

Testimony of Deputy Assistant Administrator Bob Leavitt
Bureau for Democracy, Conflict, and Humanitarian Assistance
United States Agency for International Development

House Committee on Foreign Affairs
Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health, Global Human Rights and International Organizations
“South Sudan’s Prospects for Peace and Security”
April 27, 2016

Chairman Smith, Ranking Member Bass, and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for holding this hearing and for your continued strong interest in South Sudan.

Today, I would like to highlight the worsening humanitarian crisis that the South Sudanese people face and how USAID has adapted its efforts to help them despite serious challenges. I will discuss our life-saving aid, as well as our long-term assistance to provide basic services, improve livelihoods, and mend the deep societal rifts in South Sudan. USAID’s mission is to partner to end extreme poverty and to promote resilient, democratic societies while advancing our security and prosperity—nowhere more so than in a country as desperately in need as South Sudan.

Situational update

The parties to the August 2015 peace agreement have taken some steps to implement the agreement; we join the Special Envoy and international community in calling on the Transitional Government of National Unity to begin to address the country’s urgent challenges. South Sudan’s economy is collapsing, its people struggle to find enough to eat, and human rights violations and abuses continue with impunity.

South Sudan has one of the highest inflation rates in the world. Ordinary South Sudanese are struggling to afford food and other basic goods with a significantly devalued currency. In March, USAID’s Famine Early Warning Systems Network (FEWS NET) reported a 300 percent price hike for the staple crop—sorghum—compared to its pre-crisis price.

People continue to flee South Sudan in search of food and safe haven. The recent exodus of South Sudanese into Darfur, Sudan, shows the desperation they face. A total of about 2.5 million South Sudanese have fled their homes, including 1.7 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) and more than 800,000 refugees in Ethiopia, Uganda, Sudan, and Kenya.

Half of all South Sudanese—meaning 6.1 million people—are in need of humanitarian assistance or protection this year. Approximately one in four South Sudanese—2.8 million people—are experiencing extreme, life-threatening hunger. Years of conflict and periodic drought have eroded their ability to cope and many have no remaining livestock or other assets with which to feed their families.

In the most conflict-affected areas of the Greater Upper Nile region (Jonglei, Unity, and Upper Nile states), approximately 40,000 people face catastrophic levels of food insecurity, which means they do not have basic food to survive and some are starving to death.

Despite impressive efforts to pre-position as much food aid and other assistance as possible before the rainy season intensifies, the hunger crisis will not improve this year. According to FEWS NET, the number of people facing extreme hunger will increase as the limited harvest runs out and food prices continue to rise through the summer. It is likely that this year will be the most food insecure since South Sudan gained its independence in 2011.

Delivering Life-Saving Assistance

The U.S. Government continues to do everything possible to help the people of South Sudan during these very difficult times. We are the largest donor to South Sudan, providing nearly \$1.6 billion in humanitarian assistance for conflict-affected people in South Sudan and South Sudanese refugees in the region since the start of the crisis. This includes more than \$86 million announced this week. Every month, we reach 1.3 million South Sudanese with lifesaving assistance, including food and nutrition, protection, and safe water and sanitation. Since the crisis began, we have moved over 344,000 metric tons of food—more than enough to fill 18,000 tractor trailers lined up back to back from Washington, DC to New York City.

Our partners take very seriously the needs of members of vulnerable populations, especially women and children who have suffered unspeakable brutality in this conflict. They have reached 48,000 children and parents with child protection services, helped reunite nearly 10,000 separated children with their families, and provided gender-based violence support for more than 30,000 people. After February's attack on the Protection of Civilians site at the Malakal UN compound, USAID partners established a clinical management of rape site and two emergency women's centers that provided clinical and trauma support to women and girls. Partners also integrate protection across all humanitarian assistance. For instance, we involve women in decision-making about clean water and sanitation access to ensure their safety.

I want to express our deep appreciation for our United Nations (UN) and NGO partners and staff on the ground for their courage and commitment to save lives. Our partners use creative tactics to reach people in one of the world's most dangerous and logistically difficult countries. One USAID partner's staff walked for days to deliver critical emergency nutrition supplies to remote displaced populations in Upper Nile State. Another partner used canoes and an extensive community network to distribute seeds to communities in need. Partners have deployed mobile teams during sporadic cessations of fighting to quickly access people in hard-to-reach, remote, insecure, and conflict-affected areas. They have surged back into areas of Unity State where aid groups previously had to evacuate due to violence and resumed services for some of the hardest-hit populations.

