

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

 press.un.org/en/2013/db130809.doc.htm

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

Good afternoon, everyone.

****Syria**

The Secretary-General met last night with Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov for a working dinner to discuss the conflict in Syria, including the escalating humanitarian crisis and the disconcerting rise in sectarian violence. The Secretary-General underscored the need to find a political solution to the conflict and to urgently renew momentum behind the Geneva conference on Syria.

The Secretary-General said that he was encouraged by the resumption of direct negotiations in the Middle East peace process, and that the United Nations would do its utmost to support it. The Secretary-General and the Foreign Minister also discussed the situations in Lebanon and Afghanistan, as well as the situation in the Middle East and North Africa.

****Mali**

The United Nations Stabilization Mission in Mali, known as MINUSMA, will assist the Malian electoral authorities in deploying sensitive materials to Timbuktu, Gao, Kidal and Mopti for the second round of presidential elections, which will be held this Sunday. As it did in the first round, the Mission is providing support to the Malian defence and security forces in implementing the security plan for the elections. Also, as part of its efforts to increase the number of refugees who are able to vote, the UN Mission organized a flight to Néma, Mauritania, to ensure the delivery of voter cards belonging to Malians living in camps in that country.

****Lebanon**

The Force Commander of the UN Interim Force in Lebanon, UNIFIL, Major General Paolo Serra, provided an update on the UN peacekeepers' investigation into the reported incident near Labouneh during the night of 6-7 August.

He said that, even as the investigation proceeds, it is clear that the presence of Israeli soldiers in Lebanon in violation of the Blue Line constitutes a serious breach of the terms of UN Security Council resolution 1701 (2006). General Serra said that UNIFIL has strongly protested the violation to the Israeli Defense Force and called for its full cooperation with the investigations into the incident. He added that a UNIFIL investigation team has already been to the location and continues to work in coordination with the Lebanese Armed Forces on the ground to determine all the facts and circumstances surrounding the incident.

**** Yemen**

The Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) said that funding remains low for critical humanitarian projects in Yemen, particularly for water and sanitation, health, education, protection, and early recovery. Humanitarian organizations have received less than half of the \$702 million they had requested for 2013. The World Food Programme (WFP) faces an \$80 million funding gap for the rest of the year for Yemen.

Ismail Ould Cheikh Ahmed, the Humanitarian Coordinator for Yemen, urged international and regional donors to provide funding for these critical activities, which will have the immediate impact of saving the lives and livelihoods of the most vulnerable Yemenis.

**** Viet Nam**

The Office for the High Commissioner for Human Rights said today that it is dismayed by the resumption of the death penalty in Viet Nam. A 27-year-old man was executed by lethal injection on 6 August, some 18 months after the last execution was reported to have taken place in the country.

The Office said that this resumption represents a major setback in Viet Nam's human rights record. It is also deeply concerned that more than 100 death row prisoners who have exhausted their appeals are now facing imminent execution. The High Commissioner for Human Rights, Navi Pillay, wrote to the Prime Minister of Viet Nam last month, noting that the country still retains the death penalty for several offences that do not meet the threshold of most serious crimes.

The Office urged the Government not to carry out further executions and to join the growing number of Member States that have established a moratorium on the death penalty or abolished this practice altogether. There is more information on the Office's website.

**** Audio-visual Testing**

On Monday, 12 August, the Department of Public Information and other offices at UN Headquarters will be performing a large-scale testing of the new audio-visual conferencing system. During this test, we will be simulating meetings throughout the system to check the performance and work flows during peak demand periods for the forthcoming General Assembly. This exercise will include the simultaneous testing of every conference room and every studio in the facility. Some of this activity may be seen on the IPTV/EZTV system, and you may experience some disruptions during the time of the test.

****Graham Usher**

Lastly, it is with great sadness that we announce the passing of a member of the UN press corps, Graham Usher, who wrote for *Al Ahram* weekly and several other publications. He passed away peacefully at home on Thursday after an illness. His wife, BBC correspondent Barbara Plett, was by his side. Funeral arrangements will be announced in due course.

That's all I have for you. Any questions, please? Yes, please?

****Questions and Answers**

Question: Thank you. My question is related to the Secretary-General's talk with Russian Foreign Minister Mr. Lavrov. Was there anything related to the recent Edward Snowden case?

Associate Spokesperson: No, there is nothing on that to say beyond... there was nothing in terms of details of that meeting beyond what we provided in the readout. Yes, Michelle?

Question: Do you have any update on the chemical weapons investigators and where they're at, when they are planning to go into Syria?

Associate Spokesperson: At this stage, there has been little change from what we have reported for the past few days. The head of the mission, Professor Åke Sellström, and his team are in The Hague, and they are completing their preparations prior to their departure to Syria. At the same time, we are working to finalize the legal and logistical modalities for the investigations on the basis of the agreement reached last month with Syria. And if we have any further updates in the coming days, we will send that around once we have that. Nizar?

