


Consultations on the UN Mission in Syria

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What's In Blue

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Council members will be briefed tomorrow morning (30 May) on the UN Supervision Mission in Syria (UNSMIS) in closed consultations by Jean-Marie Guéhenno, deputy to UN-Arab League Joint Special Envoy Kofi Annan. Under-Secretary-General for Peacekeeping Hervé Ladsous will also brief. While the briefing has been on the programme of work since earlier this month (resolution 2043 calls for the Secretary-General to keep the Council informed at least every 15 days), it has taken on greater significance following events over the weekend.

Guéhenno is expected to provide an initial read-out on Annan's meetings during his 28-29 May visit to Damascus, while Ladsous is likely to update Council members on UNSMIS deployment and activities. It is likely that Annan will brief the Council late next week after his travel in the region. (Annan will apparently attend a meeting of the Arab League on 2 June in Doha on the Syrian situation. He is also expected to visit Jordan, Lebanon and Saudi Arabia where the Secretary-General will also be attending a meeting of the UN Counterterrorism Center.)

Council members received a briefing in closed consultations on Sunday (27 May) by Ladsous and UNSMIS head Major General Robert Mood, who had visited el-Houleh, a residential neighborhood near Homs, and confirmed the killings that took place there on 25 and 26 May. France and the UK circulated a draft press statement on Saturday on the incident but apparently Russia broke silence and requested a briefing for further information.

Following Sunday's briefing, Council members issued a press statement condemning the shelling by the Government of Syria as a violation of its commitments under resolutions 2042 and 2043 to cease the use of heavy weapons and withdraw from population centres (SC/10658). Sunday's press statement also called for those responsible to be held accountable, expressed full support of Annan and his six-point plan and for Annan to convey the demands of the Council, in particular to the Government of Syria. (Annan urged Syrian President Bashar al-Assad to take bold steps to stop the violence and release detainees during their meeting today. Annan was also expected to meet with UNSMIS, opposition figures and civil society during his visit.)

The killings in el-Houleh prompted wide-spread condemnation from a number of UN actors and the international community. On 26 May both Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon and Annan jointly condemned the "indiscriminate and disproportionate use of force" as a violation of international law and of the Syrian government's commitments to cease the use of violence and heavy weapons in population centres.

Earlier today the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights said that 108 civilians were killed in the el-Houleh incident, estimating that most of the deaths were due to summary executions and that fewer than 20 deaths were caused by shelling and tank fire. The High Commissioner's office also said that local residents reported that the executions were primarily carried out by a paramilitary group, the Shabihah, that supports government forces.

On 28 May, the Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict also condemned the incident saying that 49 children were among the dead, all of them under 10 years of age.

Meanwhile, media reports indicate that France, Germany, the UK and the US have expelled Syrian diplomats in protest over the el-Houleh incident.

Some Council members are viewing the el-Houleh incident as a possible critical turning point. Many underscore the importance of the press statement, which clearly stated that the Government of Syria violated its commitments and reiterated the need for the government to cease violence in the first instance as required by the six-point plan. On 28 May, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, expressing shock at the el-Houleh incident, said that it was a "situation in which both sides evidently had a hand in the deaths of innocent people." (Sunday's press statement condemned the killings by shooting at close range, but did not apportion blame for them.)

It seems many Council members are of the opinion that it is now vital to think strategically about the Council's ongoing approach to the Syrian situation so as to ensure the success of the UNSMIS mission and avoid full-scale civil war. Possible ways of doing this seem to be increasing pressure on the Syrian Government to meet its commitments, galvanising the opposition in preparation for political dialogue and tackling the threat posed by the recent spate of terrorist attacks. While Council members seem to be in broad agreement that the el-Houleh incident demonstrates how quickly the situation can spiral out of control, it remains unclear if all Council members would advocate a more proactive Council approach.

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