

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

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The following is a near-verbatim transcript of today's briefing by Martin Nesirky, Spokesperson for the Secretary-General.

Good morning, everyone.

****Syria – Sellström Readout**

The Secretary-General held a telephone call today with Dr. Åke Sellström, Head of the United Nations mission to investigate allegations of the use of chemical weapons in the Syrian Arab Republic.

Dr. Sellström, who has just returned to The Hague with the rest of his expert team, after work in Syria from 19 to 31 August, briefed the Secretary-General on the next stages of the investigation process. All preparations for classifying the samples are progressing well. Samples will begin to be transferred to laboratories tomorrow. Dr. Sellström told the Secretary-General that two Syrian officials were observing the process. The whole process will be done strictly adhering to the highest established standards of verification recognised by the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW).

In light of the horrendous magnitude of the 21 August incident in the Ghouta area of Damascus, the Secretary-General asked Dr. Sellström to expedite the mission's analysis of the samples and information it had obtained without jeopardizing the scientific timelines required for accurate analysis, and to report the results to him as soon as possible. And they discussed ways to further accelerate the process.

The Secretary-General personally thanked Professor Sellström for his undertaking and for the performance of the team while in Syria in spite of the difficult and dangerous circumstances.

****Syria - Humanitarian**

And I just wanted to update you a little on the humanitarian picture in Syria.

The UN is continuing its critical humanitarian work in Syria, where and when possible, as well as in neighbouring countries.

For example, the World Food Programme (WFP) targeted 3 million people with food aid in August. And last week, it dispatched 2,000 emergency ready-to-eat rations for 10,000 people in Latakia. In Aleppo, where fighting and the spike in prices are leading to food shortages, the Programme sought to feed more than 350,000 people in August.

In the first seven months of this year, the World Health Organization (WHO) has coordinated the provision of assistance to 3.7 million people in Syria. The UN Children's Fund, UNICEF, has reached more than 180,000 uprooted children with health support in clinics, and it has also helped more than 10 million people in Syria access drinking water.

And for its part, the UN refugee agency, UNHCR, and its partners have reached more than 1.5 million people with much-needed supplies.

And of course there are many more people outside of Syria in neighbouring countries receiving assistance.

****Syria — France**

I'd also advise you that the Secretary-General spoke this morning with the Foreign Minister of France, Mr. Fabius, and he will continue to stay in touch with world leaders in the days to come.

Yes?

****Questions and Answers**

Question: Thank you, Martin. [inaudible]?

Spokesperson: Well, at this point, to answer your second question first, at this point, I am not aware of any full Security Council meeting. As you will be aware, the Secretary-General did speak to the permanent members of the Security Council already, and he intends to speak to the non-permanent members of the Security Council in the days to come, and I think that would probably be on Tuesday. We can give you more details as we get closer to that.

With regard to your first question, I would simply say that the Secretary-General took note of the announcement by President Obama yesterday on the referral to Congress. I can tell you he regards it as one aspect of an effort to achieve a broad-based international consensus on measures in response to any use of chemical weapons. Use of chemical weapons will not be accepted under any circumstances, and there should be no impunity, and any perpetrators of such a horrific crime against humanity must be held accountable. The UN investigation mission should be given an opportunity to succeed. The Secretary-General applauds the bravery of the team of UN experts who undertook their on-site fact-finding activities despite grave security risks.

And finally, the Secretary-General reiterates the primary role of the Security Council in maintaining and restoring international peace and security, including in any case where the use of chemical weapons is established. As such, he believes the Council should stand firm and united in agreeing on measures in response to any use of chemical weapons. Yes, Pam?

Question: Martin, does the Secretary-General plan to meet with either President Obama or President Putin at the G-20, and will Syria be on the agenda? And then just a separate, will Dr. Sellström, Professor Sellström, be on the return trip to Syria? Thank you.

Spokesperson: On the G-20, needless to say, Syria is likely to figure rather prominently in any discussions, in addition to all of the discussions about the global economy, sustainable development and the other topics which would ordinarily be discussed there. At this point, I cannot say precisely with whom the Secretary-General will be meeting, but of course, there will be gathered there in Saint Petersburg, the major leaders from the major countries of the world, industrialized economies in the world. And we will keep you posted as we get closer to that, but I don't have any set itinerary at this point. Yes?

Question: And on Dr. Sellström returning?

