

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

 press.un.org/en/2013/db130731.doc.htm

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.

**** Great Lakes**

The Special Envoy for the Great Lakes region, Mary Robinson, delivered a message today in Nairobi, on behalf of the Secretary-General, to the Summit of Heads of State and Government of the International Conference on the Great Lakes Region of Africa.

The Secretary-General said he remained concerned by the continuing reports of serious human rights violations and called on all armed groups to fully disarm, and on all parties to fully respect human rights and international humanitarian law. He also said that any acts that undermine or target the efforts of the United Nations on the ground to protect civilians and deliver urgently needed humanitarian relief would not be tolerated.

In the message, the Secretary-General said the meeting of the International Conference was a significant opportunity to build on the momentum generated by the Peace, Security and Cooperation Framework for the Democratic Republic of the Congo and the Great Lakes region.

**** Afghanistan**

In its latest report, the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) says that the number of Afghan civilians killed or injured in the first six months of 2013 rose by 23 per cent compared to the same period last year. More than 1,300 civilian deaths and 2,500 injuries were recorded for the first half of this year.

The rise in civilian casualties reverses the decline recorded during the same period in 2012, and marks a return to the high numbers of civilian deaths and injuries documented in 2011. The main reasons for this were the increased use of improvised explosive devices and an increase in civilian casualties from ground engagements between Afghan security forces and anti-Government fighters. We have copies of the press release, as well as the report available in my Office.

**** Eritrea**

John Ging, the Operations Director of the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), has welcomed improving cooperation between the United Nations and the Eritrean Government following a two-day visit to the country.

He said that UN agencies are working with the Government to help the Eritrean people to help themselves, and that Eritrea continues to make impressive progress towards achieving several Millennium Development Goals. He said that the United Nations is committed to working with the Government in support of their goal to halve hunger by 2015. But he also noted continuing challenges, saying that the delayed rains this year are a pressing reminder of the difficult climatic conditions faced by the Eritrean people.

****United Nations Children's Fund**

The UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) has launched an initiative today that urges people around the world to join global, national or local movements to end violence against children and bring together new ideas to focus collective action on this goal. The End Violence against Children initiative builds on growing popular outrage that erupted following attacks against children, such as the shooting of the then 14-year-old Malala Yousafzai in Pakistan, the fatal shooting of 26 pupils and teachers in Newtown, Connecticut, and gang rapes of girls in India and in South Africa. There is more information on this on UNICEF's website.

****Heavy Rainfall**

In Indonesia, torrential rains have caused widespread flooding in Central Maluku over the past couple of days. The National Disaster Management Agency reports that more than 5,000 people have been displaced and at least nine people have been killed. Also, over the past few days, heavy rainfall, landslides and floods have affected communities in Karen state in southern Myanmar. The Government of Myanmar has evacuated thousands of people along the Salween River to higher ground and set up relief camps to accommodate vulnerable families. The Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) says it is monitoring the situation in both countries and stands ready to assist.

****Press Conference**

Tomorrow, the Working Group on the Use of Mercenaries will hold a press conference on the use of private military and security companies in UN peace and humanitarian operations in the field. The press conference will begin at 1:30 p.m. here in this room, and it will be chaired by Anton Katz of South Africa, who is the Chairman of the Working Group.

Questions, please? Yes, Ivan? Well done.

****Questions and Answers**

Question: Thank you. Do you have any details on crash-landing of the Russian helicopter working for the United Nations in Ethiopia? There were reports that several people are in hard conditions and at hospitals.

Spokesperson: We're aware of the reports and we're trying to find out more about that and, as we have more details available, then we'll let you know, but I don't have anything at the moment. Yes, Pamela?

Question: Martin, do you have any updated information on Dr. Sellström and Angela Kane visit and what the sites will be? Thank you.

Spokesperson: I don't. I'm aware of your interest and certainly as soon as I have some information for you, I'll let you know. But I don't have anything further than what Eduardo has already told you in the past few days. Okay. Yes, Nizar?

Question: Yeah, Martin, the Austrians pulled out today from the Golan — 41 of them. What is the total number now after the Philippines came and what's the position of the UNDOF at this stage?

Spokesperson: Well, as of 29 July — so the day before yesterday — UNDOF has 1,166 troops and I can give you the breakdown if you would like: Fiji (501); India (193); Philippines (339); Nepal (130); and three staff officers from Ireland. And as for the situation in the Golan, of course it remains volatile; there are clashes between the Syrian Armed Forces and armed members of the opposition that continue in the UNDOF area of operations and including in the area of separation. And UNDOF will continue to carry out its mandate, which is to monitor the ceasefire between Israel and Syria, and it's continuing to do that in what is obviously an extremely challenging environment. Yes, Nizar?

