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Full transcript of Secretary-General's press encounter following briefing to the General Assembly on his Priorities for 2016

The Secretary-General

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Remarks at press encounter following briefing to the General Assembly on his Priorities for 2016

New York, 14 January 2016

Good morning, Ladies and Gentlemen. It is a great pleasure to see you again.

Before I begin let me express my outrage over the attacks in Indonesia and Turkey and my condolences to the victims and people of those two countries.

Ladies and gentlemen,

I have just briefed the General Assembly on action we must take in the coming year. Let me reiterate two points.

First, we must get off to a fast start in implementing the two towering achievements of 2015: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Paris Agreement on Climate Change.

Both are triumphs of multilateralism. Now we have to bring them to life for every person, in every country.

Second, we must bridge the divisions that have kept Syrians in agony, plunged Yemen into darkness, and helped to spawn violent extremism.

Perhaps nothing more urgently reflects the need to act than the harrowing scenes from Madaya in Syria. In a conflict that has already reached shocking depths of inhumanity, the suffering there is another low.

UN teams have witnessed scenes that haunt the soul. The elderly and children, men and women, who were little more than skin and bones: gaunt, severely malnourished, so weak they could barely walk, and utterly desperate for the slightest morsel.

There can be no denying their suffering.

Many hundreds of people are in such a dire state that they require immediate medical attention, including through possible evacuation. We are working to get medical teams and mobile clinics on the ground right away. I want to make a special plea for those in besieged areas of Syria. I would say they are being held hostage – but it is even worse. Hostages get fed.

These children and women and men are struggling to survive without food or medicine.

It has never been easy for the United Nations and its partners to reach those in such desperate need. But the situation is getting worse.

Today, almost 400,000 people are besieged in Syria – roughly half in areas controlled by Daesh, 180,000 in areas controlled by the Syrian government and its allies, and some 12,000 in areas controlled by opposition armed groups.

In 2014, the UN and partners were able to deliver food to about 5 per cent of people in besieged areas. Today, we are reaching less than 1 per cent.

This is utterly unconscionable.

Along with food, the people we have encountered want answers.

Who cares about our lives? Where is the international community? Who will speak for us?

Let me be clear: the use of starvation as a weapon of war is a war crime.

All sides – including the Syrian government which has the primary responsibility to protect Syrians -- are committing this and other atrocious acts prohibited under international humanitarian law.

States, in the region and beyond, that can make a difference must press the parties for sustained and unimpeded humanitarian access throughout Syria. I speak specifically about members of the International Syria Support Group.

Other urgent measures are needed – such as the immediate end to the use of indiscriminate weapons in civilian areas, including through shelling and air strikes by any of the parties involved militarily in Syria.

No cause can justify the toll in civilian lives and destroyed schools, clinics and markets that we continue to register around the country every day.

This is fundamental to the credibility of the renewed political process. My Special Envoy, Mr. Staffan de Mistura, will continue to work towards convening intra-Syrian Geneva Talks on 25 January.

Let me also say a few words about the crisis in Yemen.

In recent days, we have seen intensified airstrikes, ground fighting and shelling. We also have worrying reports of cluster munitions attacks on Sana'a which, again, could constitute a war crime.

My Special Envoy, Ismail Ould Cheikh Ahmed, was in Riyadh and Abu Dhabi last week. He is now in Yemen to continue consultations with the parties on the urgent need for confidence- building measures and a new round of UN-sponsored negotiations. Release of detainees, a renewed and sustainable cease-fire and improved humanitarian access are crucial.

Finally, I would like to reiterate my deep concern about the highly unstable and unpredictable situation in Burundi. Violence could deepen inside the country and spill across borders.

The Government must take steps to build confidence, including releasing prisoners of conscience and lifting restrictions on civil society. In that regard, I welcome and commend the visit of the Security Council next week, as well as the efforts of the African Union. We must do all we can to break the political impasse and avert a humanitarian catastrophe.

Thank you.

Q: Secretary-General, you've just said that you believe what had happened in Madaya was a war crime. Do you believe now the Security Council should follow your strong lead and refer this to the International Criminal Court (ICC)? And on the meeting of the 25th, should at the top of the agenda be trying to get access to these besieged places?

SG: It's up to Security Council now. Security Council has taken very important resolution on 18 December, last year, 2254. That was the unity and solidarity, Security Council members, particularly permanent members, have shown their political will to see there must be a political solution. And if and when this political will is established, then there will be naturally a much, much easier way for us to deliver humanitarian assistance. In that regard, I leave it to Security Council members to determine and take necessary measures, actions, on these war crimes. And when this meeting is held on 15 January, I think, in addition to and in parallel to political negotiations, how to deliver humanitarian assistance without any impediment should be discussed. This is very important confidence-building measures, which I have discussed yesterday with Mr. de Mistura.

Q: Secretary-General, thank you very much. I don't know if you saw President Barack Obama's remarks in his State of the Union address earlier this week, where he basically said that it was America that stopped the spread of the Ebola virus in West Africa. He said it was America's military, America's doctors and America's developmental staff that created the platform for the eradication of this virus. Do you believe it was American leadership at the expense of United Nations' leadership that has gotten us to this point where today we can say there are no new transmissions of Ebola in West Africa?