Question: Yeah, Farhan, regarding the abduction of one Turkish pilot today in Lebanon and his assistant, do you have any details or anything, any communications with the Turkish community, Government, whether there could be any kind of hostage swap, or would they be willing to come forward and release the abducted Lebanese who have been there in custody for over two years now?

Associate Spokesperson: We don't have any first-hand information on this case, but the basic point of principle is that, for all the people who have been abducted or detained in this conflict, we have called for their release and we would do so in this case, as well. Yes, in the back?

Question: Thank you. The Panel of Experts of the 1718 Committee, the Security Council is supposed to be in Panama next week. So could you once again spell out what you expect coming out from this visit?

Associate Spokesperson: Well, certainly we hope that the team will be able to go about its work and get information. At this stage, of course, this is an initial for the sanctions committee dealing with resolution 1718, which is chaired by the Ambassador of Luxembourg, and so ultimately this group will report back to that team. And we will see what information they have to impart. Matthew?

Question: Sure, thanks, Farhan. Earlier today, the... a... a plane of... called... an Ethiopian military plane went down in Mogadishu in... in flames, some people died on it, but now most people are saying that it was a plane full of weapons, so I wanted to know, given the sanctions regime, whether, to your knowledge, the Somalia/Eritrea Monitoring Group is gone. And I also wanted to ask a question that I have asked all the way back to June about Mr. David Bax of UNMAS [United Nations Mine Action Service] in Somalia. One of the questions that was asked was, who were the private security personnel or armed guards with whom he... he went to the compound on the day of the attack, and... and it... it seems like if they are UN contractors and they are getting paid by the UN, it shouldn't be hard to answer it, but it is yet to be answered. I am wondering if you either have that answer or can provide it today?

Associate Spokesperson: On the latter, as I believe Martin [Nesirky] had mentioned a few days ago, the United Nations Office for Project Services, which is the contracting group regarding Mr. Bax, is looking into this particular case, and we wouldn't have any further comment while it looks into it.

Question: Is he looking into... are they looking into just the sexual harassment allegations or the private security? I wasn't aware...

Associate Spokesperson: We have no comment while they look into the matter.

Question: Could I... okay, there is other... I still want to hear about this... this plane, but I did... I remember... I went back and looked, I think it was 5 July, in this room, when I asked about Mr. Bax. You made a big point of saying, “we always answer your questions, we always send answers,” and I am wondering, should I still be waiting, which I have yet to receive from your Office, so it’s an answer on the questions that I asked about Mr. Bax, or is this is indirectly answering the... the answer that’s gonna be given?

Associate Spokesperson: No, while... as I just made clear, while they are looking into this, we wouldn’t have any further comment. At some point, if we have some answers...

Question: Well, why is Kieran Dwyer sending an answer to... to other if that... if that is the policy... if the policy is that there will be no answer, so I am still wondering why...

Associate Spokesperson: Matthew, I don’t speak for Kieran. Whatever information we have, we’ve provided once we have it. As we did, by the way, with David Bax.

Question: What about the plane?

Associate Spokesperson: Regarding the plane, it is up to the monitoring committee to determine whether it is going to look into this or not. That’s not something for us to comment on until they make that decision. Kristen?

Question: Hi, Farhan. Can you give us any more details on what obstacles remain for the Syrian monitoring team to get into Syria? When you say legal and logistical arrangements are being finalized, is that in terms of where they will go, how they will go? Any more details would be appreciated.

Associate Spokesperson: I am sure they would, but they won’t be provided. Yes?

Question: Yes, I am from VNA. I have questions on Cambodia elections. The opposition party has sent a letter to the UN and asked for the UN to come as an observer for the investigation on the Cambodian elections. So what is the UN reaction to the request?

Associate Spokesperson: We don't have a specific reaction to that request. I would refer you back to the statement we issued last Friday about the Cambodia elections, and our hope that any problems or objections to the elections are handled within the system, within the electoral system. And that remains our standpoint at present. Yes, Nizar?

Question: Okay. Do you consider... does the United Nations consider anyone helping [Jabhat] al-Nusra as helping terrorism?

Associate Spokesperson: We haven't said anything specifically about that. The point is that we are against any further militarization of the conflict in Syria, and so anyone helping any of the armed parties on the ground is essentially creating a worsening situation on the ground. And we have asked for all of the aid to all of the various parties to be ceased, so that they turn away from the military option and towards a negotiated solution. Yes, Matthew?

