

DRC: Interview with Jean-Marie Guehenno, UN Under-Secretary-General for Peacekeeping Operations.

KINSHASA, 5 Jun 2003 (IRIN) - The UN Under-Secretary-General for Peacekeeping Operations, Jean-Marie Guehenno, concluded on 31 May in Kinshasa, capital of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), a regional tour that also included visits to eastern and northeastern DRC, Uganda, Rwanda, and South Africa, in advance of the deployment of a multinational emergency intervention force authorised by the UN Security Council for the troubled northeastern DRC city of Bunia. In this interview with IRIN, Guehenno provided details about what this multinational force would look like. He also emphasised the importance he placed on having Congolese and regional leaders actively involved in restoring peace to the Great Lakes region.

QUESTION: The UN Security Council on 30 May authorised the deployment of a multinational force to Bunia. When do you expect the deployment of this force to begin?

ANSWER: The resolution was just approved yesterday, so little time has been lost. I know that there was a meeting held on Friday among countries willing to contribute troops, so things have proceeded rapidly with regard to finalising the composition of the force. The countries contributing to the force handle military planning. I think this force will be deployed very soon, but I do not have a precise date because it is the countries contributing to this force that will decide on the exact date of deployment. In the meantime, however, our Uruguayan contingent is doing a magnificent job in Bunia. I believe that the people of Bunia have already begun to realise that the international community is coming to their aid.

Q: Is there not a risk that fighting could resume if the deployment of this multinational force takes too long, because so far the UN presence in Bunia has not hindered belligerents from fighting, despite the ceasefire they signed in Dar es Salaam?

A: Those who would resume fighting while the Security Council has unanimously adopted this resolution are taking on a very serious responsibility. Today, there is no longer a culture of impunity. Whoever thinks that he can assassinate, that he can drug young children and use them for armed combat, whoever thinks they can get away with this will find himself before a tribunal one day. I believe that everyone would be well advised to follow the path to peace rather than that to armed conflict.

Q: Before the most recent eruption of major fighting in Bunia, there were about 800 UN Uruguayan peacekeepers along with 700 police officers dispatched by Kinshasa, but that did not prevent new clashes. Do you think that the multinational force to be sent will be sufficient to dissuade militiamen from resorting once more to violence?

A: First of all, the deployment of the 800 UN peacekeepers took place after the eruption of these hostilities. When they began, there were about 400 UN peacekeepers in place. And as for the Congolese police officers, I do not think they

were prepared for the situation that faced them. We think that under the current conditions in Bunia, it is very important that an international force be deployed to Bunia and that its deployment beyond Ituri at present is not advisable.

Q: What will become of these combatants, of whom the majority are children, after the deployment of the UN emergency intervention force?

A: Reintegration programmes for these children will be needed. Of course, they will first need to surrender their arms. The use of child soldiers is a horrible thing, and unfortunately we have seen the phenomenon in many of Africa's conflicts, such as in Sierra Leone. During a visit to Sierra Leone, I visited a magnificent programme run by an NGO that was taking care of demobilised child soldiers - some of whom their families refused to take in because of the crimes the children had committed - in an effort to give them back their childhood, which had been stolen from them by criminals using them as combatants.

Q: How will the task of the emergency intervention force be different from that of the UN Mission in the DRC, known as MONUC?

A: This [multinational force] is a mission that is authorised under Chapter Seven of the UN Charter, which means that it is a peace enforcement mission rather than a peacekeeping mission. So there is a major difference: the conditions for action by the emergency intervention force are totally different from the conditions for action by the MONUC Uruguayan contingent. Furthermore, because this will be a peace enforcement mission, they will be better armed than are the Uruguayans. They will have far greater means to impose peace, to stabilise Bunia, than the Uruguayans - who despite all these limitations have succeeded in making the difference between life and death for thousands of Bunia residents - have available to them.

Q: During your meeting with Rwandan President Paul Kagame were you able to obtain his assurances that there would be no obstacles put in the way of the intervention force's deployment?

A: President Kagame wrote a letter to the UN Secretary-General in which he clearly stated that Rwanda would happily welcome the deployment of a multinational force. And the concerns [Kagame] expressed in his letter, as well as those expressed in a letter from the Ugandan President [Yoweri Museveni] have been taken into account in the Security Council resolution. I believe that the position Rwanda has taken on this matter at the highest level is perfectly clear. We are counting on the active involvement of Rwanda to ensure that all necessary measures are taken to prevent any further escalation of violence so that the situation of the civilian populations of Bunia and all of Ituri improves.