Spokesperson: Well, we have said that the team has given an undertaking to return. We have not said when, and we have not said precisely what the composition of that team will be. Talal?

Question: Thank you. Two short questions. The first one is, you mentioned two officials, Syrian officials, are accompanying the samples to ensure the credibility of the sample. While on the two officials from the oppositions, I am just noticed that they... you didn't mention them unless they are... that are accompanying to ensure the credibility of the samples. And secondly, you mentioned that the SG is encouraging Sellström to get these

results as soon as possible without jeopardizing the credibility of these tests. Do you see a possibility that this timeline will coincide with Congress voting first week of September that they will [inaudible]?

Spokesperson: I beg your pardon, I forgot to remind you about the microphone.

Question: [inaudible] Sorry, thank you. First question is... I forgot what the first question is now!

Correspondent: Syrian officials...

Question: There are two Syrian officials, but you didn't mention those two rebels, or opposition, I should say, officials watching out for the credibility of the samples. And the second one, now that he is egging and asking Sellström to expedite the results, do you see a feasibility that there is a convergence of evidence in the first week of September? Is that a possibility, while the Congress is making its decision, that we have the results from the United Nations?

Spokesperson: Well, I wouldn't speculate on that latter part of your question. I would simply reiterate what we have said, that the United Nations mission is uniquely capable of establishing in an impartial and credible manner the facts of any use of chemical weapons based directly on evidence collected on the ground. We are not giving a timeline. Despite various reports of different timelines, we are not giving a timeline. And one of the reasons is precisely what I said earlier on, and you picked up on it, that the Secretary-General discussed with Dr. Sellström ways to accelerate this process while keeping strictly within the scientific bounds that there are, including adhering to the standards set down by the OPCW, the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons. Which brings me to your first question — the Secretary-General's mechanism — so the guidelines for this procedure set out very clearly who should be there to oversee the chain of custody, and that is why there are two Syrian Government officials there. And that's where I would leave it.

Question: [inaudible]?

Spokesperson: Because, because the guidelines specify precisely what the mechanism should be to ensure the chain of custody. And as I have said, and I would repeat again, this is all being done strictly in adherence with the established standards for verification set out by the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons. Nizar, and then I am coming to you. Yes?

Question: Martin, Mr... the Secretary-General has indicated that the Security Council members should be united on that, and that no unilateral action to be taken against Syria or the...

Spokesperson: Don't put words into his mouth.

Correspondent: But this is what this implies. I mean...

Spokesperson: Well, just listen to what I said, okay.

Question: [inaudible] Mr... Mr. Ja'afari yesterday addressed the Secretary-General in a letter asking him to use his office as a guardian of the Charter in order to prevent unilateral action against his country by any party, especially after what Mr. Obama has said. Is there any reaction to that letter? What kind of actions do you... do you expect [inaudible]?

Spokesperson: No, not at this point, Nizar. Let's just repeat what I have already said on numerous occasions, and the Secretary-General has said equally often, and that is that he would underscore the importance of the Charter. And as I just said, the Secretary-General reiterates the primary role of the Security Council in maintaining and restoring international peace and security. Okay, yes?

Question: Thank you. It's been 10 days since the attacks. The US has already put out the results of its blood and tissue samples. Are you confident you can match the timing within your realm [inaudible]?

Spokesperson: But let me just repeat what I just said...

Question: [inaudible] totally key given the process in Congress happening right now?

Spokesperson: Yes, we are not... we are not specifying a timeline, we are simply saying that it is being done as fast as it is possible to do within the scientific constraints. The Secretary-General is obviously very keen, as is the rest of the international community, that this should be done as swiftly as possible, but you need to be able to adhere to the standards so that the scientific process of verification is credible. And just to answer your point when you said that the US has announced the results of its evidence – let me just repeat that the United Nations mission is uniquely capable of establishing in an impartial and credible manner the facts of any use of chemical weapons based directly on evidence collected on the ground, and that relates to chain of custody. James?

Question: Sorry, I have another follow-up. [inaudible]?

Spokesperson: Yes, you do, and then I am coming to James. Go.

Question: The Secretary-General in Austria said that he might... he will be briefing the Security Council once he'd heard from Angela Kane. That doesn't appear to have happened. The P5 were briefed on Friday, prior to that first briefing. Does he intend to give the P5 any further details about the progress in the forthcoming week, and what happened to that original suggestion in Austria?

