

07 December 2012

Secretary-General's press encounter at Islahiye refugee camp

SG: I am pleased to be here at Islahiye camp. I have come to this camp to convey my strong support, sympathy and solidarity to the Syrian refugees here.

Let me begin by thanking the Government and people of Turkey for their generosity, hospitality and compassion in hosting more than 135,000 refugees in 14 different camps. I understand that there are another 70,000 refugees outside the camps.

I am aware of the tremendous burden this places on the Government and society, as ever more Syrians seek refuge outside their borders in towns, cities and refugee camps.

I also want to pay deepest tribute to the many humanitarian workers from the Government institutions, UN, the Red Crescent, Red Cross, and many other humanitarian organizations and humanitarian workers who are performing such noble work in tremendously difficult circumstances.

I was in the Za'atari camp in Jordan this morning and I have come to Islahiye this afternoon to see the conditions for myself, to learn more about the challenges and to listen directly to people's concerns and hopes.

I have been shocked, humbled and deeply moved by the stories that families shared with me.

I met children whose simple request was to return home and live in safety and security. And he told me that he wanted to go to school. One child was five years old, the other one was six years old. I told them not to lose hope and have courage. The United Nations and the whole international community stand by them.

So many have gone through so much suffering. It is simply not right that people are being uprooted from their homes because leaders have not addressed legitimate demands for democracy, justice and equality. Innocent Syrians are paying the price for this failure.

I have come to listen. But I am also here to say to the world: The slaughter in Syria must stop.

The military path is a dead end. It only fills streets with more blood. It only fills camps like this with more tears.

I appeal to all sides – particularly the Syrian Government – to stop the killing. Stop the violence in the name of humanity.

And I urge the international community – and in particular the Security Council – to stand united and act decisively to end this crisis.

Joint Special Representative [Lakhdar] Brahimi is working to achieve a Syrian-led political solution.

That is what Syria and all the families here need. And it is what the region needs. I am committed to doing all I can to make it happen.

I am also committed to ensuring that humanitarian needs are met.

We have seen a tripling of refugee numbers since July, and the numbers keep growing. I am afraid that any serious escalation of violence in Syria will lead to a dramatic increase in refugee numbers.

Unfortunately, international assistance is simply not keeping up with needs. The Syria Humanitarian Assistance Response Plan is only 50 per cent funded -- the Regional Response Plan even less so.

I call on all Member States, especially countries in the region, near the region, to ramp up assistance – both to the affected countries around Syria who are bearing the brunt of the refugee burden, and to the humanitarian agencies working on the ground.

This evening, I am going to meet with President [Abdullah] Gul, Prime Minister [Recep Tayyip] Erdogan and Foreign Minister [Ahmet] Davutoglu.

On my return to New York, I will discuss with UN agencies and other key humanitarian partners how we can provide humanitarian assistance in a more coordinated and effective manner.

I appeal to the international community: do not close your eyes while people are suffering.

We have to help them. The people I have met today are mothers, brothers, fathers and sisters.

They are our family. Let us stand by them.

Thank you. Teshikurudurum. Shukran Jazeelan.

Q: Mr. Secretary-General, have you had any conversations, discussions about organising safe passage from Syria for President [Bashar al] Assad and his family? Thank you.

SG: This is an issue which the international community has not yet started to discuss. What I am saying is that, first and foremost, the violence must stop. Then the political dialogue must start as soon as possible to address this issue through a political process reflecting the genuine aspiration of the Syrian people.

Q: You have earlier expressed your concerns about the possible use of chemical weapons in Syria. And you have heard from Syrian Government officials that that was not an option, that chemical weapons would never be used upon their own people. And similar words we have heard from the Russian officials. So given all that, how seriously are you concerned about this chemical weapons threat and how do you find the reactions from Syria and other parties?

SG: Recently we have been hearing alarming news that the Syrian Government may be preparing to use chemical weapons. We have no confirmed report on this matter. However, if it is the case, then it would be an outrageous crime in the name of humanity. Several months ago, I have written to President Assad, again urging him not to use under any circumstances chemical weapons. Syria is not a party to the OPCW, the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons. And a few days ago, I have written another letter, in addition to my official public statement. I know that many world leaders have added their voices, urging him not to use it and warning him that it will create huge consequences and he will be met with huge consequences about that. And yesterday, I have also spoken to the Director General of the OPCW and discussed about the possible way of investigating this. However, at this time, we do not have any plan and there has not been any such plans discussed.

Q: [question in Turkey about conditions at the Islahiye camp and the situation of Syrian refugees in Turkey]

SG: As I said, first of all, I am deeply grateful to the Government of Turkey for their very generous helping hands to these more than 135,000 refugees. And I believe that the

people and Government of Turkey, they have big hearts of compassion and love and care. I am also grateful to the Turkish Government's open door policy, receiving all the refugees fleeing Syria without any condition. This is highly commendable and appreciated. As far as the United Nations is concerned, we have been mobilizing all humanitarian related agencies, starting with UNHCR [United Nations Refugee Agency], UNICEF [United Nations Children's Fund], WFP [World Food Programme] and UNDP [United Nations Development Programme], all these organizations are being mobilized. And also IOM [International Organization for Migration] is making a great contribution. I am very much impressed and encouraged with what I have seen today, the way the United Nations agencies, working in close coordination and under the auspices of the Turkish Government, have established this camp in a very efficient and structured manner. The United Nations needs more generous support in terms of funding, in kind or financial support. That is why I am again appealing to the international community to provide their generous support, so that this support can be given to those people who are in need of such support. I know that the Turkish Government during the last 21 months have spent almost one billion dollars. Is it really sustainable? The Governments of Jordan, Lebanon, Iraq and Turkey, they have been mobilizing all their national resources. Then I am afraid to tell you that this situation may go for a considerable time. Then it is only natural that the international community should support those countries who are doing such a great humanitarian work for those refugees. The United Nations is going to mobilize such funding. Thank you.