Question: Sure, Farhan. I want, one, one Haiti question and I have some Great Lakes questions, but on Haiti, as you may have seen, the former DPKO [Department of Peacekeeping Operations] chief, Jean-Marie Guéhenno, has said via Twitter the UN needs to be, come clean about the cholera crisis in Haiti. And I am wondering, given his stature in the, in both having worked here and now as a professor, and I can, some, somehow the, the reports don't seem to be, to be, uh, leaving their mark. Is there some response from the UN to its former head of Peacekeeping saying that the peacekeeping mission in Haiti should come clean or... what's the response to that?

Associate Spokesperson: We wouldn't have any comment about what Mr. Guéhenno said in his private capacity, in his personal capacity. And regarding Haiti, of course, our focus there remains now on trying to combat the spread of cholera. And we continue to do that. Yes?

Question: There have been some reports in the media that the UN is waiting for a letter from the Syrian Government before the chemical weapons team comes in. Is there another? I thought there was already a letter, some sort of understanding between the Government. Is there a further letter that is being waited for? Can you shine any light, confirm or deny that report?

Associate Spokesperson: I wouldn't be able to confirm or deny that. We, of course, remain in touch with our Syrian counterparts, and as I said, we were working to finalize the legal and logistical modalities so that the team can go about its work. Yes?

Question: Farhan, given the recent military developments in Khan al-Assal, does the United Nations feel that it is secure to send a team after all to that area, especially after Al-Nusra has taken over that town?

Associate Spokesperson: Our hope and expectation is that the team would be able to go about its work and with appropriate security conditions permitting. We will have to see how that goes. And, like I said, if there is any further announcement we have to make about the team's work, we will provide it to you at that point. Yes?

Question: Great, thanks a lot. Great Lakes and then a possible one Sri Lanka question. I wanted to ask, it has been announced in the Democratic Republic of Congo that there is gonna be a "national dialogue" led by... by President [Joseph] Kabila, it's gonna involve the President of... of... of neighbouring Republic of Congo and various groups, and I am wondering, since there is a peacekeeping mission and there is also the Mary Robinson good offices role, is there, does the UN have a role in this national dialogue in the Democratic Republic of Congo, and how does it relate to the... to... to the process the Secretary-General has been speaking so much about?

Associate Spokesperson: Regarding a national dialogue, no, the role that we have had diplomatically is the one, as you know, that Mary Robinson is playing in the Great Lakes region as a whole, and she is in touch with all the various Governments, including the Government of the Democratic Republic of Congo. But the national dialogue is, I believe, a separate process.

Question: Okay, and then, then I wanted to ask, uh... uh... Médecins Sans Frontières has said that it has been under attack and is ceasing medical service in Pi... in the Pinga area in the... in the Kivus, and I am wondering what's... both what's the plan, can... can the UN confirm, uh, you know, clashes or violence or threats there, which groups are behind it and what the MONUSCO [United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of Congo] would be doing about that?

Associate Spokesperson: Well, we don't confirm anything for Médecins Sans Frontières, of course. It is for them to do that. We...

Question: Right, what about the Pinga area? Is it... is it safe or it's not safe? And if it's not safe, why not?

Associate Spokesperson: You are well aware of the problems of insecurity throughout the Kivus and we have talked at length about that. The basis for their decision; that would be for them to comment on. Yes? [He later added that MONUSCO reports that, since 5

August, following reports of localized clashes in Pinga, North Kivu Province, its peacekeepers have provided protection to over 450 civilians and four humanitarian workers. The clashes reportedly involved combatants from local armed groups. The Mission is closely monitoring the situation.]

Question: Farhan, do you have any statement regarding the terrorist attack today in Pakistan against worshippers?

Associate Spokesperson: As you know, we have spoken many times about, against terrorist attacks against civilians, and particularly against sectarian attacks. And that remains the case. We have no specific comment about today's attack, but that's very much in line with our condemnation of terrorism in all its forms. Yes?

Question: Yeah, but I mean, I know this may be for MSF to say, but an MSF worker has been killed near Juba. Um... and I am wondering, since there is UNMISS [United Nations Mission in South Sudan] mission there, one when, I guess does it, my question to you is really does it change the U... it's the same thing on the Democratic Republic of Congo; does it change the UN peacekeeping mission's uh... uh... you know, desire to protect civilians and humanitarian workers, the fact that this MSF worker has been killed?

Associate Spokesperson: Our desire to protect humanitarian workers remains the same and remains strong wherever we operate, but we wouldn't have a comment on this. That's again an issue for MSF to talk about.

Question: And on Sri Lanka, could I ask you this, there... there... the live fire incident that I asked about before, there are now, the death toll has risen and the... the... the... the UNP party has asked for an international investigation of the army's use of live fire against protesters of polluted water; is there any response from the UN to that?

Associate Spokesperson: Not at this stage. If that changes, we will let you know. If that's it, have a good weekend, everyone.

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