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**9 JANUARY 2009**

**Daily Press Briefing by the Offices of the Spokesperson for the Secretary-General and the Spokesperson for the General Assembly President**

The following is a near-verbatim transcript of today’s noon briefing by Michèle Montas, Spokesperson for the Secretary-General, and Enrique Yeves, Spokesperson for the President of the General Assembly.

Briefing by Spokesperson for the Secretary-General

\*\*Guests at Noon Today

Our guests at the noon briefing today, again, will be John Ging, Director of Operations in Gaza for the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) (via video link from Gaza), and John Holmes, Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and United Nations Emergency Relief Coordinator, who will [update](http://www.un.org/News/briefings/docs/2009/090109_Gaza.doc.htm) you on the humanitarian situation on the ground today.

\*\*Security Council on Gaza

The Security Council [voted](http://www.un.org/press/en/2009/sc9567.doc.htm) last night, as you know, to adopt a resolution that called for an immediate, durable and fully respected ceasefire, leading to the full withdrawal of Israeli forces from Gaza.  In a resolution adopted by 14 votes to none, with the United States abstaining, the Council also called for the unimpeded provision and distribution throughout Gaza of humanitarian assistance, and it condemned all violence and hostilities directed against civilians and all acts of terrorism.

Speaking after the vote, the Secretary-General [said](http://www.un.org/press/en/2009/sgsm12043.doc.htm) that he was heartened and relieved at the Council’s adoption of the resolution, telling Council members, “Your decision signals the will of the international community.  It must be fully respected by all parties to this conflict.”  He said that a ceasefire would open the way for the United Nations to resume urgently the delivery of humanitarian aid, food and medical supplies.

The Secretary-General added that his visit to the region next week will focus on helping to ensure that the ceasefire is implemented and that urgent humanitarian assistance reaches those in need, and the visit would also encourage the diplomatic efforts currently under way.

\*\*Secretary-General’s Press Conference

The Secretary-General will provide more details about his forthcoming trip to the Middle East when he holds his first press conference of the year next Tuesday.  That will happen in this Room at 10:30 a.m. and, as usual, will take the place of that day’s noon briefing.

\*\* Gaza Humanitarian

Our guests will shortly brief you about the humanitarian situation in Gaza.  I just wanted to clarify some of the facts in yesterday’s shooting incident involving drivers contracted by the UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) near the Erez checkpoint in Gaza.  After the convoy was fired upon, UNRWA says, the driver of one of the vehicles had been killed; another sustained severe injuries to the stomach; and a third was shot in the arm.  You heard John Ging talking about that yesterday.  There was, apparently, some confusion yesterday.  UNRWA suspended movement of staff with immediate effect.  UNRWA will resume operations once security could be guaranteed.

In a separate incident, UNRWA’s head mechanic of the Gaza Field Office had been killed in his home on Monday.  The family had been evacuated on Wednesday, but the body could not be evacuated.  UNRWA had some staff that tried to approach the house yesterday to evacuate the body, but they also had come under fire.  Those were decisions given by John Ging yesterday.

At the same time, the Relief and Works Agency has made clear that it is not pulling out of Gaza, with core international staff and the network of 9,000 local staff remaining there.  Emergency shelters are open and continue to host people.  There are still distribution centres where people could -– if they could manage to get there –- receive food.

Meanwhile, the World Food Programme (WFP) noted that, despite the restrictions owing to a lack of trucks, actual services are continuing.  WFP has not suspended operations at all.  And WFP Executive Director Josette Sheeran today arrived at the Rafah crossing at the border with Egypt, to get firsthand information and discuss the situation there.  We have more information, as well, in the Geneva briefing notes today.  And, of course, you will get all the details from the two Johns in a few minutes.

\*\*Human Rights Council on Gaza

High Commissioner for Human Rights Navi Pillay told a special session of the Human Rights Council, which met today to discuss “the grave violations of human rights in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including the recent aggression in the occupied Gaza Strip”, that the violence must stop.  She said that the ceasefire called for by the Security Council must be implemented immediately.