Q: France has already stated that it would be willing to lead the multinational force in Bunia, and other countries have expressed interest in participating. Can you clarify which countries, exactly, will be taking part in this force, and how the deployment of this force will take place? Will all troops arrive at the same time, or will the deployment take place in stages?

A: The composition of this force is still being decided. According to the information I have, French troops will comprise one half of the force, while other countries will comprise the other half. I know that a meeting among nations contributing troops was held on Friday in New York. As I am in Kinshasa, I therefore do not yet have all the details on the outcome of this meeting. However, I think that we will see the participation in this force of both African and European, as well as possibly Asian and Latin American soldiers. There is a truly global mobilisation underway. I think that this will enable the force to not only be efficient, but to be a force that demonstrates the engagement of the entire world for Congo.

Q: You visited Bunia, where two MONUC military observers were brutally murdered and there was widespread talk of a possible genocide. What might be the consequences for these crimes?

A: There have been horrific crimes in Bunia and Ituri [District], massacres where the ethnic dimension was present. The deployment of this emergency intervention force has, of course, the objective of stabilising the situation in Bunia and preventing such atrocities from continuing. You have also raised the question of impunity and the necessity to judge those who have incited and used armed groups to commit these crimes that I have seen with my own eyes: children who must be no older than 11 years carrying weapons that are bigger than they are, drugged before being sent into combat. There has been a disgraceful manipulation of innocent children, and those responsible must not go unpunished.

MONUC is at present gathering all information available on such crimes, including the murder of our military observers, which was a hateful crime. What could be more hateful than attacking unarmed observers - who are always unarmed and put their trust in the various parties to the conflict for their security? What is more hateful than killing a partner who has come to a country in an effort to bring peace? Such crimes must not go unpunished. We must begin by gathering all information available, and one day there will be a tribunal. There is the International Criminal Court. There is the possibility for judgment some day, and I believe this day will come. For the moment, what is most important is to stabilise the situation and stop these crimes, to end the terror that can be seen in the faces of the women and children of Bunia, such as those I saw while visiting camps for the displaced.

Q: Those who are fighting in Ituri were not parties to the inter-Congolese dialogue and believe that their points of view were not taken into account by the peace agreement. What do you plan to do to ensure that their demands are taken into account in order to bring an end to hostilities?

A: That is an important question, the relation of the inter-Congolese dialogue and the situation in Ituri. The current dynamic in Ituri is not represented in the inter-Congolese dialogue. I think that the inauguration of an interim administration in Ituri is a very important political act. I met the president of the administrative assembly of Ituri, as well as the coordinator and the other people responsible for this administration. I believe that these well-intentioned people can bring about a new political dynamic in Ituri. It is necessary that all those who wish to play a role in the politics of Ituri join this process and commit themselves to it totally. By doing this, I am convinced that with

the stabilisation of the situation in Ituri a link can be made between this local process and that national process.

Q: The resolution authorising the deployment of the multinational force is valid only until 1 September 2003 and only in Bunia, not the rest of Ituri District. However, as massacres have occurred outside of Bunia, do you think that the presence of the intervention force in Bunia will be sufficient to prevent massacres from occurring in the rest of Ituri?

A: Although the deployment of the emergency intervention force is planned until 1 September 2003, the UN resolution also notes that the deployment of the second MONUC task force should be taking place in the meantime - a first contingent to be deployed in Kindu and a second to be deployed in Ituri. Therefore, there will be other MONUC military forces in place to contribute to the stabilization of the region. However, the military strategy -that of deploying a multinational force - must by all means be accompanied by a political strategy. When Uganda withdrew from Bunia and the majority of Ituri, the interim administration in Ituri had just come into being; it had not yet been consolidated. It is imperative that at the same time the international community is deploying this multinational force, that it also provide all necessary support to the interim administration so that the political process sought by the people of Ituri take root. Furthermore, it is essential that all national and regional stakeholders support the political process, as called for by the UN resolution. I think that the international community will continue to remain engaged with these stakeholders to ensure that these promises are kept.

The deployment of a multinational force is only one aspect of a greater strategy by the international community to obtain the full cooperation of all actors who have an influence on Ituri and to bring humanitarian aid to the people of Ituri in need.

