

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 noon briefing by Martin Nesirky, Spokesperson for the Secretary-General.

Good afternoon. Welcome to the briefing.

**** Syria**

An advance team from the United Nations and the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) has arrived in Damascus, just four days after the OPCW Executive Council and the UN Security Council unanimously endorsed a plan to send them to Syria to begin the process of overseeing the destruction of the country's chemical weapons programme.

The team, which includes 19 OPCW inspectors and 14 UN staff members, went into Syria over land from the Lebanese capital, Beirut. On arrival, the team established a logistics base for its immediate work. In the coming days, their efforts are expected to focus on verifying information provided by the Syrian authorities and the initial planning phase of helping the country destroy its chemical weapons production facilities. We have a press release with more information in my office.

**** Iraq**

The UN Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI) reports that a total of 979 Iraqis were killed and another 2,133 were wounded in acts of terrorism and violence in September. Nickolay Mladenov, the Secretary-General's Special Representative for Iraq, called upon all political leaders to strengthen their efforts to promote national dialogue and reconciliation. He said that political, religious and civil leaders, as well as the security services, must work together to end the bloodshed and ensure that all Iraqi citizens feel equally protected.

**** Libya**

The UN Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL) and the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) have issued a report, which says that the abuse of detainees continues despite the Libyan Government's efforts to end it. The report recommends swift action to transfer detainees held by armed brigades to effective State control and renewed efforts to build the capacity of the criminal justice system.

The report is based on information gathered first hand during the UN Mission's visits to nearly 30 detention centres over two years, including information from detainees, family members, officials and civil society, as well as documentation such as medical reports. The title of the report is "Torture and Deaths in Detention in Libya", and it's available online.

**** Central African Republic**

The United Nations Special Advisers on the Prevention of Genocide and on the Responsibility to Protect expressed their deep concern today over the deterioration in the situation in the Central African Republic. Adama Dieng and Jennifer Welsh called in a press release on the national transitional authorities to take urgent measures to protect the population against the risk of atrocity crimes and to restore the rule of law and public order. And there is a press release available with more details.

And also on the Central African Republic, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) said today that it is providing emergency assistance to around 5,500 families newly displaced by recent violence in the north-west of the country. The agency said that the majority of the displaced are women and children, who are now living in deplorable conditions without shelter and also with no access to safe water. There are close to 400,000 people displaced by the fighting in the Central African Republic, including around 170,000 who have been uprooted by the violence in recent weeks.

**** Darfur**

A police adviser from Sierra Leone serving with the joint African Union-United Nations peacekeeping mission in Darfur (UNAMID) has died in hospital. He died yesterday and he had been seriously wounded in an attack on a patrol on 13 July. Seven peacekeepers from [United Republic of] Tanzania also died in that attack in July.

****Hunger**

According to a new report released today by the UN food agencies, global hunger is down, but millions of people are still not getting enough food. Some 842 million people suffered from chronic hunger between 2011 and 2013. The number is down from 868 million reported for the 2010-2012 period. The vast majority of these people live in developing regions, while 15.7 million live in developed countries. And the full report is available online.

****Press Conferences**

On Thursday and Friday, there will be an important meeting here at the United Nations Headquarters on migration and development. Tomorrow, at 11:30 a.m., there will be a press conference here ahead of that meeting. Speakers will include the Deputy Secretary-General [Jan Eliasson] and Peter Sutherland, who's the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on International Migration and Development.

And then at 12:30 p.m., following the noon briefing, there will be a press conference by Ambassador Agshin Mehdiyev, the Permanent Representative of Azerbaijan and the President of the Security Council for the month of October. And he will brief you on the Council's programme of work for the month. As you know, Azerbaijan has now replaced Australia in the rotating presidency of the Security Council.

And that's what I have. Questions, please?

****Questions and Answers**

Question: Sure. Thanks a lot. I wanted to ask you something yesterday about the DRC (Democratic Republic of the Congo) and now there's something else, as well. One is, there's been a reported escape, or assisted escape, from prison in Buvavu of two FARDC, Congolese Army, suspects of human rights violations. And I wanted to know, what, if anything, MONUSCO (United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo) is doing about that. And also, there are reports of Congolese Army abuses, including looting and torturing of children, in Ituri, areas they've taken back over from rebel groups, and I wanted to know what MONUSCO's take on that is. It seems like these are two... the allegation at least in the Bukavu case is that the governmental forces helped these two escape and are helping keep them on the run. What's MONUSCO's understanding?

Spokesperson: I'll check with the Mission. Next question? Yes?

Question: Thanks, Martin. There was a lot of talk about Syria during the general debate, including comments from a representative of the Syrian Government. First off, does the Secretary-General believe that now is an appropriate time for refugees of that crisis to begin returning to Syria? And second, is the UN in any position to provide aid to those or facilitate the movement of people who do heed the appeals from certain officials to return to the country?

Spokesperson: I think it's self-evident that conditions in Syria are little short of disastrous and anybody who has fled the country or indeed been displaced within the country has moved because they feel in imminent danger, they and their families. Therefore, it's for those families and those people to decide if and when they wish to return; and in the meantime, it is incumbent on the international community to ensure that they are both protected and helped in every way possible. And that's why the United Nations in the surrounding countries and, indeed, further afield is helping. And of course, the countries on the immediate border of Syria have shown extraordinary generosity these past two and a half years, and most particularly, in recent months, as the numbers have grown dramatically. That's why there was a meeting at the beginning of this week, just yesterday, in Geneva, looking at how to better support those countries that are on the border with Syria and to ensure that they receive adequate funding to help them to look after the refugees who have fled. No one should be seeking to persuade people to return if those people are not yet ready to do so, because they do not feel safe to do so. That's the essence of the work of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees and the rest of the team at the refugee agency. Yes, Saloua?

