**[PRESS RELEASE](http://www.un.org/press/en/type-document/press-release)**

**5 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

\*\*Guest at Noon Today

Our [guests](http://www.un.org/News/briefings/docs/2009/090105_Gaza.doc.htm) at the noon briefing today will be John Ging, Director of Operations in Gaza for the UN 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 UN Emergency Relief Coordinator, who will speak to you on the humanitarian situation in Gaza.  We thought it was important that we keep on focusing on what is happening right now there.

\*\* Gaza

The Secretary-General, in a town hall meeting with UN staff this morning, said that the situation in Gaza and southern Israel has worsened dramatically in the past 48 hours.  Civilian suffering was already alarming, he said, but Israel’s launch of a ground operation has only made it worse.  The Secretary-General has spoken with Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and expressed his extreme concern and disappointment.  He stressed the need for Israel to do everything possible to protect civilians and to allow humanitarian assistance to reach those in need.  He said there must be an immediate end to violence on both sides.

In a [statement](http://www.un.org/press/en/2009/sgsm12035.doc.htm) yesterday, the Secretary-General regretted that the Security Council has not been able to reach a consensus, including during its emergency session held on Saturday evening, in order to bring about an end to the violence.  The Secretary-General will be working actively with members of the Council and other key players, in particular Arab leaders, whom he will see at 3 today, to facilitate the emergence of a consensus.

The Secretary-General added that he is extremely concerned about the deteriorating humanitarian situation on the ground.  We are in close contact with the Israeli authorities to press them to open not only the Kerem Shalom crossing, but also Karni and Nahal Oz, to allow in, particularly, wheat grain and fuel for the power plant, as well as other essential supplies.  And of course, you will hear a little more from our guests, who will join us in a few minutes.

\*\* Gaza – Humanitarian Situation

On that last point, the UN Humanitarian Coordinator for the Occupied Palestinian Territory, Maxwell Gaylard, said that the fuel crossing at Nahal Oz was opened today for the transfer of urgently needed industrial fuel with the assistance of the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East.  We hope that this crossing will now remain open in order for sufficient supplies to enter over the coming days, and for the Gaza power plant to continue to operate on a more sustained basis.

As of today, Gaylard said at a press briefing, our estimates are that the Palestinian fatalities are 500 and rising, and the injured are 2,500 and rising.  He added that movement within the Strip is a severe challenge.  Ambulances and medical workers are facing increasing difficulty reaching the wounded, and some have been killed in doing so.  Getting medical supplies to where they need to be is also extremely challenging.

For its part, UNRWA says that it is struggling to maintain its services in Gaza, but it has opened all but two of its food distribution centres there, as well as all but five of its 18 health centres.  The Relief and Works Agency has also opened seven shelters around the Gaza Strip, which are currently housing some 4,000 people affected by the recent fighting.  UNRWA emphasizes the need for humanitarian breathing space.  It calls upon Israel to allow industrial quantities of wheat to pass through the conveyor belt at the Karni crossing.  It also calls for more fuel to get into Gaza; at present, the Agency says, 1 million people in Gaza are without electricity, while a quarter of a million people lack fresh water.

\*\*Security Council

The Security Council had its first meeting of the year on Saturday night, when it held consultations, under France’s presidency, on the situation in the Middle East.  The consultations ended without agreement on a statement on Gaza, but the Council President, Ambassador Jean-Maurice Ripert of France, said that there had been a “convergence of views” on the need for “an immediate, permanent and fully respected ceasefire”.  The Council expects to hold consultations tomorrow morning on its programme of work for January.

\*\* Iraq

Staffan de Mistura, the Secretary-General’s Special Representative for Iraq, condemns in the strongest terms the attacks targeting pilgrims both yesterday and today.  De Mistura described these actions, which included an attack that resulted in the killing of at least 40 pilgrims on Sunday, as “appalling and unjustified crimes”.  He extended the United Nations sincere condolences to the aggrieved families and its wishes for the full and speedy recovery of the wounded.

\*\*Secretary-General’s Statement on Iran

We issued this weekend a [statement](http://www.un.org/press/en/2009/sgsm12032.doc.htm) attributable to the Spokesperson for the Secretary-General on Iran.  The Secretary-General is greatly concerned about reports that Iranian lawyer, human right activist and Nobel Peace Prize Laureate Shirin Ebadi has been threatened in recent days, her Center for the Defense of Human Rights broken into and materials taken, and that hostile crowds have mobilized today outside her office and home.  He calls on the Iranian authorities to take immediate measures to prevent any further harassment and to ensure Shirin Ebadi’s safety and security.