Spokesperson: He said he would be briefing the Security Council. That can be done in numerous forms. And I have just said that, in addition to the discussion with the permanent five members, the Secretary-General intends to speak to the non-permanent 10 members in the coming days, probably on Tuesday. And it is of course for the Security Council itself to invite the Secretary-General to speak to them as one body. The Secretary-General is seeking to reach out to the Member States, and this is part of that process.

Question: He was very specific in Austria that he would be briefing the Security Council [inaudible]?

Spokesperson: Well, I am being very specific now; I am being very specific.

Question: So he was... he was inaccurate then?

Spokesperson: No, he's not inaccurate. He has said he is willing and ready to brief the Security Council. It is for the Security Council to invite him to brief them. James?

Question: We know about the problem with the shooting incident on the ground when they were in Syria. Were there any other problems? Because Secretary of State John Kerry, when he spoke on Friday, said when the UN inspectors finally gained access, that access, as we now know, was restricted and controlled. Did Professor Sellström report that that was the case?

Spokesperson: Well, I can already say, regardless of what the Secretary-General and Dr. Sellström discussed this morning, that while in the country, the mission was able to access all locations it had identified as priority sites. And it was able to conduct the fact-finding

activities it deemed necessary. The mission did have to overcome serious safety concerns and, as you just mentioned, on one occasion while travelling, the mission came under fire by unknown assailants in a buffer area. Yes, Matthew?

Question: Sure. Thanks a lot, Martin. This morning, as I am sure you saw... saw, Secretary Kerry said very specifically... talked about blood and hair samples showing...

Spokesperson: I've just answered that question.

Question: I understand you said that you said that, but what I wanted to understand is your answer said that the... the... the UN is uniquely qualified because of chain of custody...

Spokesperson: Uniquely capable.

Question: Capable, okay. So they obviously believe that their lab has moved pretty quickly on this. So... so what I wanted to know is, how do you...? I understand that if... if it is only in their custody, the idea would be it doesn't have the credibility to the world as a whole, but how... it seems like their lab has moved pretty fast, are you saying that their lab work is... is... is less than credible? Have they shared this evidence with the UN, as the Secretary-General requested and... and I wanted to ask, in answer to the... to... to... to respond to yesterday, President Obama said, quote, "I am confident in the case our Government has made without waiting for UN inspectors. I am comfortable going forward without the approval of the Security Council." It's really the first part, the... what... what does the Secretary-General say to the... to... to... to a Member State ignoring this, you know, uniquely capable ent... entity and announcing the results that Mr. Kerry did... did?

Spokesperson: I have already characterized the Secretary-General's thoughts on that last part of your question; I don't intend to go back over that. And I also can simply... all I can do is repeat what I already said, that the United Nations mission is uniquely capable of establishing in an impartial and credible manner the facts of any use of chemical weapons based directly on evidence collected from the ground, okay.

Question: And has the US shared any of this evidence that it has described with the UN?

Spokesperson: Well, as we have repeatedly said, Member States are encouraged to share information, information they may have with regard to alleged incidents. Yes?

Question: Emma Bonino, the Italian Foreign Minister, said repeatedly that any outside intervention in the Syrian crisis by any Power, unless it happens under the umbrella, if you like, of the United Nations, is likely to trigger a major conflict, perhaps even a world war. Is this the UN view?

Spokesperson: I don't really want to comment on every individual politician's and minister's comments on this around the world. We have repeatedly said that there must be a political solution to this crisis, that ultimately a military solution is not an option. At some point, there will need to be a political solution, and the sooner that that can happen, the better. Sangwon?

Question: Two questions. You said that Syrian opposition they are not part of the observers monitoring the process as per guidelines that specified what the mechanism should be, and that guidelines as was agreed with Ms. Kane and the Syrian Government, is that correct?

Spokesperson: Well, this...

Question: Just with the Syrian Government?

Spokesperson: The Secretary-General's mechanism has guidelines that encompass any investigation under that mechanism. There are... the guidelines are online. And also, it is... the key part here is that this is all being done in the strictest adherence to the standards that exist for verification, as laid down by the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons.

Question: Can I just follow up on this, please?

Question: And second question... okay...

Spokesperson: Talal, you can when someone has finished their second question.

Question: Can I ask... so when you say Member States are encouraged to share information, has the US shared the information that Secretary Kerry was mentioning today on NBC?

