



REMARKS BY MR. ISMAIL OULD CHEIKH AHMED, UNMEER SRSG, AT MICAT PRESS BRIEFING IN MONROVIA ON THURSDAY, 19TH FEBRUARY 2015 (NEAR-VERBATIM)

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Thank you very much for this opportunity to brief you about my mission and the first impression I have from this second mission to Liberia. But I would also like to say that I'm very pleased with the level of attendance by media institutions that we have got here today; the relationship with the media and the role they can play, particularly on the social mobilization and community engagement is so critical.

I think for me, you are one of the major actors in this battle against Ebola. I would therefore like to congratulate you for your contributions, because where we have reached today is also a result of your contributions and you should feel proud of that.

Mr. Minister, Ladies and Gentlemen, I am very glad to be back in Liberia. This is my second visit. I was here in January during the height of the outbreak in Grand Cape Mount.

Today, Grand Cape Mount has gone 21 days plus – actually above 30 days today– without new confirmed cases, and this is excellent news. I was also very pleased to hear from the minister about the launch of the decentralization program yesterday which is also an excellent news and illustrates, again, the gains that we getting out of this crisis under the leadership of Her Excellency, Madam President.

Liberia is very close to getting to zero. This is a testament to the President, government and community leaders, and commitment of the Liberian people to keep up public practices and modified social and behavioural change.

We also need to keep in mind that the fight against Ebola is not only about getting to zero but the maintenance of the required, continued commitment from all sides, that governments build up sustained systems and capacity for improved health services delivery, that health workers practice infection prevention and control protocols; that community leaders remind against complacency, and as I said earlier, I include community leaders, the role of the media and the Liberian people to maintain the health practices that have lowered the rate of infections – these are all the challenges that are ahead of us.

At the same time, we recognize the cooperation of Liberia's neighbouring countries, and I appreciate the continual leadership of President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf and the effort of the Mano River Union to implement strategies for sustained surveillance for possible cross-border activities, and sharing responsibilities. And that's why I was very pleased, on behalf of the Secretary-General, to attend the summit on Sunday and delivered a speech there, again emphasizing the importance of not looking at this crisis only from a sub-regional perspective.

While I will stop my introductory remarks here, I will be pleased to take few of your questions with your permission, Mr. Minister. And thank you, again, for this opportunity.

Question & Answer session

Q1 – Justice Clarke, UNMIL Radio: *When actually do we expect that either WHO or the United Nations in general, validates Liberia as Ebola-free?*

Q2 – Rudolph Gboreh, Parrot newspaper: *Having seen the Liberian response to the fight against the deadly virus, what impressions are you taking back to the Secretary General?*

Q3 – Varney Kamara, New Democrat newspaper: *You completed your comment by cautioning that complacency and other attitudes still need to be worked on to finally eradicate the virus. What is the level of your assessment of how Liberians are moving towards that? Are we complacent, or what do you think is our general attitude towards Ebola?*

In regard to when we expect Liberia to be declared Ebola-free, I think nobody would like to go on forecasting at this point. It's for a very simple reason. This virus has surprised us in the past. There are many reasons to worry even if we have one case. As you know, today we have on average (for the last two or three weeks), three to five cases in Liberia which is less than one case a day. But still, as we all know, this whole crisis started from just one case and we always have to be careful. The big success now in Liberia is that I think all the cases come from one known chain of transmission, and that's a big difference because we can follow the tracing of contacts and surveillance. But it would be extremely pretentious to make a forecast. What is very sure, however, is that Liberia is going in the right direction and that the national leadership is doing the right thing.

I have been saying from my day-one, in fact on my first visit, that there are three things that orient my vision: national leadership, community leadership and the resilience shown by the people of Liberia, all of which we have seen here, and the third being coordination. Also, the Liberian president and her Guinean and Sierra Leonean counterparts have decided that there will be no declaration of "Ebola-free" until the three countries come out of it, together. And I have to tell you that this is a big challenge today because we have over one hundred cases today if we count the countries together and, therefore, we need to make sure to get that result in the three countries rather than declaring just one. So I would say that we are getting there ...we are very close, but one has to remain extremely vigilant.

On the question of complacency, I believe that, frankly, from what I am hearing from my various reports and the colleagues I have been meeting, I don't think anybody needs to remind Liberians not to be complacent. Everybody is aware and from what I am seeing, the level of awareness is very strong. But the biggest risk we have is the second degree of fatigue. People reach that a point wherein we are so close yet this virus is very, very vicious and as with Polio, it's always much easier to go from one hundred to ten, than from ten to zero. The last ten digits are always the most difficult part because there is fatigue, there is complacency and there is also fatigue among donors and even external partners. But honestly what I am seeing today, there is nothing worrying me in terms of either government or public awareness except that I'm saying simply everybody is becoming frustrated about why there is still one or two cases in some places. But we call it the bumpy road to zero when you still have one or two cases going up and down. I think it's really important to realize that today our biggest enemies are complacency and fatigue.

Q4 – Alex Zogar, Bloomberg: *Ebola disrupted investments, the economy, education, the health sector as well as livelihoods; what are your immediate plans to tackle Liberia’s post-Ebola challenges?*

Q5 – Rose Stubberfield, Super FM Radio: *I would like to know as to whether you are pleased with the support of the international community.*

Q6 – Wilfred, Liberia News Agency (LINA): *Why is UNMEER’s headquarters in Ghana rather than in any of the affected countries?*

As you know, my colleague Helen Clark who is the head of UNDP and head of the UNDG has been asked by the Secretary-General to lead the assessment on the post-Ebola recovery plan, and her team was on the ground to conduct a pre-assessment, and they are now emphasizing some of the big priorities for the next phase. Beyond beating the virus, we must take the lessons learned from this: if we don’t strengthen the health system, if we don’t take this as an opportunity to look at the basic services.... Look at what the President did yesterday by launching the decentralization program, realizing that one of the big problems we have in this country is the too much focusing on Monrovia. Now we need to make sure that the basic services are close to the citizens even in the most remote areas.

So all these lessons are now compiled in what we call the Post-Ebola Plan. There will be a first discussion on that at the 3rd of March conference in Brussels which is convened by the European Union but co-chaired by the UN, the African Union and the three heads of states who, by the way, have requested President Sirleaf to speak on their behalf. By the way the three presidents decided to look at three essential points. First to say, we want to come as a bloc, we don’t want to be treated as individual countries because our faith is together. Second, they want a Marshall Plan... beyond this, what do we need to do? How do we create sustainable health systems, job opportunities, and revive the market and investment opportunities? And the third is the whole discussion around the debt relief and how the three countries can benefit from total cancellation of the debts. So, all these elements will be presented by President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf. And we are all saying that there is or has been a disaster; the societies have been affected. But we are now finally hoping that with this loss of lives, this is an opportunity for the future.

I have to say as head of UNMEER, and I am basing this on our assessment that very clearly we have to acknowledge even if we say there was some delay at the beginning, but when the International Community woke up with the call by the Secretary General to create UNMEER, since then we have seen a major support from the international community. I have to say we have seen a high level of solidarity in Liberia, for example with the US, with the EU, with the British and French governments, China and a number of other countries, through considering the crisis as an international issue.

UNMEER was never here to stay, and we have realized that the agency has beefed up so much the capacity of other institutions involved in the response to the Ebola crisis in the sub-region.