Question: To follow up on that, there was a report talking about a Saudi shipment — a boat from Israel to the rebels — that is going to be handed over to the rebels in that region. Should that happen, would it be unnoticed by the UNDOF?

Spokesperson: I'm not aware of those reports, Nizar. Matthew?

Question: Thanks, Martin, I wanted to ask you about the Democratic Republic of the Congo. I wanted to... one very specific question, then a more general one. They... they... there was a MONUSCO [United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo] press conference today in which they said... they described a joint surveillance cells that they had established with the forty-first battalion... commando battalion in Sake-Goma, which is the security zone... since this is one of the two battalions that was implicated in the rapes in Minova... I'm really... I remain curious, is it possible to get... one, is this... does this involve support... is this support for purposes of the human rights due diligence policy to establish these joint surveillance cells? What's the current, you know, tally of actual arrests or indictments made for those rapes, and is it possible to know which units of the Congolese Army MONUSCO would be providing support to, for purposes of the human rights due diligence policy as part of its newly announced disarmament initiative to begin in 24 hours?

Spokesperson: Well, on the middle question, that's one for the authorities. On the last part of your question and the first part of your question, for operational reasons with regard to the present circumstances, the Mission is not providing a full list of which units it is operating with and would support. So that's the first bit. The second is with regard to the broader question you raised a number of times, the Department of Peacekeeping Operations is simply not putting into the public domain that information.

Question: Then, I just... one follow-up because, I mean, generally how could it be... how could the UN have a policy publicly announced like the human rights due diligence policy, which says they won't support abusive units and then refuse to disclose which units they do support, and when you're saying it's up to the Congolese authorities to disclose the arrests at least as... as described by... by Patricia O'Brien this involved... the UN must seek that information in order to make its risk assessment of potentials of abuse arising from its support. Is it an entirely secret policy?

Spokesperson: No, no, not at all. Those two parts are not mutually exclusive. It's for the authorities in the Democratic Republic of the Congo to provide information into the public domain on what arrests have or have not been made, who has been charged, who has been prosecuted. That's self-evidently for the authorities, the Congolese authorities to do. It is not... that does not mean that it's not possible for them also to provide that information to the peacekeeping mission there. And with regard to the more general point, this policy is about a process. You don't decide from one day to the other if a unit has been accused of some kind of infractions — that is investigated under that policy and, of course, by the authorities, and that's a process.

Question: Can I just... thanks a lot... I just wanted to get this out of the way. I wanted to ask two general things.

Spokesperson: Just wait a second. I can see other hands in the room. Okay? And I'm going to... yes? And then... and then I'm going to Joseph. Yes, please.

Question: The ALBA countries just announced, Venezuela, Cuba and so on, just announced they are lodging a complaint to the UN regarding the American spy programme revealed by Edward Snowden. So I wanted to know, first off, have you heard anything? Have you received anything regarding this complaint? And what's the procedure? How does it work when a country lodges a complaint with the UN?

Spokesperson: Well, I'm not aware of that specific complaint that you refer to. We can certainly check on it. And of course, it would depend on the nature of any correspondence or appeal made to the United Nations how you would respond. So I would have to look into that further.

Question: If a country lodges a complaint with the UN, does that trigger an automatic response from the UN? Does that mean that you have to provide a response?

Spokesperson: As I've said, that depends on the nature but, for example, if a Member State or a group of Member States writes a letter to the Secretary-General, then diplomacy and indeed, common courtesy, would suggest that there would be some kind of reply. It's a different matter what that reply would contain. Joe?

Question: Martin, on Syria, can you confirm that Khan al-Assal is one of the three sites and the fact that the other two sites were proposed by Western Governments? Is that a sign of progress in your view that the Syrian Government has agreed to those two sites?

Spokesperson: Well, as I said to Pamela, I don't have any further updates at the moment on the outcome of the mission by Dr. Sellström and Ms. Kane to Damascus. Once I have that, I will let you know.

Question: Okay, but the Syrians only proposed one site so and they've agreed to three. That means that two were not proposed by them, but by Western Governments. Is that a sign of progress?

Spokesperson: Joe, as I say, you can come at it from a different angle, but at this point, I don't have anything further to add. Yes, please, Benny?

Question: Yesterday, in the Quartet statement... ended with saying they will meet soon to decide...

Spokesperson: Well, they intend to meet.

Question: Intend to meet... Is there anything concrete on that? Any planned meeting or...?

Spokesperson: That's a good question. I don't have anything further. I also saw that. I haven't seen any update since that statement was issued with that intention as the last sentence; mainly the Quartet intends to meet soon at the envoys-level to discuss next steps. Obviously, they've also said that they are determined to lend effective support to the efforts of the parties and they've also expressed their appreciation for the efforts made by [United States] Secretary [of State John] Kerry and [United States] President [Barack] Obama. Once I hear anything further, then obviously we can update you.