USAID's partner, the World Food Programme (WFP), has expanded road routes to deliver aid when warring parties fight or block movement. They have found new places to land in support of air operations. In January and February, WFP mobile teams completed 21 missions, reaching

403,000 people with emergency food assistance. WFP works with the governments of Sudan, Ethiopia, Kenya, and Uganda to bring aid across each of their borders to maximize efficiency.

Security and Access Challenges

Our partners continue to face significant security and access challenges that make our life-saving operations more dangerous and complex. Since the beginning of the current conflict, warring parties and armed actors have killed 52 aid workers—a dozen more since I last testified before Congress in December 2015. More than 90 percent of all aid workers are South Sudanese who risk their own lives to help their fellow citizens. Since January 2014, the UN has recorded nearly 1,900 incidents in which criminals or warring parties attacked offices, detained or assaulted aid workers, or otherwise interfered with aid operations. Journalists and other civil society groups are also under threat as South Sudan becomes an increasingly dangerous place to speak and operate free from violence.

Following President Kiir's unilateral creation of 28 states last year, local officials proliferated. Since then, our partners report a marked increase in informal taxation, harassment, and other impediments that slow down the delivery of aid to people in desperate need. Although the parties are obligated under the peace agreement to allow humanitarian aid to flow without interference, aid workers continue to deal with lengthy negotiations, numerous checkpoints along major supply routes, and other obstacles.

While we have been able to reach communities trapped in the crossfire through ad-hoc negotiations, parties to the conflict have not yet demonstrated the political will to grant full and unfettered access nationwide. For example, on March 16—after a month of intense diplomatic pressure—the government allowed a humanitarian delegation to reach more than 27,000 people who had been cut off from aid in Wau Shilluk for weeks. Nevertheless, the people of Wau Shilluk are still not able to move freely and parents and children in that community remain stranded on opposite sides of the Nile River.

The parties to the peace agreement must meet their obligations under the agreement to facilitate an environment in which civilians and aid workers can move freely and safely. Ambassador Booth and I recently met with senior South Sudanese officials and urged them, as we have many times before, to make access a top priority immediately.

Adapting our Response to Promote Recovery

Since the conflict began, USAID has shifted its development assistance from helping to build the institutions of the new South Sudanese state to more directly meeting the needs of the South Sudanese people. We recognize that corruption is a pervasive problem. We provide no financial assistance to the Government of South Sudan. We are squarely focused on investing in the people of South Sudan directly and empowering them with the services, information, and economic opportunities to move their country along a path to peace. As part of our assistance, we strengthen civil society, which plays a critical role as a government watchdog.

Because the government has used its resources to wage war, the people of South Sudan have

poor and scarce basic services. The government is by far the largest employer in South Sudan, but it routinely pays salaries late. Many government workers are not getting paid at all—including teachers and health care workers.

Education is critical if we are to ensure that an entire generation is not lost to war and despair. We provide education to children where they are now—including thousands of children that are in Protection of Civilians sites at UN compounds across South Sudan. We have enrolled nearly 148,000 children and adolescents from displaced and host communities—that is more than triple the number of students in the Washington, DC public school system. We are also partnering with the Bangladeshi NGO BRAC to provide community-based education for an additional 10,500 children—60 percent of whom are girls—who have never attended school. Despite our efforts, education needs are massive. Over half of all children aged 6 to 15—or 1.8 million children—are not in school in South Sudan, the highest proportion in any country.

As a result of the conflict, South Sudan has experienced one of the steepest declines in media freedoms in the world and there are very few independent outlets for citizens to receive unbiased information. We have adapted our efforts to expand access to information on everyday needs during the crisis. For instance, our partner Inter-news created an innovative and low-tech service that offers information to displaced people—by motorized bike and loudspeaker—on topics such as the peace process, IDP services, and how to mitigate health threats such as cholera.

We have expanded access to independent radio in all of South Sudan's 10 states. At a community radio station we support in Northern Bahr el Ghazal—Nhomlaau FM—a group of 64 women recently walked for hours to communicate on air about their frustration over having to walk 12 hours from their homes to collect water. Their remarks sparked intense community debate throughout the day as others called into the station to discuss the problem of water access. The radio station later reached out to the area's governor who promised to visit the affected area within a month to resolve their water problem. These efforts are critical to ensuring that South Sudanese can engage and speak freely about their concerns, and sustain the space for democratic debate and participation in South Sudan.