In her address to the special session, Pillay stressed unequivocally that international human rights law must apply in all circumstances and at all times.  She strongly urged the parties to the conflict “to fulfil their obligations under international humanitarian law to collect, care for and evacuate the wounded and to protect and respect health workers, hospitals, and medical units and ambulances”.  The High Commissioner suggested that the Human Rights Council should consider authorizing a mission to assess violations committed by both sides in the conflict in order to establish the relevant facts and ensure accountability.  “I remind this Council that violations of international humanitarian law may constitute war crimes for which individual criminal responsibility may be invoked,” she said.

It is the session today, following a request by Egypt, on behalf of the Arab Group and the African Group, Pakistan, on behalf of the Organization of the Islamic Conference, and Cuba, on behalf of the Non-Aligned Movement.  They asked for that session of the Human Rights Council.

\*\* Lebanon

United Nations Special Coordinator for Lebanon, Michael Williams, met today with Lebanese President Michel Sleiman and Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri to discuss regional events and the Secretary-General’s forthcoming visit to the region.  He said after meeting Berri that he and the Speaker had agreed that utmost vigilance was required during this period to avoid any tension from spreading to Lebanon.  He said his talks had focused on the incident that took place yesterday along the south Lebanon border.  The United Nations is encouraged by the immediate measures taken by the Lebanese Army, in very close cooperation with the UN Interim Force in Lebanon, to control the situation and to prevent further incidents from taking place.  We have a statement from Michael Williams upstairs.

Also today, a UNIFIL patrol found an old weapons cache inside two disused bunkers in south Lebanon.  The cache includes 34 rockets and some boxes of ammunition that were placed in two old bunkers covered by camouflage nets.  There is no sign of any recent use of the bunkers, and the weapons appear to date from the period of the 2006 conflict.

\*\* Somalia

A United Nations technical team will visit Nairobi and Addis Ababa next week to look into how the Organization can support the African Union Peacekeeping Mission in Somalia (AMISOM).  The Political Office for Somalia and the Departments of Peacekeeping Operations, Field Support and Political Affairs will be represented in the team.  And the Secretary-General’s Special Representative for Somalia, Ahmedou Ould-Abdallah, said that AMISOM must get material and financial support from the United Nations that would make it possible for its troops to remain effective on the ground in Somalia.  He thanked Burundi and Uganda whose troops make up most of the AMISOM forces.

Next week’s visit, Ould-Abdallah said, follows the partial withdrawal of Ethiopian troops from Somalia.  He added that Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon was also in discussions with regional leaders to ensure that AMISOM receives the necessary support.

\*\* Somalia Humanitarian

In other news, the World Food Programme reports that gunmen shot and killed one of its staff members yesterday near Mogadishu.  This is the second killing of a WFP humanitarian worker in Somalia in three days.  Forty-nine-year-old food monitor Mohamud Omar Moallim was killed during a distribution to displaced people, about 10 kilometres north-west of Mogadishu, the agency says.  The gunmen then put his body in a WFP vehicle and drove off.  A short time later, they pushed the body from the vehicle and drove off.

Despite the challenging security circumstances in Somalia, WFP has managed to provide food aid to more than 1.5 million needy people in the country each month.  WFP shipped some 260,000 metric tons of food to Somalia in 2008, almost four times what it provided in 2007.

\*\* Sudan

The United Nations Mission in the Sudan (UNMIS) today congratulated the Government of National Unity and the people of the Sudan on the occasion of the fourth anniversary of the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA).  In a statement, the Mission commended the parties to the Agreement for their achievements to date, including the maintenance of the ceasefire.

Now, as implementation of the Agreement enters another year, the milestones ahead, ranging from elections and border demarcation to the launch of the disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) of ex-combatants, will require the redoubled commitment of both the parties and the international community.

