

11 DECEMBER 2015

Daily Press Briefing by the Office of the Spokesperson for the Secretary-General

The following is a near-verbatim transcript of today's noon briefing by Farhan Haq, Deputy Spokesman for the Secretary-General.

I'd like to welcome a group of young Palestinian journalists who are here with us today as part of the Department of Public Information's annual training programme for Palestinian journalists. Welcome! I hope this isn't too boring for you.

**COP21

The Secretary-General is continuing his work in Paris at the Conference of Parties (COP 21) talks on climate change. After meeting with COP President Laurent Fabius, the Secretary-General expressed his optimism at the ongoing discussions. He said that those discussions were by far the most complicated and most difficult that he had ever attended, but they were also the most important for humanity.

The Secretary-General described the current draft text as a good basis for cordial negotiations and urged the negotiators to go beyond national interests. He told them good global solutions will help good local solutions.

The main part of his day was spent in bilateral meetings, which included with the delegations of India, China, Turkey, Venezuela, the United States, Australia, Singapore, and others later in the day.

**Syria

The United Nations in Syria and the Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC) have evacuated more than 300 combatants, along with their families and the critically injured, from Al Waer neighbourhood in Homs and transferred them into Idleb governorate, as stipulated in a local agreement between the Government of Syria and the local committee of Al Waer. In an evacuation operation that was carried out on Wednesday, a United Nations team and its partners moved about 700 evacuees from Al Waer, including thirty wounded.

This evacuation, in addition to the previous entry of humanitarian assistance on 5 December, made a significant change in the lives of more than 60,000 people with limited access to humanitarian assistance living inside Al Waer and the wider geographic area of Homs.

The UN Special Envoy for Syria, Staffan de Mistura, said that the UN's clear goal is to reach, as soon as possible, a nationwide ceasefire. Meanwhile, he added, initiatives like this one bring relief to besieged or isolated communities and have great value. They help the perception that a nationwide ceasefire brokered by the members of the International Syria Support Group is doable and that the UN can and will do its part.

Meanwhile, the UN humanitarian chief, Stephen O'Brien, is scheduled to visit Syria from 12–14 December 2015 to review humanitarian work and see for himself the impact on civilians of the intensified fighting and military operations.

As the fifth winter of this conflict gets under way, more than 13.5 million people need basic aid and protection. They face daily deprivation and brutality. Four out of five Syrian families now live in poverty, and millions do not have enough food, clean water or shelter.

During his visit, Mr. O'Brien is expected to meet displaced families, as well as key officials and humanitarian agencies and partners, to discuss ways of strengthening access so that more lives can be saved.

Still on Syria, the Agreement between the United Nations and the Syrian Government concerning the Status of the OPCW-UN Joint Investigative Mechanism (JIM) was signed in New York this morning. With that Agreement, the Syrian Government agreed to provide support to the JIM to conduct its activities in accordance with Security Council resolution 2235 (2015).

As you will recall, the Mechanism's mandate is to identify to the greatest extent feasible individuals, entities, groups or Governments who were perpetrators, organisers, sponsors or otherwise involved in the use of chemicals as weapons, including chlorine or any other toxic chemical, in the Syrian Arab Republic, as determined by the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) Fact Finding Missions.

Pursuant to resolution 2235 (2015), the first report of the JIM will be submitted 90 days following its announcement of commencement of full operations. The Secretary-General announced the Joint Investigative Mechanism to be fully operational on 13 November, and its first report is expected sometime in February 2016.

**Security Council

The Security Council is [meeting](#) right now on Ukraine.

In his briefing, Deputy Secretary-General Jan Eliasson [noted](#) that last month, we passed the two-year mark since the beginning of the Ukraine crisis. He emphasized that the Minsk agreements remain the best available viable and accepted path to resolving the conflict, adding that the agreements must be implemented in full.

The Deputy Secretary-General said that all parties must, without delay, work towards a durable political solution. Greater political will and flexibility must be demonstrated by all concerned.

Also stressing the importance of the Minsk agreements was Assistant Secretary-General for Human Rights Ivan Šimonović, who said that they are the only viable strategy for achieving a peaceful solution in eastern Ukraine, which, in turn, is key for resolving the human rights crisis in the country.

He said that the UN Human Rights Office will continue to monitor and advocate on the human rights situation in Ukraine in 2016.