This force will be deployed to Bunia and not to all of Ituri because Bunia is the heart of Ituri, and a consolidation of the political process in Bunia should have a positive effect throughout the region if all elements of the global strategy are put in place.

The attention of the entire world is today focused on Ituri, and we shall see if the violence in Bunia spreads to the rest of Ituri. If this does happen, I am convinced that it would not go unnoticed by the Security Council, we would not fail to inform the Council of any information we had regarding the situation in the rest of Ituri. I believe that by deploying this force in Ituri, the Council has sent a very strong message to all that this is not simply a call for peace, but a demand. Starting with Bunia, this is a message for all of Ituri.

Q: You have said that the humanitarian situation in Ituri and in Bunia remains very worrisome. What emergency action does the UN plan on taking to prevent a worst-case scenario from occurring?

A: The UN's humanitarian commitment to Bunia is a very strong one. During my visit to Bunia I was able to see the role that MONUC has been playing in the humanitarian effort at the most difficult time. When it is not possible for civilian personnel to remain in place because of violent combat, it is the soldiers of MONUC who have distributed food to the people of Bunia. It is the soldiers of MONUC who have protected the food

warehouses that would otherwise have been pillaged, causing even greater suffering. It is MONUC that has ensured the security of the emergency hospital that is located next to the MONUC base. And now, in the shadow of MONUC, there is a major humanitarian effort underway. I know, for example, that the NGO Medecins Sans Frontieres has just set up a hospital in Bunia. There is also a German NGO, AgroAction, which is playing a very important role in the purification of water and distribution of food in Bunia. An international mobilisation has begun in Bunia, before the multinational force has even been deployed, thanks largely to the courage of MONUC's Uruguayan contingent there.

With the deployment of the multinational force, I think that these humanitarian efforts can be further increased in Bunia in partnership with those responsible for Ituri - the interim Ituri administration, which is the political body that must define the needs of the people of Ituri. It is very important that the people of Ituri take control of their own destiny, with the international community providing assistance sought by the interim Ituri administration.

Q: What was the objective of your tour of the region, which took you to DRC, Uganda, Rwanda and South Africa?

A: This is my fourth visit to the DRC. This is a visit that once more bears witness to the commitment of the United Nations to end this terrible war that has destroyed the Congo. I believe that the upcoming visit of the Security Council will serve as further testament by the international community of its commitment to the DRC. This commitment can also be seen in the fact that I am here when I was supposed to be in New York for the international day of peacekeepers and peacekeeping, as I am responsible for all peacekeeping missions. I wanted to be in the DRC because I appreciate the importance of MONUC in UN peacekeeping efforts. In the 50-plus years that such operations have existed, some 1,800 people have died in peacekeeping missions. MONUC has lost 18 such people, including the most recent tragic loss of our military observers in Ituri. Thus, the commitment is there: sometimes with tragic incidents. Therefore I wanted to be here as testament to the solidarity of UN headquarters with our people in the field, and to see for myself what support might be necessary at this critical juncture in the DRC peace process.

In just a few days I have crossed the DRC. I also went to Uganda, Rwanda, and South Africa. On the political front, I met [DRC] President [Joseph] Kabila. I met all the members of the follow-up committee [of the inter-Congolese dialogue], even if I did not meet all of them together as I would have wished, although I know that will come shortly. I met the international committee to accompany the transition. Thus, a vast array of political contacts made in the DRC.

I met presidents [Yoweri] Museveni [of Uganda] and [Paul] Kagame [of Rwanda]. I held political discussions in Pretoria [South Africa]. I also wanted to visit the field. I was in Bunia, where I was able to see firsthand what the words "human suffering" mean, as with the tragic situation of people who have sought refuge under our courageous contingent of Uruguayan soldiers. I saw the reality for myself, because a gun battle erupted while I was in Bunia. I saw the blood that has been spilled. I believe that MONUC's presence has made all the difference in preventing much

larger massacres that could have occurred. It is a situation that remains horrific, but which has been contained thanks to the courage of the UN peacekeepers.

It is clear that MONUC is a mission with troops who are not combat troops and with a mandate that does not authorise combat and thus can not truly stabilise the situation as is necessary in Bunia and as has now been demanded by the Security Council.

I also visited [the eastern DRC city of] Kindu on Friday, which is going to play a very important role because it is from Kindu that the first MONUC task force will deploy. In Kindu I again saw the commitment of the international community because I saw the deployment of South African troops, I saw the inauguration of a hospital built for MONUC by China, which is also contributing logistically to MONUC with military engineers in Bukavu, which is very much appreciated. I believe that all of this was very important for me because it showed a genuine commitment on the part of the international community. I also saw in Kindu the first elements of an air support unit provided by Sweden.

