

Transcription of Leaked Audio Recording of Tigray Meeting Held by the Ethiopian Country Offices of Various UN Agencies on March 26th, 2021

Acronyms

- UNCT – United Nations Country Team
 - <https://ethiopia.un.org/en/about/our-team>
- UNFPA – United Nations Population Fund
- OHCHR – Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights
- EHRC- Ethiopian Human Rights Commission

Participants

1. Maureen Achieng, IOM, Chief of Mission to Ethiopia and Representative to the African Union, UNECA and IGAD
2. Letty Chiwara, UN Women, Representative to Ethiopia, AU and ECA
3. Dennia Gayle, UNFPA, Country representative to Ethiopia
4. Turhane Saleh UNDP Resident Representative
5. Charles Ndiema Kwemoi, OHCHR, Human Rights Officer,
6. Kwesi Sansculotte-Greenidge, Peace Advisor
7. Alexio Musindo Director, Country Office for Ethiopia

START OF AUDIO

Maureen Achieng

We would all have seen the IASQ principal statements on this. UN women and UNFPA are working very hard on trying to ensure that some of the work that **we are doing even if not directly geared towards combating the incidents, or mitigating the incidents of sexual violence, could help to contribute or to mitigate the incidents of it.** We know that UN women and UNFPA are both part of the early recovery initiative and some of the actions proposed under early recovery will help to – if implemented – will help to mitigate the incidents of sexual violence being perpetrated. **Important to note is that we don't really have verified information, clearly something is happening but in terms of data, statistics, a lot of it remains anecdotal,** hence the importance of also getting OHCHR, I don't know whether they are on the call to eventually feedback information to us based on the assessments that they will be carrying out jointly with the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission. So, I'll invite Letty and Dennia of the UNFPA to give a brief on that. I know that Dennia is held up at another meeting and might be joining in if she hasn't already, but Letty for sure is online. So, Letty, perhaps we start with you.

Letty Chiwara

Thank you very much Maureen and good morning colleagues. I think you've actually articulated the objective of this organization. It was really for me and Dennia to bring to the attention of the UNCT that there has been this global attention to **the – supposed - escalating cases of sexual violence**

and rape being perpetrated against women and girls and in some instances also media hype – I would call it – around rape being used as a weapon of war, which we know, sometimes is true, sometimes it's not true. You take it with a pinch of salt but there is always some element of truth sometimes in the things that we read out of media. But we cannot take it all as is. Having said so, it is definitely clear, based on the principles of the IASQ which are 11 agencies, we have recently issued that statement which we shared with all of you. Also, (inaudible) Condemning ... (inaudible). accountability... **definitely elements of truth, even if we don't have data. But anecdotal evidence tells us it's true, it's happening.** We are also hearing, particularly (inaudible) ... CSO's who are providing a one-stop service center for survivors of violence, **some of the horrific incidents** (inaudible).

[resumes only with audio following discussion on connectivity]

That said, the objective of bringing this to the UNCT is two-fold. One is how do we as the UNCT also have our own common position around what's happening to women and girls in Tigray? Building on what our ISAQ principles have already written as a statement, if we were to be asked as a member of the UNCT or a country team or EHCT, if we were to be asked by either media or government or anybody, around how to respond to this, what do we say? How do we come up with a common position and common statement to allow us to respond in a uniform way? So, that's number one. Number two is to also look at what are some of the programmatic actions that not only UNFPA and UN Women are doing on the ground, which includes of course what we are doing under the Prevention of Sexual Exploitation and Abuse but also other programmatic actions we are doing on providing services to survivors. What else is being done which could actually help to reduce the risk of women and girls being raped or being exposed to potential rape. I think that could also help us as a UNCT to be able to say, you know what...

[inaudible]

In conclusion, what I want to say – I don't want to go into details of what we are doing – I think we don't have much time for that. We are doing a lot of work, but I want to say in conclusion what... (inaudible) ... **what are some of the actions we are doing that could help to ensure that women and girls are ... (Inaudible) ... protected from violence and of course they have these services they need, once - if they are attacked.** Those are the two areas of conversation that I would expect to get guidance and support from the colleagues, to help ... (Inaudible). To move forward with putting together a strategy and messaging for ... (Inaudible)

Maureen Achieng

Thank you, Letty. I don't know whether we have Dennia on the Line?

Dennia Gayle

For me, brief also, just to add to what Letty said, I think the importance of this consolidated messaging from the UNCT because I'm sure many of you - **after the statement has gone out from our principal – have received requests for media interviews or questions from journalists around this issue and I personally am receiving quite a bit of them and most of them are very – the sensationalist kind of questioning and I think we want to have a clear messaging and we also want to add what work is being done on this. So that we move it – the conversation – away from 'how many women? What kind of violence?' and we speak to the work that has been done, as Letty rightly said so.** I am particularly interested in hearing from our colleagues how we can put that kind of

collective messaging together so that we also have a position as the UNCT on Ethiopia. Thank you very much.