\*\* Democratic Republic of the Congo

Security matters, including possible ceasefire and cessation of hostilities agreements, have dominated the third day of the Nairobi talks between the Congolese and the CNDP [Congrès national pour la défense du people] rebel group.  That’s according to the co-mediator, former Tanzanian leader Benjamin Mkapa, who was speaking after the adjournment of the talks.  Mkapa later met and briefed his co-mediator Olusegun Obasanjo, the Secretary-General’s Special Envoy for the Great Lakes Region.  Obasanjo was returning from three days of consultations with key players in Kinshasa, Kigali and eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo.  The talks will resume tomorrow under the chairmanship of the Kenyan Foreign Minister, representing President Mwai Kibaki.

\*\* Sri Lanka -- UNHCR

The United Nations Refugee Agency is concerned over the deteriorating situation in Sri Lanka’s east following a significant increase in the number of killings, abductions and injuries in areas of return during the last few months.  In November alone, the United Nations recorded 24 civilian deaths in Batticaloa district.  UNHCR is also concerned about the negative impact these security incidents may have on the sustainability of the return process for internally displaced people.

Most of the more than 200,000 people displaced during fighting between Government forces and the Liberation Tamil Tigers of Eelam in the eastern districts have returned home over the past two years.

UNHCR is also closely monitoring the rapidly developing situation in Sri Lanka’s north, where some 250,000 people remain displaced due to the ongoing conflict.

\*\*UNHCR -– Refugees/Migration

And then finally, the UN Refugee Agency says the Mediterranean Sea has become an “asylum route” for people fleeing violence and persecution.  According to UNHCR estimates, more than 67,000 people crossed to Europe by sea in 2008.  Over half of them arrived in Italy and Malta, mostly after transiting through Libya.  The vast majority applied for asylum, and more than half of them were found to be in need of international protection.

Another major route for those fleeing violence and persecution is across the Gulf of Aden from Somalia.  Final 2008 statistics from the UNHCR office in Yemen show that more than 50,000 people made the crossing in smugglers’ boats last year, a 70 per cent increase from 2007.  At least 590 drowned; more than 350 were reported missing.  Most of the deaths were attributed to smugglers forcing passengers overboard far from shore, in order to avoid detection by the Yemeni authorities.  UNHCR has improved reception conditions in Yemen, and has also carried out information campaigns in the Horn of Africa to warn people about the dangers of using smugglers.  There is more information in the UNHCR note upstairs.

\*\*Press Conference Today

And at 3 p.m. today, there will be a [press conference](http://www.un.org/News/briefings/docs/2009/090109_Takasu.doc.htm) by Ambassador Yukio Takasu, Permanent Representative of Japan, on Japan’s role as a member of the Security Council.

I will take your questions very briefly, if you have any, and then we’ll have Enrique briefly, he says.

\*\*Questions and Answers

Question:   You mentioned Judge Pillay’s speech to the Human Rights Council session yesterday or today…

Spokesperson:     Today.

Question:   …in Geneva.  Is that speech and/or any of the other proceedings of that meeting something that would be available to us?

Spokesperson:     It is.  They are on the Web, and they have the full statements there.  We have them in hard copy also in my Office.

Question:   What is the Secretary-General’s response to a letter on the racks today from the Syrian Ambassador concerning his protest over United Nations staffers’ receipt of holiday gifts of bottles of wine produced from grapes harvested and bottles made in the occupied Syrian Golan, in alleged violation of United Nations resolutions?

Spokesperson:     I don’t have an answer on that, but I will try to find out for you.

Question:   How many people received such bottles?

Spokesperson:     I have absolutely no idea, but I will try to find out for you.

Question:   And secondly, just out of curiosity, what is that little TV there?

Spokesperson:     It’s just so that the person sitting here, which is going to be John Holmes, will be able to talk to John Ging directly without having to break his neck.