Spokesperson: That I do not know. I would simply say Member States are encouraged to provide information that they may have, and that's actually an important distinction. Talal, and then I am coming to you, okay, Carla. But first of all, Talal.

Question: Thank you. Just a follow-up. I don't know who put these guidelines, but I mean, logic states that the two parties have a major stake in finding out which one of them has used the chemical weapon. And we have two officers from the Syrian regime, but we don't have anybody...

Spokesperson: Officials.

Question: Officials, I am sorry — the word officer doesn't mean military in this case — two officials from the Syrian regime, but we don't have anybody from the other party as a major stake. Since the United Nations does not represent the opposition, shouldn't there have been... whoever put these guidelines, and we don't know so far, has taken account of this?

Spokesperson: Well, the Secretary-General's mechanism is something that, as I mentioned yesterday, derives from a General Assembly resolution, later adhered to and ratified by the Security Council. In any case, I don't need to tell you Talal, being an expert in the region, that there isn't just one opposition group. So I am not quite sure how you would decide who would tag along. So I will leave it there. So, please?

Question: [inaudible]

Spokesperson: Microphone, please. Thank you, Carla.

Question: You said that the Secretary-General condemns the use of chemical weapons by anyone under any circumstance, and several months ago the Russian Federation submitted an 80-page report on the incident at Khan al-Asal to the Secretary-General and to the P5 with very, very serious evidence that the opposition had been using chemical weapons, albeit primitive ones, but chemical weapons in that area. And why has this report not been made public or available to the US Congress, who may have to vote on issues of war and peace? According to yesterday's *Huffington Post*, even US intelligence officials have actually talked about the possibility that rebels could have carried out the attack...

Spokesperson: Okay, so, I get the point, so what's your question?

Question: Well, the question is, why has this information not been made available, the 80-page report...?

Spokesperson: Well, I think as far as I understand it, the document, which was submitted by the Russian Federation, is for the Russian Federation to make available to Member States if they wish to have it. That's the first thing. The second thing is that we have repeatedly said — and I mentioned it yesterday — that the team, chemical weapons investigation team, is carrying out its investigation into this 21st of August incident as a priority, given the international community's evident and obvious interest in trying to find out what happened. We have also said that the team has given an undertaking to the Syrian Government that it will return to carry out its investigation into all pending allegations, and that includes Khan al-Asal. And so, when it comes to a report that will encompass all of the allegations, this part will be addressed. Yes?

Question: Sorry going back to this, the briefing timeline, the P5 who were spoken to on this Friday before Angela Kane briefed the Secretary-General, is there no invitation from any of those interested parties to hear again from him after Angela Kane? You mentioned he would only brief if invited. And secondly, do you anticipate any further briefings during this week, and what would they be on?

Spokesperson: Bear in mind, the Secretary-General is travelling to Saint Petersburg, but there are other officials, of course, within the Department of Political Affairs, Office for Disarmament Affairs, who can obviously brief the Council, should they so wish. But I am not...

Question: So the need to issue an invitation [inaudible]?

Spokesperson: Well, you have to ask the Council, you'd have to ask the Council, which as of today means speaking to the Australian Permanent Mission, if I am not mistaken. Yes?

Question: So do you anticipate in the forthcoming week any further briefings and what will be the content of them? Tuesday, you mentioned the Security Council?

Spokesperson: Well, it would be a little unusual to say what the content of a briefing would be if we don't know when the briefing is going to be, or if indeed there is going to be one, but simply to say, if...

Correspondent: Tuesday, you mentioned.

Spokesperson: Pardon?

Correspondent: Tuesday, you mentioned.

Spokesperson: That's a meeting with the non-permanent members of the Security Council...

Correspondent: Yeah.

Spokesperson: ...given, as you pointed out, and I said that the Secretary-General spoke to the permanent five members of the Council. So there are other ways to be able to reach out to Member States, and I think at some point it may be possible to elaborate on that. Also, I think these briefings are intended to help to explain to the international community what the Secretary-General is doing, and his interaction with the team and with the High Representative for Disarmament Affairs, for example.

Question: You see what I am getting at here, though. He was supposed to talk to them after he'd spoken to Angela Kane, that's what he said in Austria, and he briefed them on Friday instead.

Spokesperson: But, please don't...

Correspondent: I'm just trying to work out why that change occurred.

Spokesperson: Well, no, the Secretary-General has made clear that he is available and ready and willing to brief the Security Council. But it is obvious, and I think everybody knows that, it is for the Council to invite him to brief.