[Floor opens up for comments, inputs, suggestions]

Maureen Achieng

I don't see any requests yet. Perhaps we could – to help guide the deliberation (Inaudible) UN Women and UNFPA could put together a one-pager that we review among ourselves and endorse as the agreed lines to take on this. That might help the discussion, as opposed to starting from a completely blank slate. I see a request from Charles.

Charles Ndiema Kwemai

Thank you very much Maureen Just speaking on behalf of OHCHR, I think what is clear – obviously some of you may have seen that we released a press statement – jointly with the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission, announcing the commencement of the joint investigation. We are still dealing with the logistical aspects... **it appears to be a very complex investigation**. Clearly, in the plan that we have developed, sexual violence is being prioritized as well. I think that engagements with the UN women and the relevant agencies will need to agree on what are the key aspects that we need to focus. There is also an interest from (inaudible) to provide specialized training for Ethiopian Human Rights Commission in the short run to prepare them for that kind of investigation. So yes, I think clearly, we need a common messaging, we are also being **bombarded a lot with a lot of questions from the media. And as you can imagine, in most of these questions, sexual violence will not miss – almost everywhere. We have remained general because we don't really have very concrete facts to stand on** and I think that one-pager will be interesting for us to feed into it so that we have a common messaging from the UNCT because these questions will continue to linger for a while.

Maureen Achieng

Thank you very much for that Charles. And I really hope that we can have OHCHR really support UNFPA and UN Women on this. I see Turhane and then Kwasi

Turhane Saleh

Thank you very much. I actually wanted to underline the point that you made because it's a very important one. Which is that the recovery work that we are doing right now – that the UN as a group- it would be a very good follow up also complementing the work that OHCHR is doing, very important work, to actually, as a **UN, using the statement as a background and in a sense, a mandate also, to really push on the recovery planning process, action – serious action on the issue of SGBV**. I think this is a great opportunity and we are in a good place to do it as a team. Thank you

Kwesi Sansculotte-Greenidge

Thanks. A couple of questions for clarification so that we have a shared understanding of how we go forward on this incredibly serious issue. **We see statements from the secretary general, from his spokesperson, from the special advisor on the prevention of sexual violence during conflict, from the special advisor on the prevention of (inaudible) responsibility to protect as well as the prevention of genocide. All of which said that there are credible reports of large-scale sexual**

violence taking place in Tigray. But in the introduction to this, the framing of it was that these hadn't been verified. **How do we go from not verified too credible? I don't think it's a physical examination of these women's bodies, so how do we do that as the UN? When do we move from it being that (Inaudible)?**

The second is that – If Maureen and Letty could say a bit more about the term that they used around **media sensationalisation of the rape cases. How does that fit into our positioning as the UN and what exactly is meant by that media sensationalisation? Because I am not following how that fits into this discussion exactly.** Thanks.

Maureen Achieng

Thank you Kwesi... Alexio

Alexio Musindo

I'd like to make a suggestion for a one-pager, Frequently Asked Questions that can help us. But, I thought, if we have that very specific on the violence against women that it could also be worth thinking to have another Frequently Asked Questions on the whole Tigray issue in general so that we have common answers as UNCT when we meet with partners.

Maureen Achieng

Thank you Alexio, great suggestion. I think the second one will be much tougher to reach agreement on, but I fully agree with you, it would help for us (to) have something of a common position. But I'll ask Letty and Dennia to come in.

Letty Chiwara

Thank you very much colleagues for all your questions and comments. I think the questions are mainly from Kwesi. I'll frame the responses based on (inaudible) ... Alexio (inaudible) very good idea for us to have a frequently asked questions, so that our responses are therefore. And to that effect, request those colleagues who have been particularly – who've had questions or requests from media or other partners on this issue to share with us what were those questions, so that it can help me and Dennia and our teams to look at how do we begin to respond to some of those questions and of course we will add others. I heard some colleagues who have said they've already been receiving questions from media, so I think that would help us to prepare the one-pager with Frequently Asked Questions and I appreciate Alexio your suggestion for framing the one-pager in the form of a FAQ.

Going back to what Kwesi said, **one of the frequently asked questions will be “how many women have been raped? Or is it true that women have been raped?”**. So, how do you respond as a UN agency to that question? And again, it goes to the question that Kwesi was raising, **our principals at some level are saying there is verified evidence and then media would ask us “where is the source of the evidence and what is the evidence?”** So, and I think we really need to be super careful. Unless we have the **verified evidence, to be able to say ‘yes, there is real data or evidence of this happening to so many women and in this context’**. And I think up until such a time when **OHCHR and the Commission for human rights (EHRC) have finished their investigations, I would not feel comfortable as a UN entity or as a whole UN for us within Ethiopia, to begin to**