Question:   A court in Cambodia has formally accepted a corruption complaint against a top official of the United Nations-backed Tribunal in Cambodia.  So, given the United Nations involvement in that court, what does that mean for the continuing service of that official and what was the finding of the United Nations investigation of whether employees of the court had to pay for their jobs?

Spokesperson:     I’ll get into this for you.  We have been following quite extensively the alleged corruption cases -– that we have denounced before.  So we’ll get an answer to you.

Question:   One, kind of a logistical question now.  Down in the basement there is a meeting, I guess, this afternoon.  A room is booked for bid opening for the Capital Master Plan and Skanska bid opening, but it says “closed”.  So I wanted to know whether it is the United Nations policy that openings of bids are, in fact, closed.

Spokesperson:     Yes, I mean, they are not available to journalists.  They are available to the companies.

Question:   They are opening it up to determine who is the lowest bidder?  I mean, I thought, when they do that in procurement, it’s open, but when they do it here, it’s closed?

Spokesperson:     Well, I’ll try to find out why it’s closed, but I think it’s not uncommon to close bids in cases like this.

Question:   I mean, it’s the bid opening.  They are going to open the envelopes.  And the idea is that, usually, when they do that, it can be viewed, to make sure that the lowest bid is, in fact, selected.  It’s up to you, I mean, if you could find out…

Spokesperson:     Well, you can be sure that it is going to be the case, but, at any rate, we’ll try to find out why this should be or should not be open.

[Following the briefing by General Assembly Spokesman:]

Question:   Michèle, could I just ask –- maybe you said it earlier, but what was the Secretary-General’s reaction to the fact that Hamas and Israel have not stopped fighting, despite this resolution?  What is the response to the usual critics who say the Security Council and the entire Organization is just… the credibility has just dropped to a new low, because whatever is said here –- nobody seems to pay any attention to?

Spokesperson:     I would only say that the resolution was passed last night, as you know, very late.  There are discussions continuing with all the parties.  It is being done through diplomatic channels, it was mentioned in the Security Council resolution that was adopted yesterday, and those discussions are continuing.  In fact, they are intensifying.  So that’s what is happening right now.

Question:   Does the Secretary-General agree with the General Assembly’s comments regarding the effectiveness, the minimalist approach by the Security Council?

Spokesperson:     Well, I think the Secretary-General does not have an opinion on what the President of the General Assembly says.

Question:   Can you say, in terms of what’s intensifying, is the Secretary-General… who has he been on the phone with, in terms of regional leaders?  And can we say that he is concerned, or dismayed -– whatever you want to say -– about the fact that the ceasefire has not taken effect?

Spokesperson:     Well, he is working now on those diplomatic channels, and I am not going to reveal who he talked to at this point.  And I will, of course, let you know when the time comes.

I would like to invite our guests today.

Briefing by Spokesperson for General Assembly President

Good afternoon to everybody.  Let me be really brief today, because I know that you all really want to hear the news from Gaza directly.

Let me say that President of the General Assembly Miguel d’Escoto welcomes the resolution passed last night as an important step.  He recognizes that politics, whether we like it or not, is the art of the possible.  And this resolution reflects a minimalist response of the Security Council to a horrific aggression.  The Council’s action, important as it is, was neither prompt, nor effective, as demanded by Article 24 of the United Nations Charter.  Rather than responding to the warnings of a likely new aggression against Gaza, the Council fiddled, while Gaza burned.  Which is the reason he answered the request of Member States to convene a meeting of the General Assembly.

Gaza is still burning.  But the Security Council resolution could be at least a first step in a process to quench that fire.  The President is aware that the Security Council resolution does not eliminate the continuing obligations of the United Nations as a whole, including the General Assembly, to the people of Gaza.  He will continue his efforts to meet those obligations.

And if you have any further questions, I will be outside, because I think it’s important that you get the news directly from Gaza.