Question: In the readout of the meeting yesterday between the [Secretary-General] and Mr. [Nabil] ElAraby of the Arab League, under the context of the Geneva II Peace Conference on Syria, it said they discussed the importance of a unified delegation on the opposition side. Now, is Mr. [Nasser] al-Kidwa still the deputy to Mr. [Lakhdar] Brahimi? What's he doing? Does he have any role in unifying the opposition? We never hear of him. Thank you.

Spokesperson: Well, Mr. Brahimi has himself spoken about this. The Secretary-General has spoken about this, most recently when he met the Syrian National Coalition, and particularly the president of that coalition, Mr. [Ahmed] al-Jarba. In that meeting, he urged the National Coalition to reach out to other opposition groups and agree on a representative and united delegation. So, the comments from the meeting with Secretary-General ElAraby yesterday simply helped to reinforce that message. As for Mr. al-Kidwa, he remains very active in this and he was present at the meeting that was held last week looking at the Geneva II Conference that was held with a number of Member States. Other questions, please?

Question: Sure, I want to ask about Haiti, visas, and then, if I can, about this briefing itself. On Haiti, I wanted to know, there's been a report in the media in Haiti that one of the things agreed to in the meeting between the Prime Minister and the Secretary-General was something called a joint commission to work on cholera that would begin its work on 10 October. Is that the case?

Spokesperson: The case is that the Secretary-General and the Prime Minister, as we said in our readout, discussed efforts, joint efforts, to eradicate cholera, amongst other matters, including relocating internally displaced people. And there is a senior coordinator within the UN system for the cholera response in Haiti, and he will remain in close touch with the Haitian Government and authorities, particularly with the aim of having joint efforts to eradicate cholera.

Question: Is there anything to this 10 October date in Haiti, [inaudible] dot com? They've sort of put a date... they have made it seem like kind of a formal kicking off of a new project?

Spokesperson: As I say, the senior coordinator from the United Nations is in close contact with the Haitian authorities and I don't have anything beyond that at this point.

Question: Thanks. On visas, since we're hitting the end of this general debate week here. There are probably more, but there are at least two allegations that I've heard of, of the host country denying visas for people to be present. One is a Palestinian counsellor, [inaudible]. And there's obviously, [Omer Hassan A. al-]Bashir; Sudan said that the [United States] never responded to their request for a visa for him to come. So, I wanted to ask you, is the Secretary-General... does he have any role under the Host Country Agreement and does he have any comment on these two and any others that he's aware of, denials or non-action on visa requests?

Spokesperson: Well, visa requests are a matter for the host country and the Secretary-General does not have a specific role in that. I would refer you to the host authorities.

Correspondent: And thanks a lot. I wanted to ask you this one, just to see whether...

Spokesperson: I'm looking to see if anyone else has any questions around the room. That is not the case.

Correspondent: Okay. I don't know how you'll respond to this, but I just wanted... I...

Spokesperson: That's why we ask questions, Matthew.

Question: I understand there was a lot of interest in the speech of the Prime Minister of Israel, Mr. [Benjamin] Netanyahu, and there have been other times where I'd wished the briefing had been postponed to hear, for example, the Foreign Minister of Rwanda. But, I wanted to know... I just want to know what the policy is, because, obviously, every day in this last seven days, at noon there's been somebody speaking. What's the policy on when the briefing is postponed for a particular Head of State, and also, what's the policy on... currently, Iran is speaking, giving its response to what Mr. Netanyahu said, and we're, obviously, having the briefing at the same time. So, I just wanted to sort of ask you that, in an open-ended fashion, what is the policy?

Spokesperson: I think journalists who are covering hard news do understand why I would not think it advisable to go head-to-head with Prime Minister Netanyahu. He's the Head of Government, not the Head of State, by the way; that's Shimon Peres. And, that's the first thing. The second is that there is no hard and fast rule. It's simply to try to help journalists, like yourself, to be able to cover things to the best of their ability. The fact of the matter is that the journalists in this building, for the most part, were focused today very much on what Prime Minister Netanyahu would have to say, and he was the last speaker in the general debate; and therefore, I took the decision that it would be better not to go head to head with Prime Minister Netanyahu, but to listen to what he had to say and to allow the journalists who are covering him to be able to listen, too, and not be... have their attention divided by wondering whether there was anything going to be said at the briefing, for example, about the chemical weapons team that went in today. As for the rights of reply, that's a separate matter. That is a procedural matter. This was a speech that was the last one in the general debate.

Question: And I really appreciate that. My only question would just be... since you're using this term "hard news" and that this is harder news than other Heads of State or Heads of Government. Isn't a definition of "hard news" hearing what the other side has to say, which is taking place right now?

Spokesperson: I think you understand the distinction, Matthew, and I think that most journalists in this room and watching this would understand the distinction.

Question: Did you take a poll? Is that based on any polling data?

Spokesperson: It's based on my experience, for a quarter of a century — far longer than you, Matthew — as a journalist. Thanks very much. Good afternoon, thank you.

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