**At UN, No Answers on Sudan Election Flaws Hostage Takers of Peacekeepers**

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UNITED NATIONS, April 19 -- On Sudan, the UN on Monday dodged questions not only about irregularities in the elections to which it ostensibly provided technical assistance, but even about its own peacekeepers taken hostage.

While it appears that the hostage takes are government affiliates faux rebels in Darfur, UN spokesman Martin Nesirky doggedly maintained that the UN is working with the government to secure their release. He did not disclose whether the UN or South Africa, from which the peacekeepers come, is considering paying ransom, financial or political.

From the April 19 UN noon briefing transcript:

Inner City Press: the so-called Sudan troika -- it’s the United Kingdom, Norway and the United States -- they put out a statement this morning by the United States State Department, saying that the elections in Sudan failed to meet international standards, and this, the quote I wanted to ask you about: “We regret that the National Elections Commission (NEC) did not do more to prevent and address such problems prior to voting.” Since it was described that the UN was providing technical assistance to the NEC, what does the UN say of this criticism implicitly of its own work, working with the NEC and the statement that elections didn’t meet international standards?

Spokesperson Nesirky: I think there are two things here. One is that, most importantly, the elections, despite the reported irregularities and other difficulties, took place without any major incident of violence. I think that’s important to note. The second is that, you’ve mentioned it yourself, the UN’s role was indeed to provide technical assistance. And the UN did so. It was for the National Election Commission actually to conduct the elections and that’s what they did. Anything beyond that is trying to divide things a little bit, and I don’t think that that’s the way that we would see it. We would see it as the UN providing electoral assistance, technical electoral assistance, and then it was for the National Election Commission to then conduct the elections.

Inner City Press: But how does the UN judge the efficacy of its technical assistance other than by the performance of the entities to which it provides technical assistance, you know what I mean? I am not actually trying to divide it. I am trying to say, if you’re in the business of helping the entity, what’s the response to the criticism of what they, are you saying that the NEC didn’t follow the advice of the UN or…?

Spokesperson: No, I said what I said. Matthew, I think one of the points here is that we’ve said all the way along that this is extremely complex and an extremely challenging exercise for all concerned. And what we’ve been providing is advice on fairly technical matters, including voter registration, and the counting, and tabulation and announcement of results, and training plans and materials, this kind of thing -- and helping to provide assistance, technical assistance for voter education. But ultimately, it is the National Election Commission that makes the decisions and then runs the process.

Inner City Press: Also on Sudan, I wanted to -- last week there were these reports of a ransom demand for the missing peacekeepers, and the group that’s listed as making the demand turns out to apparently be kind of a Government proxy; it’s really a rebel group. It was accused of being a pro-Government entity in Darfur. I’m wondering, since this time has gone by, what can you say about the status of these peacekeepers? And there is one South African media account saying that the UN has requested a media ban of any discussion of this hostage taking. Is that accurate or not accurate?

Spokesperson: What I can tell you is that our colleagues on the ground there are clearly very well aware of the fact that four of our peacekeepers, police officers as you pointed out, South African nationals, are missing. We are clearly in contact with the Government of Sudan and, as in all such cases, it’s the host Government that is the one that is responsible for helping to ensure that people being held or missing are returned safely.

Inner City Press: Okay. So, I mean, this idea that there is a media ban, is there a media ban?

Spokesperson: I have told you what I’ve told you, which is that the United Nations is working with the host Government; it’s for the host Government to do its utmost as in all such cases to help to ensure that people who work for the United Nations are returned.

But the kidnappers, it appears clear, are a government affiliated militia... Watch this site.

Footnote: US President Barack Obama was meeting Scott Gration on April 19 about the elections, but nothing has yet been announced. Watch this site.