Question: Is there any concern at least... a concern at least as far as the UN is concerned about the possibility of how to put it delicately... of harming the negotiations?

Spokesperson: [inaudible]

Question: Exactly... of harming such delicate negotiations by involvement of too many players, including Russia, the European Union, and the UN.

Spokesperson: Well, first of all, the Quartet is a well-established mechanism and it obviously includes the United States, and it includes the Russian Federation and the EU and the United Nations and they have worked in the past to coordinate efforts and I think it would be seen in that light should they meet again at the envoys-level in the time ahead, but I don't have any further details on that at the moment. Pamela?

Question: My question is a variation on Benny's, which was just that...it was good to have the Quartet statement... is there... are there any preliminary EU, UN discussions about when and where the Quartet meetings will be?

Spokesperson: Just to be very careful here, this is at the envoys-level not the principals-level that we're talking about and they've said that they intend to meet soon at that level. Once we have some details, I'll let you know.

Question: But no preliminary discussions even on the envoy-level?

Spokesperson: I don't have anything about it.

Question: All right, and then there was a Taliban statement that was put out about the UNAMA statement report on Afghanistan's civilian casualties saying it was not... that those are not what they considered civilian casualties. Is it UNAMA themselves who determine that they are civilians in terms of the casualties? Are there any other UN agencies that are involved?

Spokesperson: This is UNAMA's report and they do extremely careful work on this, that's the first thing. The second thing is that it's very easy for others to point the finger in a different direction. I think it's obvious that there is a very clear pattern here that goes back a number of years and what we've seen in this past reporting period is an unfortunate return to higher figures, meaning more people dead, civilians dead, than in the past. Nizar? And then I'm coming back to Matthew. Yes, and Evelyn, I've seen you.

Question: Martin, some Israeli television networks today broadcast footage of racial attacks against Palestinians including the murder of a young man called Rushdi Tamimi. Is there any reaction from United Nations about these new revelations and what kind of action usually they take when something comes to light?

Spokesperson: I need to check into that, Nizar. I don't have anything on that. Matthew and then Evelyn, yes?

Question: I have a question on Mali but I wanted to just finish on DRC. I wanted to ask... this seems to be something that's right in the UN's mandate to answer, which is whether the Geneva Conventions apply to the operation that MONUSCO has... that the Intervention Brigade or MONUSCO has just announced, i.e., would it be making the Intervention Brigade a party to an armed conflict? And the other question has to do with the drone... with the... Hervé Ladsous announced during the Bastille Day in France that the drone contract had been signed... he said it's been signed. So I'm wondering... I haven't seen it... I've checked various databases that are publicly available. What's the company that won? And if it's not yet public, how could the UN be signing a contract declaring a winner and not have it be public? Is it public and what is the name of the company?

Spokesperson: I will check. I don't believe it is public, firstly. Secondly, there is a very clear procurement process that's in place, and with regard to the first part of your question, the mandate that the peacekeeping operation has in the DRC is fully compliant with international humanitarian law. Yes, Evelyn?

Question: Just to be certain the drones that are being used are for observation and not for shooting something, aren't they? And...

Spokesperson: Well, yes, just to deal with that. These are unarmed aerial vehicles and unmanned aerial vehicles. They are for use as reconnaissance in an area that is obviously rather difficult to cover on foot or indeed in vehicles on the ground.

Question: Right, and also do you expect any reaction to Saudi Arabia convicting and sentencing a website editor for blasphemy and that includes prison and 600 lashes and other nice things? He had started a debate on religion. Is that something that's come to your attention yet, or has to percolate through the UN human rights body?

Spokesperson: Well, we'll certainly check with our colleagues who cover that part of the world from a human rights perspective. Joe, I saw your hand in the air and then last question after that will be Ivan.

Question: It was indeed. Thank you. We know how that Facebook among many other American social media companies provided information to the National Security Agency when asked and now there's a story that the UN Monitoring Group on Somalia and Eritrea asked Facebook for information about pirates in Somalia and Facebook refused. Are you disappointed by this? Do you think that they, Facebook, should cooperate with the UN the way they do with the US?

Spokesperson: Well, I saw that story, too, but I think you need to ask either the Security Council or the Monitoring Group, themselves. I don't have anything for you on that. Last question, Ivan?

Question: Thank you. What can we...what outcome can we expect from today's meeting of the Committee on resolution 1718 (2006) on DPRK?

Spokesperson: I think that would be something you would need to ask the Chairperson of the Committee. I would need to obviously see what comes out of it, and then if we were to have any response, I would let you know. I understand your interest.

Thank you very much. Have a good afternoon. Thank you.

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