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Secretary-General's press encounter on return from his trip to Thailand, Myanmar and China

SG: Good afternoon ladies and gentlemen. It is a pleasure to see you again.

I have come back from a humanitarian mission with two distressing but encouraging visits, one to the displaced victims of cyclone Nargis in Myanmar and one to earthquake-stricken China, witnessing with sadness two terrible tragedies.

Before I say more about my trip, let me briefly make a statement:

I regret the decision of the Government of Myanmar to extend for a sixth consecutive year the detention under house arrest of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, the General Secretary of the National League for Democracy (NLD). The sooner restrictions on Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and other political figures are lifted, the sooner Myanmar will be able to move towards inclusive national reconciliation, the restoration of democracy and full respect for human rights. In this regard, I expect my Special Adviser, Ibrahim Gambari, to continue on my behalf the process of political dialogue that he has begun with both the Myanmar authorities and Daw Aung San Suu Kyi in the context of his good offices mandate.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

My visit this time in Myanmar was to address the aftermath of cyclone Nargis while almost two million human lives are still at stake. I went there with a message of solidarity and hope, telling the survivors that “the world is with you and the world is ready to help you.” I extended my heartfelt condolences to the people, of Myanmar and of China, expressing my admiration for the courage and resilience of the survivors and all those trying to help them.

Flying over the Ayeyarwady delta, I saw first hand the effects of Cyclone Nargis. In China I visited the town of Ying Xu in the District of Chengdu, at the epicenter of the earthquake. The United Nations must work together with other Member States of the United Nations, to bring help and support to the people of both countries.

Few countries possess the capacity and resources to cope on their own with disasters of this magnitude. That is why we convened the international pledging conference. Under difficult conditions, the Government of Myanmar and the people of Myanmar have put together a functioning relief programme, together with the international community including ASEAN, that has taken the lead in our relief efforts. But much, much more needs to be done.

We have seen an outpouring of sympathy and support from the international community. In Thailand, Prime Minister Samak Sundaravej launched the Don Muang airport logistical base for help for Myanmar and planeloads of relief items have already been flown to Yangon. The government of Canada and others have agreed to transport the helicopters to be used in Myanmar. I am sure that my Humanitarian Aid coordinator, Mr. John Holmes, has given you the

details of what is being put into place for the relief efforts needed in the next 6 months, and to help the Myanmar people in rehabilitating and reconstructing their country.

I have been much encouraged by my discussions with Myanmar's authorities in recent days. Senior General Than Shwe agreed to allow all international aid workers to operate freely and without hindrance. We agreed to establish several forward logistics hubs and to open new air, sea and road links to the most affected areas.

The Myanmar government appears to be moving toward the right direction, to implement these accords. Some international aid workers and NGOs have already gone into the regions of the Ayeyarwady delta, without any problem. I hope –and I believe –that this marks a new spirit of cooperation and partnership between Myanmar and the international community as a whole.

Prompt and full implementation will be the key. I will be fully, continuously and personally engaged. I look forward to returning, before too long, to see for myself the progress we have made.

Sunday's pledging conference was a good beginning. Apart from the tens of millions of dollars pledged by the Member States, it was an important exercise towards building greater trust, confidence and cooperation between the Government of Myanmar and the international community. I saw a strong unity of purpose and a sense of urgency at the meeting.

There was unanimous agreement on the need to scale up urgently and very significantly the current relief efforts. The participants also expect the Government to act in the spirit of that new agreement.

We have, here, a chance for a new beginning. We should make the most of it.

I will be traveling again tomorrow to attend the first annual review of the International Compact with Iraq, which will be held in Sweden - a five-year package of economic and political reforms launched last May in Egypt. Upon return from Stockholm, I will again head to Rome this Sunday to attend the FAO summit meeting to deal with another serious issue: the global food crisis.

Thank you very much for your support, and I will be happy to answer your questions.

Q: Mr. Secretary-General, when you went to Myanmar, you went under a cloud that the Myanmar government was not cooperating, and that you were going to ask them for full access and full cooperation. While you were there, did you raise the issue that you want complete and total access and cooperation from them, and while you were talking to them, did you talk to them about Aung San Suu Kyi? The statement that you just gave belies that you did not. Was there any reason that you were unable to talk to them about that?

