**Off-the-Cuff**

**Secretary-General's press encounter following his address to the Informal Meeting of the General Assembly on the Year Ahead**

New York, 8 January 2015

United Nations

http://www.un.org/sg/offthecuff/index.asp?nid=3789

Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. Thank you for this opportunity.

It is a great pleasure to see you again at the start of this New Year, the first press stakeout.

As you might have already heard, I have just briefed the General Assembly on the year ahead.  Let me just reiterate three points:

First, 2015 is a year of historic opportunity.  We are the first generation that can end poverty, and the last one that can take steps to avoid the worst impacts of climate change.

With the adoption of a new development agenda, sustainable development goals and climate change agreement, we can set the world on course for a better future.

This must be a time for global action.  Future generations will judge us harshly if we fail to meet our obligation.

Second, we continue to face multiple crises, with more people displaced and in need than at any time in decades.  Beyond the diplomacy and humanitarian action needed today, there are lessons for the future.  Whether it is disease or conflict or human rights abuses, the international community needs to act earlier, focus on prevention and get at the root causes before events get out of control.

That leads me to my third point.  I want to make a special appeal for tolerance and understanding.  In far too many places, we have seen acts of terrorism, extremism, unspeakable brutality and a deeply worrying escalation of tensions between communities and within societies.

Addressing this discord in a manner that solves -- rather than multiplies -- the problem may be the greatest test our human family faces in the 21st century.

All of us were deeply moved by the many images from yesterday’s despicable attack in Paris.  Perhaps none was as horrifying as that of a French policeman ruthlessly executed on a sidewalk.

We now know that policeman’s name.  He was Ahmed Merabet.  He himself was a Muslim.

This is yet another reminder of what we are facing together.  It should never be seen as a war of religion … for religion … or on religion.  It is an assault on our common humanity, designed to terrify and incite.

Giving in to hatred and sowing division only guarantees a spiral of violence – precisely what terrorists seek.  We must not fall into that trap.

We need to find a way to live together, in peace, in harmony, in full respect of universal human rights and fundamental freedoms.

We face another grave test as Nigeria readies for its election next month.  Boko Haram has continued its violence, killing Christians and Muslims, kidnapping even more women and children, and destroying churches and mosques. Mayhem has spread across the region, and is now having a direct impact on Cameroon and other countries.

I urge Boko Haram’s leaders to end the destruction of so many lives and communities, and immediately and unconditionally release the kidnapped school girls and boys and all others.  The international community cannot let human rights abuses continue with impunity.

This is my personal appeal, as a father and grandfather.  And as Secretary-General of the United Nations, I will continue to actively explore with Member States what more can be done.

Thank you for your attention.

Q: Mr. Secretary-General, you talked about the event in Paris. There is legislation proposed by a lot of states at the General Assembly against defamation of religion. Do you think that such legislation helps or hurts the atmosphere that the [Charlie Hebdo] magazine was defaming religions?

SG: Defamation of any religion or belief – that is not acceptable. Whether taking any measures against freedom of expression, that is another matter. Therefore I would welcome the Member States of the General Assembly to discuss what kind of measures and actions they should take to promote more tolerance and harmonious dialogue, and inclusive dialogue. That, we have been making a lot of efforts, through the Alliance of Civilizations initiative, and there have been interfaith dialogues, but unfortunately we have not been able to promote much needed tolerance and mutual dialogue. It is important to respect others’ religions and beliefs and traditions, but at the same time, in implementing all these initiatives it is important to promote and protect freedom of expression.

Q: Secretary-General, you just mentioned impunity. So I wanted to know, what has the UN system done in order to get access again to Thabit in Darfur, where there were allegedly 200 rapes, and then the Government didn’t allow any inspectors. What have you done since we last spoke on it?

And in your speech you said you were dissatisfied with the General Assembly not acting on management issues. I wanted to know if that means LBGT or same sex benefits for UN staff, and what would you have the Assembly do?

SG: As for the first part of the question, as you know, we tried to have a thorough investigation. This report might not have been sufficient because of the lack of full cooperation of the authorities on the ground. That has really hampered our authorities to go into the field and get a thorough investigation. It is important that we have to have a thorough investigation and as a matter of principle, there should be a clear accountability process and justice. I am firm about this matter. And we will, in the course of time, have better information on this matter.

And on LGBT, I have made my position clear. This is an issue of human dignity and there should be no discrimination whatsoever for any staff, any people, on the basis of sexual orientation or religion or belief. So this is the fundamental principle of human rights, and that is why, on the basis of that I have taken some administrative measures to allow the same and equal treatment for the staff who are having that sexual orientation. This is, I think, the proper thing to do.

Q: Mr. SG, some countries are calling to punish the Palestinians for the latest step to join the ICC. Do you think this course will help the Palestinian and the Israeli cause, and do you think that the Security Council, it is about time for them to take a strong step regarding the Palestinian state?

SG: The State of Palestine was accorded [non-member observer state] status by the General Assembly, and in accordance with their status they have taken their own decision to accede to international agreements and conventions and treaties. That is their right, and I understand that they have taken action. As depository of many conventions and treaties, including the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, we have taken procedural, administrative measures, and it was announced and posted on the website, and as I have already announced through the Spokesperson, this should become effective as of the 1st of April.

Then this process and the peace process [are] separate. The peace process is a much more important one. It is important that the parties concerned create a favourable atmosphere - whether it is political or social and whatever it may be - conducive to the smooth progress of peace talks. That I have been urging both sides – Palestinians and Israeli authorities - to fully cooperate and sit down together and address all these pending issues, the root causes of the issues. Otherwise, if they continue like this, there is no guarantee that we will not have any other tragic confrontation, as we have been experiencing three times already during the last six years. Again, I am urging the two parties to address all the pending issues through dialogue, and the United Nations and as Secretary-General, I will spare no efforts.

Thank you very much.