SG: We appreciate President Obama's leadership and U.S. Government's strong support by dispatching lot of military soldiers and equipment, medical assistance to Liberia. That was a very important part in showing solidarity. And, most importantly, I appreciate the Member States of the United Nations who have shown such immediate solidarity and political and humanitarian support in the form of financial and medical support. And that is the way the United Nations was able to establish, for the first time in the history of the United Nations, a health-related special mission. That was the only occasion when the United Nations worked in solidarity, in partnership, with the Member States, including United Nations. Now today Liberia has [been] declared Ebola-free. Now we see that the Guinea, Liberia, Sierra Leone are all Ebola-free. But we have to be very much vigilant so that there will be no such flare-ups and no case. We need the strong engagement and solidarity of all Member States. Thank you very much.

Q: Thank you. Majeed Gly for the Kurdish Rudaw Media Network. Secretary-General, with the new rising tension between Iran and Saudi Arabia and escalation of conflict in Syria, many key Syrian opposition leaders are saying that 25 January is unrealistic date for the talks. Are you 100 per cent confident that the talk will happen in 25 January? And my second question is about the Mosul dam. The State Department of the United States are warning that this dam might collapse at any moment --that could lead to the death of nearly half a million people in Iraq. What will the United Nation do in this case, especially when the Iraqi Government and the local authorities seem to not be able to help to prevent this disaster to happen? Thank you so much.

SG: Thank you for this. As for the scheduled meeting, conference, on 25 January in Geneva, we are still working very hard. Yesterday, I and the Deputy Secretary-General both had intensive discussions on this matter. It's true that there are still big differences of positions between the parties. But this was the decision which was supported by the Security Council. The Security Council has shown such strong political support by adopting a resolution after their meeting in New York on 18 December, so it must be held as scheduled. But we are still very carefully analysing the situation, but that day is still on. We will do our best effort. I hope that the parties will show their solidarity as well as flexibility and sense of compromise. Even before convening this meeting, if they are not able to do that, what can you expect? What can you expect for the future of the Syrian people? First and most of all, we have to think about the future of Syrian people. They have suffered during last five years so miserably, and there is no time for us. And I know that when it goes to detailed matters of who should be invited, not to be invited or what should be the topic, but I think we should overcome, beyond... we should go beyond this kind of detailed matters. First, I think we have to have a meeting.

About this current situation in Mosul dam, the United Nations has been examining and analysing the situations very closely. Even yesterday, we have been discussing this matter with key Member States. We've been... my Special Representative, Ján Kubiš, has been working with the Iraqi Government, and I've been also discussing this matter with key countries, like the United States and Italian Government, how we can prevent such potential tragedy. I'm told by experts that, if anything happen, it will [have] huge, catastrophic consequences. So we are working very seriously on this matter as of this moment. So we will work on that.

Q: Secretary-General, today you seem to have come up with your strongest remarks on the use of starvation, calling it a war crime. It's by no means a new tactic. I wonder why it's taken you so long to arrive at that conclusion. And, secondly, when you were talking about surgical strikes and surgeons doing their work, were you referring to Kunduz?

SG: First of all, since last October, it has been very difficult for the United Nations and other international humanitarian partners to have access to the besieged area. There are still millions of people who are living under very difficult situations where it's very difficult to reach, but these people in Madaya and other related four... mostly four villages, they have been besieged by the parties, by the Government, and I'm... again, it's inhuman, and it's not acceptable to make these people a hostage of their conflict and starving them to death. That is not acceptable. That is why I'm saying it's war crimes -- so we must do all what we can do. If they show a small sense of flexibility politically, then I think we can resolve all this issue. It's not the lack of will. It's a matter of a very serious impediment, administrative impediment, political and security difficulties which have been hindering, you know, preventing us from going there. We are working very hard on this matter....
[Cross talk]

Q: Were you talking about Kunduz?

SG: Pardon?

Q: Were you talking about Kunduz, when you said about surgical strikes and surgeons doing their work?

SG: Again, I have been urging the parties who are participating in these military operations that there must be very careful assessment of the situation. And they must be extremely careful in staging operations not to harm the civilian population and the civilian facilities, including hospitals and wards and schools. That is a fundamental principle of international humanitarian law, and I'm just urging them to strictly adhere to this.

Q: Secretary-General, to be clear: Are you asking the warring parties to immediately lift the sieges across the country before 25 January? And if they don't, should they, in your view, be allowed to participate in talks to determine the future of their country?

SG: As I said, this is very important way to build confidence among the parties, who will participate in the meeting, conference, and which will also facilitate the political negotiation. Political negotiation is going to be held to save human lives, to prevent the further loss of human lives and destruction. So whatever we can do... they can do at this time, before they meet, it will be a good way of confidence-building measures. And then they can discuss further a more solid framework, political framework. That's our strategy and that's our roadmap. Thank you very much.