SG: As I have made my position clear many times, my mission was to focus on humanitarian matters. I told them that this is a time we should not talk about political issues, but we must talk about humanitarian issues - saving lives - that is what I discussed with the Myanmar authorities. But in the course of our meeting, there was an opportunity of discussing these political issues, which were in fact raised first by Senior General Than Shwe. But we broadly discussed and agreed that this good offices role, mandated by the General Assembly, will have to continue, and if necessary, it should be deepened and broadened. I urged them that the seven-point

democratization programme should be put into implementation as soon as possible. This is what we have discussed.

Though my last visit to Myanmar was focused on humanitarian issues, I am convinced that I will have a further opportunity to address these political issues at an appropriate time, and at the same time, as I said, Mr. Gambari's good offices role will continue??

Q: Mr. Secretary-General, welcome back. On Lebanon, Sir, with the appointment of the President, how hopeful are you, Sir, in the situation there, that there will be disarming of militias, and that the Tribunal will take place sooner rather than later?

SG: It was very encouraging that the Lebanese people have now elected a new President, former General [Michel] Suleimane. This is very encouraging, and about which I have already made a statement. Taking this opportunity, I sincerely hope that the Lebanese people will revitalize all these democratic institutions which have been absent during the last almost seven months, since November last year. This is a good opportunity for them to seize. They should not lose this opportunity, while the whole international community is expressing their solidarity and support. As Secretary-General of the United Nations, as I have been deeply involved in this process, I feel very much encouraged and I will continue to work very closely with the leaders of Lebanon.

Q: Mr. Secretary-General, a quick follow up on Aung Sang Suu Kyi, in your discussion with the General, when he raised the political issue, was Aung Sang Suu Kyis' name actually raised, and is there a date or timing that you are thinking of sending Mr. Gambari back?

And my real question is that today, Save the Children in Britain, put out a report that is quite damning about the sexual abuse and sexual exploitation of children by UN peacekeepers and NGOs. Your Spokeswoman has put out a statement in your name. I wonder if you could give your own reaction to this, and to tell us what the United Nations plans to do?

SG: First of all, on this democratization process, including the issue of Daw Aung Suu Kyi, I would not make any detailed briefings on this, because this is an issue which I have discussed with the leadership of Myanmar, and I made it quite clear to them that I was there for purely humanitarian grounds. While we had a brief opportunity of engaging in dialogue on this issue, I told them clearly that I would try to find another opportunity, even at my level, through Mr. Gambari, to discuss all these political issues at an appropriate timing.

On your second question, these are very serious issues. I think that report is very valuable, and it does give us some good points to which the United Nations should continue to address this issue. This sexual exploitation of minors and by any aid workers or peacekeepers is a very serious issue. I have made it always clear that my policy on this sexual exploitation abuse cases is of zero tolerance. We will address this issue with the same level of emphasis. However, on all these cases which have been raised, we will very carefully investigate, and whenever there are necessary matters, we will take necessary measures on this.

Q: Mr. Secretary, it's nice to be able to ask a question here, since our network and maybe others weren't invited by either the country or maybe the UN on your plane, so I appreciate the opportunity here. Isn't it time to say perhaps that the same diplomacy is not working in Myanmar? I mean, Aung Sung Suu Kyi is more than just one person. While there are a lot of disasters going on, she is a symbol that perhaps could represent an open change by the Government, and they put her under new house arrest just days after you were there. Aren't you

more upset about that? Were you used as just a photo opportunity? And you know how Myanmar plays the game. They want to wait for world attention to go away, as it did after the monks were beaten. You are going off to a food summit; other things are going to happen. What makes you think that things have really changed with the Myanmar regime?

SG: In fact, you have eloquently stated what I feel. It is regrettable that Aung San Suu Kyi has not been released, and still has to go through this ordeal by being put under house arrest again for the sixth consecutive year. Aung San Suu Kyi's case is one of the most important and serious concerns of the whole international community, and therefore as Secretary-General, I will continue to engage myself and through Mr. Gambari to address this issue so that she and other political figures should be released as soon as possible. This is the crucial element of the democratization of Myanmar. You have my firm commitment to see a democratized Myanmar as soon as possible.

Q: Mr. Secretary-General, on Lebanon, the issue of Hezbollah's armament during the Doha agreement, and it has to be clarified I think. Everybody is asking about this specific issue. And it seems that the use of force has been rewarded. How much are you concerned that [Security Council] Resolution 1559, 1701 and 1680 will be implemented?

