

23 May 2008

## Secretary-General's press conference at Hotel Sedona in Yangon [unofficial transcript]

Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. Thank you for being here. This is a special occasion, in many ways, not least because my visit here is the first of a UN Secretary-General in 44 years.

I came here to give the people of Myanmar a message of hope---that the world is watching, and that the world is with you.

I must tell you. Flying over the Ayeyarwady delta yesterday, I saw the saddest things: homes and villages destroyed, fields flooded, roads and bridges washed away, so many lives lost. We work hard in our lives, for ourselves and our families. And then, in a moment, it is gone.

I am humbled - humbled by the scale of this natural disaster, the worst your country has ever experienced, and humbled by the courage and the resilience of the Myanmar people. During my visit I heard the most tragic stories. At a refugee camp, villagers told me of the loss of their families, their loved ones, everything they owned. But I also saw homes - and lives - being rebuilt.

Life continues. I met a mother, living in a tent, who gave birth to a baby girl only hours before my visit. She was healthy. So is her infant daughter. They have a future. I told them my heart was with them, and not to lose hope. I know they will not, for they have already proved it.

And I told them that I - as well as the international community and the entire UN family?will do everything possible to help.

I am encouraged by my discussions with Myanmar's leadership. From all I have seen, the government, with help from the international community, have put in place a functioning relief programme. But I told them that more needs to be done. Their efforts need to be reinforced, quickly, by international experts with tested experience in handling emergencies.

In this regard, I specifically asked the government to liberalize visa policies and to grant unhindered access to foreign aid experts, and also journalists, so that they can operate freely and effectively throughout Myanmar. I also asked the government for permission to establish forward logistics bases in the affected areas, so as to more efficiently distribute aid and coordinate assistance to those in need. I further requested the government's cooperation in deploying the extra assets needed in such operations?among them, transport boats and helicopters.

Q: Do you think that your visit has produced enough confidence, enough mature confidence, between the UN and the Myanmar Government, to handle other issues outside the context of the humanitarian?

SG: Mutual trust between the United Nations and the Myanmar Government will be very important. In that regard, I have had a very good discussion with Senior General Than Shwe and Prime Minister Thein Sein and other related Ministers. They have all assured that they will fully cooperate. As I said, implementation will be the key. We'll carefully watch the implementation process and close coordination with the Myanmar authorities and ASEAN partners. I believe that they will keep and honour their commitment.

Q: Do you think you'll be able to handle other issues outside the context of the humanitarian?

SG: As far as the humanitarian issues are concerned, I think we'll be able to handle all other issues too.

Q: As you are aware Myanmar government is unloading relief supplies from Yangon International Airport and Yangon Port to cyclone devastated areas using its own strength. So in view of your talks with Senior General Than Shwe, have you touched on the need for non-military foreign ships and non military aircraft to transport these relief goods directly to these cyclone devastated forward areas in the Ayeyarwady Delta?

SG: I have stressed in my meeting with Senior General Than Shwe that additional assets like helicopters and boats will be very important. And he also said that the aid relief items can be delivered by commercial vessels and small boats and even aircraft. We will have to work in detail how we can ensure these capacities can be carried out.

Q: You mean relief items can be delivered by civil aircraft from foreign lands directly?

SG: I think so.

Q: Non-military vessels from foreign countries?

SG: When it is non-military, he said that Yangon International Airport will be used as a logistics hub. All these technical issues - we will discuss how we can implement his promise. Mr. John Holmes? Maybe you can add something.

USG/OCHA [John Holmes]: Nothing much to add to what you said, Secretary-General, it was clear that yes, aid coming from abroad, aid ships, will be welcome in Yangon Port, and I think, other ports too. So that was very helpful agreement from the Senior General.

SG: Now if I may add, the Myanmar Government has given permission for nine WFP [World Food Programme] helicopters, which is very encouraging in facilitating the delivery of relief items.

Q: At the Pledging Conference on Sunday, I understand that UN and ASEAN [Association of Southeast Asian Nations] countries are invited to the Pledging Conference. I would like to know if other countries such as the US and other Western Nations are invited to attend this conference.

SG: This Pledging Conference is open to all the Member States of the United Nations. I am sure that many countries will be represented at this Pledging Conference. It's not only ASEAN and the United Nations. This is open to all United Nations Member States and even though I do not have any full list of participants, I am sure that many countries will participate.

Q: How about the United States?

SG: I do not have any confirmed list at this time, but I am sure that they will participate.

Q: During your visit to the camps, were you satisfied with your visit, how do you find the camps and what [were] the medical facilities like in the camps?

SG: I was very humbled by the plight the people were experiencing. Of course there were tents and people were given humanitarian assistance and relief items, but much more needs to be done. Their lives should be improved with much more assistance. Simply we have not had enough aid workers who have experience and expertise in the areas of sanitation and water or other [necessities] for human life. Therefore, that is exactly what I have discussed with the Senior General to allow, as quickly as possible, all international aid workers so that they can reach all these areas where needy people are still awaiting our help.

Q: And what about the medical aid available?

SG: I saw some nurses and medical people and I was told by [the] Myanmar authorities that there were a few hundred foreign medical experts working here, but I'm afraid that these numbers are much lower than expected. What I have seen is, that even that mother who gave birth, was attended by just two or three nurses. But I saw also a nineteen-day- old baby girl who was having very much difficulty, who really needed medical support. There may be still many people whom I have not been able to even meet who need medical support. Therefore it would be extremely necessary, at this time, that these people receive proper sanitation and medical support from the international community.

Q: Are there any conditions, between the Myanmar government and the UN on permitting these international aid workers to [come to] Myanmar?

SG: For any country, when you want to enter, you should have a very genuine purpose. This time, people are coming for a genuinely humanitarian purpose to provide humanitarian assistance. I was assured by the highest Myanmar authorities that they will ensure a very swift issuance of visas to international aid workers. When they apply for visas, I am sure that the Myanmar authorities would examine the purposes according to their own regulations. But what is important at this time is to issue visas and to allow them to enter this country as soon as possible and to ensure again, the unhindered access and free movement within this country, so that they can meet and provide necessary assistance. Thank you very much, I will see you again on Sunday.

I am happy to report that we have made progress on all these issues. This morning, I had a good meeting with Senior General Than Shwe.

He agreed to allow international aid workers into the affected areas, regardless of nationality. He has taken quite a flexible position on an issue that, until now, has been an obstacle to organizing coordinated and fully effective international aid and assistance operations. He has also agreed that the visa issue will be speeded up.

The Senior General also agreed that Yangon Airport could be used as a logistical hub for international aid, from which it could be more quickly distributed to those in need. He further agreed that international aid could be delivered to Myanmar via civilian ships and small boats.

I hope all these agreements can produce results quickly. Implementation will be the key. Finally, we have agreed on the kind of effective coordination and consulting mechanisms we need, and we are finalizing the details with ASEAN as well. I warmly welcome ASEAN's leadership.

I return to Yangon for the international pledging conference on Sunday, where Myanmar's partners will discuss these matters in greater depth. Our goal will be to focus on the immediate relief efforts, and also to look at the recovery phase which will have to start in parallel. We need to galvanize the leadership and resources required to give concrete expression to our good will toward Myanmar and its remarkable people.

Thank you. I have time for a few questions.