peace that has been achieved.

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