SG: What is important is the spirit of the Doha agreement. With this Doha agreement, and with the election of the new President of Lebanon, I do not expect that all the pending issues in Lebanon have been resolved. There are still many more issues to be resolved, including exactly what you said - the Security Council Resolution 1559 and 1701. The United Nations, and I as Secretary-General, will continue to ensure the faithful and full implementation of those Security Council resolutions. That involves all the issues, as you mentioned - Hizbollah, and all other issues - social, political and stability issues. Therefore, I think this is a new beginning, a new opportunity for the people and government of Lebanon. They should not lose this momentum created through the Doha agreement. [About] that I am encouraged, but at the same time, we will have to continuously work together. In that regard, I urge political leaders and people, all factional leaders, to engage in inclusive dialogue for reconciliation and political and social stability.

Q: The Government of Myanmar just concluded a referendum on the constitution. My understanding is that the figure in favour is incredibly, or for some people, unreasonably high - maybe 94 percent is in favour of the constitution. So how do you assess the results of that referendum?

SG: As far as this national referendum conducted by the Myanmar authorities [is concerned] as the United Nations was not part of that process, and we did not have any observer missions during that time of a national referendum, I am not in a position to make any comment on this.

Q: On Lebanon, Mr. Secretary-General. The President, Mr. Suleimane, has expressed very clearly that the weapons of Hizbollah, and the resistance in Lebanon, is a legitimate one, and they should be working in concert with the Lebanese government. Would that help in expediting the liberation of Sheba'a farms and the occupied territories of Lebanon, like Ghajar and other areas?

SG: Again, I am not going to deal with any specific issues today on Lebanon. I hope there will be another opportunity of addressing this situation in Lebanon. As I said, this is a new beginning,

a new opportunity. There are so many problems which we have just stated. Those are the issues to be worked out among the parties concerned, and they need the flexibility, they need some determined will to make Lebanon, through inclusive national reconciliatory dialogue, on all these issues.

Q: Mr. Secretary-General, on the day that you met Than Shwe, or the day before, it was clear that the house arrest of Aung San Suu Kyi was expired. Were you aware of it? If so, did you bring up that specific issue with him? And if not, since you are probably the only outsider who has met with him in a long, long time, why not?

SG: I was clearly aware of when this house arrest would expire, and I was concerned whether this house arrest would be extended, but for sensitive reasons, I am not going to make any further detailed comment. Believe me that I am very much committed to work very hard for the democratization of Myanmar.

Q: Thank-you Mr. Secretary-General. Some of the correspondents who were travelling with you described the camp you toured as being a show camp and noted that the tents looked very new, some of the victims looked relatively unharmed. How representative did you feel that camp was of the overall Burmese effort?

SG: I was given free access to wherever I wanted to visit. I visited two places, and I flew over the most affected areas in the delta region, so I could see such devastating effects of Cyclone Nargis. Of course, according to the regions where they had some quick relief systems working, but in other parts, places where I saw or visited, the level of damage, the level of relief operations was quite different, so I can not tell you all in one answer. But much needs to be done in Myanmar. That is why we need to work much more, much more.

Q: There are two different interpretations or readings of the latest IAEA report on Iran's nuclear enrichment programme. The first talk about violation of the concerned Security Council resolution, and the other says it shows .. Iran cooperating with international demands. What is your own reading of this report, Sir?

SG: I don't think that there were different reports or different readings. The report of the IAEA in the past, while they appreciated and welcomed this cooperation in implementing the work programme between IAEA and Iran was progressing, the IAEA was not quite sure about the extent of their uranium enrichment programmes. I think this report, which you mention, may refer to that particular aspect of uranium enrichment programmes of Iran. What is important is that Iran should fully comply with the relevant Security Council resolutions.

Q: There was an OpEd by a former auditor of the Office of Internal Oversight Services [OIOS] where he said that his report on the Congo, on the trading of gold and guns by peacekeepers had been whitewashed and ignored by OIOS –it's a pretty damning report - are you aware of that, and given the issues that have arisen about OIOS, what is going to be your approach if former auditors say that their material is ignored?

SG: I think I have given my answer to this question. This has been raised several months ago, it has been [looked at again]. As I told you last time that, while we had looked at this issue very carefully and did not find much evidence to [support] that allegation. But since there are new allegations, then OIOS should look at it carefully. This is what I am going to do.

Q: What is your reaction to [the reports] that the United States is keeping about 900 children in prisons in both Iraq and Afghanistan. Are you going to ask the US officials to do something about these juveniles who are held there?

SG: For that specific question, I am not in a position to make any comment on that.