For his part, John Ging, the Director of Operations of the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), briefed the Council from Ukraine, where he said he saw the devastating impact of the conflict on people in the east, in particular on the most vulnerable.

He noted that the conflict is having an unacceptable impact on those least able to bear it.

Mr. Ging appealed to everyone with power and influence to put the humanitarian plight of civilians affected by this conflict at the centre of their attention for positive action.

And this afternoon, at 3 p.m., the Secretary-General's Special Representative for Libya, Martin Kobler, will brief the Security Council via video from Tunis.

****Libya**

On that, Special Representative Kobler held a two-day meeting with members of the Libyan political dialogue yesterday and today in Tunis.

Speaking to the press following the meeting today, he said that there was consensus among the members on the need to reach an agreement and address the urgent issues facing the country, including the growing threat of Da'esh and other terrorist groups, as well as the deteriorating humanitarian and economic situation.

He added that there was wide consensus that only through a Libyan political agreement can the country be brought back to unity.

Mr. Kobler noted the announcement by members of the House of Representatives and the General National Congress that the 16th of December would be the target date for the signature of the agreement. He added that the signature must be followed by a strong resolution from the Security Council.

Turning to the humanitarian situation in the country, earlier this week the UN and its partners launched the response plan for 2016, appealing for more than \$165 million to address the needs of 2.4 million people, including nearly half a million internally displaced people, across Libya.

And more information is available on the UN mission's website.

****Central African Republic**

The UN Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA) and the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) issued today a report on the human rights situation in that country.

The report shows that between September 2014 and May 2015, human rights violations occurred on a daily basis in the country.

At least 785 people, including 88 women and 43 children, were victims of human rights violations in the Central African Republic, including killings, torture, abductions, sexual violence and hostage-taking.

The report also notes that these violations were mainly the result of armed groups' ability to operate freely throughout parts of the country and the culture of impunity.

It calls on the national authorities to put an end to impunity and says that the establishment of the Special Criminal Court will be a very important step to ensure accountability.

The report is available online.

And also on the Central African Republic, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein condemned on Friday the ongoing intercommunal violence and expressed deep concern at the increasing use of sectarian language in the country. He warned that this could have dramatic consequences given the highly volatile pre-election atmosphere.

He also said he was deeply concerned that all sides, including the authorities at the highest level, are calling for vigilante groups to be established. He added that the increasing tendency among Christians and Muslims to organize in self-defence groups and to exclude any person not considered part of their community was deeply worrying.

Zeid called upon the State authorities to take urgent action to stem incitement to violence and hatred, and to ensure accountability for human rights violations. He also urged political leaders to call on their supporters to peacefully participate to the constitutional referendum this weekend and to the presidential and legislative elections which are due in two weeks.

He said that to bring the country back to peace and stability, one of the key priorities is to put an end to the long prevailing impunity, and you can read more on this on the High Commissioner for Human Rights' website.

And we also have an update on the situation in the country from the UN Mission in the Central African Republic, MINUSCA, which reports that the security situation remained relatively tense in the capital Bangui yesterday.

Peacekeepers dismantling barricades erected in the fourth district were fired upon by anti-Balaka, and responded by exchanging fire.

Also yesterday, outside Bangui, unidentified armed groups fired on a MINUSCA-escorted commercial convoy at Bormo on the Baoro–Bossemptele axis, but fled after peacekeepers returned fire. Meanwhile, on the preparations of the elections, the Mission organized more than 60 flights yesterday and today to transport approximately 100 tons of materials for Sunday’s constitutional referendum to all 15 prefectures.

****Viet Nam**

The UN Human Rights Office said today that it is alarmed at the recent spate of violent attacks on human rights defenders in Viet Nam and is concerned by what it calls the apparent failure of the authorities to investigate and prosecute the perpetrators.

The Office has expressed its concern to the Vietnamese authorities over these attacks and sought clarification on serious allegations that plainclothes policemen were involved.

Human rights defenders are entitled to particular protection by State authorities under international human rights law.

The Office urges the Government of Viet Nam to take urgent measures to ensure the security of all human rights defenders and to undertake prompt, thorough and impartial investigations of all the reported incidents involving them.

****Nepal**

The World Food Programme (WFP) today said that major disruptions in food and fuel imports across the border between India and Nepal have severely affected Nepal’s supplies and caused a worrying increase in food prices.