We continue to provide basic health services that are the only option most South Sudanese have to access health care because the government has failed to prioritize health in its own budget and procurements. Last month, USAID signed an agreement to join other donors in providing basic health services to eight states. This latest investment follows a one-year project that USAID, the United Kingdom (U.K.), and Norway recently completed to procure and deliver essential medicines across South Sudan. In addition to our longer-term support, we have also provided health services for more than 213,000 IDPs across six health clinics in protection of civilian sites, including reproductive health and gender-based violence support, and cholera and polio vaccinations to prevent disease outbreaks. We urge the government to make good on its commitments to prioritize health funding, as South Sudan has some of the poorest health outcomes in the world. The Government of South Sudan has allocated significantly less resources to health care than what other developing countries in sub-Saharan Africa allocate.

We are also helping the South Sudanese recover their livelihoods. This month, we announced a new activity to build resilience in conflict-affected states that are stable enough for early

recovery. While our previous food security work was in South Sudan's more agriculturally productive "greenbelt," this effort focuses on food insecure regions. We will help restore assets and livelihoods, build infrastructure, and bolster nutrition so that these communities can withstand climate and conflict stresses and reduce their dependency on emergency assistance.

As South Sudan's largest donor, we play an important leadership role in ensuring donor efforts are based on shared objectives. Two weeks ago, the Department of State and USAID convened global donors and the World Bank and International Monetary Fund to discuss options to promote transparent public financial management and stabilize South Sudan's economy. At USAID, we take seriously the need to integrate conflict-sensitive principles into our efforts across all sectors. We are also working with the U.K. Department for International Development (DFID) to create a resource center with research and advisory capabilities to assist all donors in incorporating conflict sensitivity into program design and implementation to ensure that their assistance does not exacerbate tensions.

We all want to see South Sudan move forward. We continue to help the people of South Sudan at the grassroots. We hope that as the new transitional government takes shape we can help put South Sudan back on a path to long-term development.

Paving the Way for Peace

As Ambassador Booth highlighted, paving a way for a transitional justice process will be critical for South Sudan's future. It is important to recognize that the South Sudanese people are heavily traumatized not just from the current conflict, but from prior conflicts dating back decades. The people of South Sudan must come to terms with the effects of trauma and rebuild ties between communities in order to lay the foundation for long-term peace and reconciliation. USAID has piloted a program that helps communities understand the impact of trauma and how it perpetuates historic grievances. The program helps communities overcome inter-communal tensions that have fueled cycles of violence and revenge killings.

We have long collaborated with faith-based organizations in South Sudan and today they play an important role in peacebuilding. Religious organizations are some of the most widely trusted institutions in South Sudan and they have reach and influence in communities nationwide. In March, we announced a new effort with Catholic Relief Services to support the South Sudan Council of Churches as it engages 1.25 million South Sudanese in community healing and reconciliation processes. We launched a National Peace Center that will provide citizens with events and materials on global peace processes and implementation strategies. We are also supporting the Catholic University of South Sudan to convene public discussions on healing and transitional justice in Juba, as part of a larger program to encourage youth and other citizens to participate in efforts to respond to and mitigate conflict.

To ensure a lasting peace, women must have a voice in the peace process, and USAID has worked hard to promote their participation. For example, a USAID partner in Central Equatoria organized a rally to encourage women's political participation. Their advocacy led to the nomination of two additional women to local governance structures and the establishment of a Gender Desk Office at the local police station. We directly support women's groups—such as

the South Sudan Women's Empowerment Network—to disseminate the peace agreement. We also worked with the Women's Monthly Forum to coordinate women's advocacy around the peace process, including efforts to strengthen female representation in key peace agreement mechanisms.

Conclusion

The U.S. Government is committed to saving the lives and aspirations of the people of South Sudan and to paving the way for peace and development wherever possible. The Transitional Government of National Unity must take on the responsibility of setting the country on the right course. The stakes have never been higher—and the people of South Sudan cannot afford one more day of bloodshed.

We urge the government to prioritize humanitarian access so that we can reach those who most need our help. We appreciate the work of our Department of State colleagues who have engaged key local actors to make real gains in humanitarian access.

We also appreciate the support provided by this Committee and other members of Congress on behalf of the American people. Our assistance to people in desperate need in South Sudan is saving lives. We will continue to invest in the people of South Sudan and their efforts to build a more prosperous, peaceful future.