Question: So they have not issued an invitation at this point?

Spokesperson: At this point, not to my knowledge. But as I also said yesterday, the Secretary-General has reached out to the Permanent Representative of Argentina, who obviously was the President of the Council last month, August, and has also spoken to the Australian Permanent Representative, who as of today, lucky man, is President of the Council.

Question: Tuesday will be an update on logistics and timing?

Correspondent: Thank you.

Spokesperson: Say again?

Question: Tuesday will be an update on the logistics in timing or would it be...?

Spokesperson: Look, I think... I think we have said quite a lot about the logistics, about the timing, should there be more information...

Question: [inaudible]

Spokesperson: Pardon?

Correspondent: You haven't given us a timeline, I am trying to establish [inaudible].

Spokesperson: Well, for example, for example, I did tell you today, if you were paying attention, that the samples would start to be delivered to the laboratories tomorrow. That's something I didn't say yesterday, so I am trying to help you here. Yes, James?

Correspondent: Thank you.

Spokesperson: Oh, no, behind you, I'm sorry. Yes?

Question: No problem. So when is the SG leaving New York? I... maybe you...

Spokesperson: Tuesday.

Question: Tuesday?

Spokesperson: The 3rd of September.

Question: Okay. And has Russia shared any information about the recent incidents in Ghouta? Because Russia said that this is a fabricated incident, etcetera. Have they shared any information... of their information with the SG or with the UN?

Spokesperson: I am not aware of any such interaction along the lines you suggested, no. This will be the last question at the back, okay?

Question: You mentioned the... any use of chemical weapons will be held accountable. In which way will the punishment... what punishment will you establish... what the UN has the power to establish as punishment if it was to be found that somebody used chemical weapons? And we understand the UN is going to find out who... who... if chemical weapons were used, but not who did it, so how that will play out at the end of the day if it was found that somebody used them and then you want to hold that person accountable or that country accountable? How will that work?

Spokesperson: Well, as I said, the Security Council has the primary role in such matters, in maintaining and restoring international peace and security, and including in any case where chemical weapons have been used, and therefore, it would be for the Security Council to determine. The Secretary-General is simply saying that the Council should stand firm and united in agreeing on measures in response to any use of chemical weapons. But of course, it would be for the Council itself to decide on any such measures, should it come to that point.

Question: Would they then probably ask to find out who used them? Would they have the capability to...?

Spokesperson: I am not going to prejudge what the Council may or may not do.

Question: Can I...?

Spokesperson: Yes, Matthew, very, very last question, okay?

Question: Thanks a lot. I really appreciate it. Yeah, much appreciated.

Spokesperson: I am being extra generous to you on a Sunday, okay.

Question: Yeah, I know. Yeah, thank you, I really appreciate it. There is, and it has to... and you... you... you might have seen this one coming. First, I just wanted to ask factually, they are two connected questions, one is whether...

Spokesperson: We only deal in facts here.

Question: Yeah, no, whether... whether... whether Germany did lend a plane [inaudible].

Spokesperson: Yes, they did.

Question: Okay. And my second one has to do with... with an article in today's *New York Times* — that's why I wanted to ask it today and I really appreciate you giving me the opportunity — it's the... it's the... you know, it's "Sunday at Home" of the Secretary-General, so I just wanted to ask you directly, it says it's... I mean, it's a very interesting article, but the section about golf, it says he likes to go golfing, he doesn't have a membership, but he golfs with the Ambassador of Korea. It mentions two different things, and I just wonder, some might say this either shows too much closeness to a country or even ask about the financial implications, even though they may... admittedly may be small, what would you say to those that say that this in some degree undercuts this idea of impartiality, etcetera? What would you say to that?

Spokesperson: I'd say it is complete nonsense, because the Secretary-General didn't mention that he plays golf with many other permanent members of the Security Council. He mentioned one also in the article, for example, the Permanent Representative of San Marino. He's played with others, for example, the United Kingdom Permanent Representative. So he plays golf with any number of people, and I don't see anything wrong with that. If that's a good way [inaudible].

Question: [inaudible]?

Spokesperson: Pardon.

Question: DPRK, Syria, Iran, Eritrea? Just wondering.

Spokesperson: You supply the clubs, I am sure he will play, okay.

Correspondent: Okay.

Spokesperson: Thanks very much. Thanks.

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