With Nepal heavily dependent on imports, especially from India, severe shortages are now being felt in local markets. The cost of some basic food staples, such as cooking oil, rice, lentils, sugar and salt, have soared in recent weeks as supplies dwindle.

The World Food Programme says that if trade remains restricted and food prices continue to rise, a serious humanitarian crisis will be hard to avoid. Coming so soon after the recent earthquake, this crisis could severely test people’s ability to cope, and may lead to an increase in malnutrition.

It urges all sides to once again allow the free flow of food items across the border to ensure that Nepalis, especially those who struggle on a day-to-day basis to feed their families, are not the ones who bear the burden of this protracted political stand-off.

****Health Coverage**

I would also like to flag the Secretary-General’s [statement](#) ahead of Universal Health Coverage Day, tomorrow.

The Secretary-General stresses that our best defences against any health emergency are strong and resilient health systems that serve all people without exposing them to financial hardship.

He notes that today, at least 400 million people lack access to essential health services, and that every year, health care costs plunge millions of people into poverty or keep them trapped there.

His message is online and available in English and French.

****Honour Roll**

And for the honour roll, Bangladesh has paid its dues in full, becoming the 139th Member State to do so.

****South Sudan**

I was asked about earlier this week the follow up of the UN Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) concerning incidents earlier this week in Western Equatoria State.

The UN Mission State Coordinator met with the Governor of Western Equatoria State to discuss the current security situation and urge that individuals who have been arrested, including Angelo Bakote, should have due process respected, including right to fair trial respected.

The Mission will continue to monitor the situation.

****Press Conference Monday**

And for Monday, we have a noon briefing guest who will be Shantanu Mukherjee, Report Team Leader at the UN Development Programme's Human Development Report Office.

And that's it for me. Like I said, Joe, you've got the first question.

****Questions and Answers**

Correspondent: Okay, thank you. Because I was on time.

Deputy Spokesman: Because you were the one person on time. Punctuality has its rewards.

Question: Okay. Actually, then, I'm going to take advantage and ask you two questions. The first is really just to get any more details, if you have them, on the scheduling, both time and location, of the next Syrian support team meetings. Is it still New York going to be the preferred venue, or do you have anything more on that?

Deputy Spokesman: No, we don't have anything more on that. You will have seen the announcement that the US Secretary of State John Kerry made a few days ago. Their intention is to see whether talks can be held on the 18th in New York. We'll see whether that is the date that is agreed upon and works out with all parties or not. If it is, the Secretary-General has already made clear his intention to be there to participate.

Question: Okay. Second question involves the Secretary-General's role as the COP21 talks are winding down. Now the anticipation of a final agreement has been put off until tomorrow. Does the Secretary-General intend to stay right to the bitter end and what, you said he's not involved in the negotiations and you said he's been having these bilateral meetings, but what exactly is his role? What is he trying to accomplish? You know, is he coming up with ideas to bridge the remaining gaps, or is he just kind of a cheerleader? What is his role?

Deputy Spokesman: I wouldn't quite use the word cheerleader, but you're absolutely right that he is not a party to the negotiations. Ultimately the language that's being developed is being developed by the negotiators themselves and we, of course, respect that process.

What the Secretary-General is doing is he's playing a helpful role in encouraging the parties to continue to give it their all and to show flexibility. You will have seen the remarks we put out earlier today where he and Laurent Fabius spoke to the press about this.

It's a little bit more than a cheerleader, but it's not a negotiator, if that clears that up for you.

Yes, George.

Question: Quick question based on something you just said. You said the Secretary-General and Mr. Fabius have spoken to the press. I don't think I have seen that on my e-mail yet. May I assume it is coming?

Deputy Spokesman: It should have come to your e-mail. I believe we emailed it about, I don't know, sometime around 9:30 or 10:00 in the morning, so check your emails then. And if not, we also have the hard copy available in our office just down the hall.

Question: Thanks very much.

Deputy Spokesman: Yes.

Question: I want to ask you about Burundi. There've been reports of attacks on military bases killing a certain number of military individuals as well as killing of civilians in neighbourhoods and two airlines have stopped flying to the capital due to security.

What does, does the UN still think a support team is enough? Is Mr. Benomar going to brief the council under "any other business" this afternoon? And what's the UN's reaction to, I guess, what seems to be a serious escalation?