In the city of Kindu, all continents of the world are united in solidarity because Africa, Asia, Europe and the Americas - there are also Uruguayans in Kindu - are all there for the Congo.

Q: What conclusions have you drawn from this visit to the region?

A: The principal conclusion of this visit is that we are now at a turning point in Congo. A turning point because the commitment of the international community is there, it is visible. A moment ago I mentioned the deployment of our troops in Kindu and throughout eastern DRC and the reinforcement that is currently underway within MONUC. I would also like to draw attention to Resolution 1484 adopted unanimously on Friday by the Security Council, authorising the deployment of a multinational force in Bunia and at the airport of Bunia. It is an international force acting under Chapter Seven with a change in the nature of engagement of the international community with a mandate to stabilise Bunia and thereby bring a halt to deterioration of the situation in Ituri.

Another conclusion that I have drawn from this mission is that the commitment of the international community must now respond to a similar commitment from the Congolese, on one hand, and the rest of the region, on the other. This commitment must manifest itself in various ways. I believe that what I have said about the commitment of the international community - be it the authorisation for deployment of a multinational force in Bunia or be it the current deployment of MONUC troops in eastern DRC - that this would not have been possible if the international community had not seen the Congolese engaging in a political process. A national political process with the Pretoria agreement, a local political process with the interim administration in Ituri - it is essential that these political commitments now become concrete realities.

I was very concerned with the suspension of the work of the follow-up commission. I am happy to see that following the declaration of the secretary-general of RCD-Goma [Rassemblement congolais pour la democratie rebel movement] the follow-up commission can resume its work. It is fundamental that all Congolese now come to

the table to discuss the immediate installation of a national transition government, which can only be done if each party agrees to be flexible and practical, as is necessary with any negotiation. By this it is understood that mutual concessions must be made in order to reach an accord that is agreeable to everyone. Therefore, the installation of this national transitional government is, I believe, a priority for the Congo and a priority for the international community that will be following very closely the manner which progress is or is not made.

The other test with respect to the commitment of the Congolese and of the region is the situation on the ground. I was encouraged by the commitment of presidents Museveni and Kagame to mobilise all of their influence toward stabilising the situation in Ituri. I believe that everyone must make the maximum effort to ensure that the political path replaces the military path, because there is no other option than the political option. I must say that in discussions I held with MONUC authorities in Kindu, my fears regarding the situation in the Kivus was, unfortunately, confirmed. The situation in the Kivus remains very dangerous. We have received reports of troop movements, military offensives and counter-offensives. It is clear that the programme for disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration [DDR], that is an essential element of the mandate of MONUC cannot be successfully implemented in the middle of armed combat. Fighting must stop. Peace must be established throughout eastern DRC. How can it be that people who are preparing to form a government of national unity are at the same time waging war in the Kivus? The international community will be watching very carefully. The evolution of the situation of fighting and violence in the Kivus will be a very powerful signal that the Congolese send to their neighbours and to the international community.

In conclusion, I would say that the elements are present so that peace might be restored after so many tragic years of war. The price paid by the Congolese people is immense. There can no longer be a culture of impunity for those who have incited war crimes and in some cases crimes against humanity. All parties must now assume their responsibilities. I think that peace is possible. The international community is ready and willing to help. It began to do this on Friday by authorising the deployment of this multinational force. It began to do this by reinforcing MONUC in allowing it to have the means to implement a DDR programme in the east of the country. I also saw to what degree the deployment of a MONUC contingent is an element of stabilisation and encouragement for the population. About one year ago I visited Kindu as MONUC was beginning to deploy there. The difference between Kindu today and Kindu then is like night and day - then being the night, now being the day. There are more people in the streets, a greater sense of peace. There is still a great deal of poverty and misery, and great deal of work lies ahead. And this will require the commitment of the Congolese people. I believe that such efforts will find active support from the international community, which will be following the situation very closely to see that genuine progress is being made on the ground.

I was very encouraged by President Kabila's commitment to peace. I was very encouraged by the contact I had with other members of the follow-up commission [of the inter-Congolese dialogue]. Thus I think that the will is there. Now that will must be translated into action on the ground, at which point a peaceful and prosperous Congo can finally rebuild itself.