say we have evidence, because we don't, in our hands. Something that has been done jointly with a recognized entity within government, which is of course, the office of the human rights commission, the commission of Human Rights for Ethiopia – (EHRC)- and indeed I've had conversations with OHCHR as they begin to plan this joint investigation, jointly with government and we've already started to look at how do we ensure that the sexual violence element of that investigation on broader human rights violations is actually going to be very strong and is going to actually give us the evidence we need. So, I think that's a conversation I am even now escalating to my Head Quarters for support for tools, for methodologies and all that, that have been used globally to ensure that we get the data we need. Noting for sure that, as Charles said, that this is a very difficult area to investigate. So, specialized training is required. Specialized tools are required, sensitivity is required, even dealing with women and girls and asking them questions. So, it's not just like a census, where you go and ask, 'how many people live in this house?'. It's really very sensitive, this issue. So, therefore, Kwesi, personally, I would want to continue to lean on accepting that **yes, these things are happening on the ground, but we are working on anecdotal evidence. I don't think we have credible data to actually give in our Q & A to say that 'we know that so many women have been raped in this context and what have you.** Because so far, we don't have, until OHCHR goes on the ground and produces their report. Which of course will need to be presented to government and verified and approved and cleared before we can even refer to it. You know the whole procedure and the sensitivity with the government. That's how I would respond to Kwesi's question.

Dennia Gayle

Thank you very much and maybe for clarification, when I use the terminology of 'sensationalism' in the past two days, I have woken up to messages from journalists (inaudible) UNFPA that they're going to go out with a report on how safe houses that are supported by the UNFPA, where we protect women and girls that have been victims of sexual violence have been raided by the armed forces in Ethiopia. And that if I did not come back and explain to them the evidence, as Letty rightly said, that they were going to go out with this story....and I was like 'go out with your story". I ... (breaks up) Safe Houses have been raided by anyone. We know where they are, we are protecting these women's safety by not disclosing anything about these ... (breaks up) ... houses.

Kwesi Sansculotte-Greenidge

Unfortunately, my internet dropped, and I missed everything Dennia said, I apologize if my follow up questions have already been answered.

I worry that there is a lot of re-invention of the wheel when it comes to the Tigray crisis. Having worked jointly with the UN and others on investigations of sexual violence, mass rapes during Darfur, having built on the work that the UN had done in Bosnia and Herzegovina, I think it is odd that the procedure is that we do not accept reports as credible unless the investigation is verified by governments or done in partnership with governments. Both in Darfur as well as in Bosnia, and in Sri Lanka for that matter, the UN has done investigations on sexual violence during conflict that had been done, if not independent of these national bodies or have been done with our own investigations that were then submitted to these national bodies. Whether they accept it or not is a different thing because they're a conflict party. It is not expected that they will jump on the report on sexual violence that we do. I think we are conflating two very different issues here. One is our public positioning to the media as a UN country team around delicate questions on sexual violence and second is being in line with what our SG, special representative on Sexual Violence during Conflict, our Special representative on the

Prevention of Genocide, special rep. on the Responsibility to Protect and the High Commissioner of the UNCHR have already said on the use of sexual violence during this conflict. It would be strange for the UN country team to be out of step with that, to say something quite different from what's being said by our principals, all the way up to the SG level. I'm repeating the same questions but just to understand whether we are saying that what is coming from HQ on this is different from what we believe is happening. Is that our official position as the UN country team? And the need to separate what we say to the media from what is actually the consolidated position of the UN country team and HQ.

Maureen Achieng

Thank you very much Kwesi. I'm not sure that there is dissonance between what the principals put out and what the position as articulated by Letty & Dennia is. I'm hearing it a little differently. There is, from this end, emphasis on the need to really get these assessments with the OHCHR and the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission so that we have factual data. **There is anecdotal evidence to suggest that these things are happening, but we should be going on a lot more than anecdotal evidence. We should be basing action on evidence, really. And I mean action in terms of getting justice for the victims but again, I think, the focus of our attention as a UNCT ought on the programmatic side,** at least for most of us. On the programmatic side, to determine what are some of the programmatic actions, which, if undertaken would help to mitigate the incidents of sexual exploitation – sexual violence against women and girls in Tigray. Letty pointed to some of those. I believe UNFP and UN women are part of early recovery precisely for that purpose, among others of course. So, **we have the OHCHR assessment that will be focused on getting the evidence to ensure that we can support the government of Ethiopia as it works to bring perpetrators to book. But again, I think, we shouldn't be suggesting that there is dissonance between UNCT and what our principals are saying.** But the one pager that Letty suggested we come up with will be helpful in ensuring we all get on to the same page and we have common lines to take on this extremely sensitive topic so that we also, as a UN country team do not come across as uncoordinated.

Charles Ndiema Kwemoi

I've already said it. Of course, the investigation we are looking in has an initial period of three months. In the whole of that time, we will need a position, obviously. And I think the suggestion that you have already put on the table so that we can do a paper that will reflect the position of the UNCT is a great idea and I think we just need to do that. Thank you

Maureen Achieng

Action points on this, Lines to take on Tigray in terms of pape and sexual violence against women and girls, Lines to take on Tigray, on the Tigray crisis in general, that was Alexio's suggestion and then the third (inaudible) recording ends.

END OF AUDIO