Deputy Spokesman: Yes, it is a serious escalation and I anticipate that we will have a [statement](#) attributable to the Spokesperson for the Secretary-General about this fairly soon.

As you can see, I do not have it now or else I would have read it. But we're hoping that we will have a statement this afternoon laying out our concerns about this rise in violence, which is a matter of grave worry to us.

It's clear that the Security Council members may want a briefing this afternoon. If that's the case, we are prepared to brief them under "any other matters". And yes, depending upon what the Security Council members request of us, Mr. Benomar is prepared to provide a briefing.

Question: Is he in Kampala? Where is he located? I saw a joint statement put out, seeming to be put out by UN and AU, and I wasn't sure if they were physically together.

Deputy Spokesman: He's been traveling, but I think he's here right now. I think he's here in New York.

Yes.

Question: Thanks. I know you probably won't detail the locations that Mr. O'Brien plans to visit in Syria, if you even know them. But you did mention that he plans to check up on how civilians are faring, given intensified fighting. And from what we've heard, the fighting has been on the part of the Syrian Government and the Russian armed forces against opposition-held areas.

So are you implying that he will make an attempt to visit sites that are not under the control of the Syrian Government?

Deputy Spokesman: I'm not implying that. We'll provide details about his travels as they come, but we're not announcing them in advance. He clearly is visiting Damascus, but as for other stops, we'll let you know those in due course.

Question: I mean, I ask because I think to say he's doing an evaluation of civilian conditions sort of imply an unfiltered look, not just hearing from Government officials.

Deputy Spokesman: Yes, he intends to talk to more than simply officials. That's the case.

Yes.

Question: About the DRC, and then a follow-up on the question yesterday about Haiti. Two things on the DRC. There seems to be a request by the Government to audit various agencies of the UN. They have written notes verbales to the country coordinator, a source reported, and asking to audit and there seems to be some pushback that that can't take place.

What is the UN's, I guess, response to requests to audit their activities in the country? And also on the Lubumbashi, I know it seems like a very specific thing, but you said from the podium a couple of times, Stephane has as well, that UNDP is investigating it and there will be no comments since.

Since yesterday I've heard an audio recording of one of the victims or stated victims, called OCHA in Goma, a gentleman called Joseph Ingangi, and on audio he said the investigation is complete. You're not getting paid. We're blaming it on a local staff member saying he wasn't working for the UN.

So is that inaccurate or is there, in fact, an investigation, because there are still people living in front of the camp?

Deputy Spokesman: As we made clear, until we get any of these results on this from the UNDP, we have no further comment at this time. It's in their hands.

Question: Why would OCHA in Goma be saying to the victims that the investigation is complete? I've heard the [overlapping talking].

Deputy Spokesman: The whole point of us saying in advance that there would be no further comment, is to make clear there would be no further comment.

Question: Right, but can you see why it seems to them that this is just not true? Because they've been told that there is no investigation or it's over.

Deputy Spokesman: I see what you're trying to do, but there still is no further comment. We're waiting for them. Once we have that, we'll get that.

Question: All right. On Haiti, yesterday I asked you about these letters that the lawyers suing the UN for having brought cholera to the country. They say they were delivered to MINUSTAH and you said you'd check to see if they've been received. Have they been received?

Deputy Spokesman: Yes, we can confirm that they have been received, and I believe the mission is exploring what to do next with that.

Question: Can I ask... I wanted to ask you one more. At the stakeout after yesterday's meeting on the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, the question arose to Prince Zeid whether he had discussed with the Secretary-General, the Secretary-General's possible trip to DPRK in terms of a human rights component to it. And he seemed to indicate that the two had not discussed it.

What I wanted to ask you is, one, is that the case? And two, what is the place, what would be the place of human rights in not... obviously the trip hasn't taken place yet, but in terms of clearly he has said that negotiations are under way and I saw Mr. Kim quoted to that effect, what is the place of human rights in such a trip?

Deputy Spokesman: Human rights has a place in all of the Secretary-General's travels and it would do so in this case as well. Regarding specifics, that will have to wait until when a trip is arranged, and there's nothing further to say about that. We've been trying to make preparations when it's feasible, but there's nothing further to announce at this point.

Have a good weekend, everyone.