\*\* Cyprus

The Cypriot leaders met for about three hours this morning under UN auspices.  The first hour was devoted to a tête-à-tête meeting.  Tayé-Brook Zerihoun, the Secretary-General’s Special Representative for Cyprus, said afterward that the leaders have reached full agreement on the issue of harmonization and cooperation between the Federal Government and the constituent states, or the federal units.  They are also very close to full convergence on the issue of hierarchy of norms and have decided to continue discussion on the matter in order to overcome the remaining obstacles.

The two leaders will meet next on Monday, 12 January, and have agreed to take up the issue of past acts at that meeting.  Special Adviser Alexander Downer will attend that meeting.

\*\*Secretary-General’s Statement on Ghana

We also issued the following [statement](http://www.un.org/press/en/2009/sgsm12034.doc.htm) on Sunday on Ghana:

The Secretary-General warmly congratulates the people and Government of Ghana on the peaceful and orderly resolution of the recently concluded presidential and legislative elections.  He acknowledges the dedication and professionalism of Ghana’s Electoral Commission, which has skilfully managed the process.  He commends the political parties and their leadership for their statesmanlike conduct during the final stages of this exercise.  Ghanaians can and should take pride in this democratic achievement.  With their continuing show of commitment to the democratic process, Ghana and its leaders are setting an admirable example.

\*\*DRC/Humanitarian

We have a humanitarian update from the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) on the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo.  Citing figures from the UN refugee agency and national authorities, OCHA says that more than 300 people have been killed in attacks in areas where military action against the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA) is ongoing.  Humanitarian organizations are particularly concerned about the situation in North Kivu, specifically the forced recruitment of children, large numbers of unaccompanied children with insufficient protection, and the extensive feeding requirements among displaced people.  The World Food Programme (WFP) has so far distributed approximately 21,000 tons of food to more than 7,000 displaced people in Dungu Province.  Distributions of 90 more tons of food to displaced persons in North Kivu are set to begin soon.

\*\* Somalia

Mark Bowden, the UN Resident and Humanitarian Coordinator for Somalia, today expressed grave concern at the number of civilian casualties and the massive displacement caused by recent fighting in central Somalia.  Violence this past week in the Galgaduud region has reportedly resulted in 40 civilian deaths and the displacement of approximately 50,000 people.  In two of the region’s towns, 90 per cent of the population has fled; many of them had already been displaced by fighting in Mogadishu.  Bowden called for a cessation of hostilities to allow urgently needed humanitarian assistance to be provided wherever it is required in Somalia.  We have a press release upstairs.

\*\* Sudan

The UN-African Union Hybrid Operation in Darfur (UNAMID) says that it received two contingents from the Nigerian formed police unit last week, consisting of 140 personnel each.  The Nigerian police will be deployed in Zalingei and El Geneina in West Darfur.  That brings the number of formed police units in Darfur to five, following the earlier arrival of units from Bangladesh, Indonesia and Nepal.  UNAMID expects to have 19 such units once it is at full strength.

And before I conclude, I just wanted to say, Happy New Year to all of you, and glad to be back and glad to be with you.

What we’ll do while we are waiting for Mr. Holmes -- and I see that we already have our friends in Gaza and everything is set on that side… Thank you, John, for being with us.  So we’ll have you in a second.  Shall I answer your questions quickly?

\*\*Questions and Answers

Question:  I was wondering if you can give us any readout of the outcome of Mr. Ban Ki-moon’s conversations with the Israeli side and whether he heard from them of any plan to end the ground operations they are holding any time soon in response to his appeals and condemnation of that ground attack?

Spokesperson:  Well, he spoke to Mr. Olmert and actually, in his statement, he mentioned exactly what was said with Mr. Olmert.  There was no engagement on the part of the Israeli parties for ending the conflict, in spite of the Secretary-General’s insistence.  And what we have so far is the fact that they said that they are going to try to strengthen the mechanism for humanitarian assistance.

Question:  What is expected today in a meeting with the Foreign Ministers and what is the hopeful outcome from this?

Spokesperson:  Well, I don’t know whether we can talk about an outcome before the actual meeting takes place.  Actually, I would ask you to wait and you’ll be able to ask questions later today.

Let me first give the floor to John Holmes, who is with us.  I’ll answer your questions and Enrique will come on afterwards, if you don’t mind, because I don’t want to have our Gaza friends waiting any longer.

[Following the noon guest and General Assembly Spokesman:]

I am sorry I interrupted earlier our Q and A.  Did you have any questions?  Maybe you don’t?  Maybe all the questions were answered?

Question: A couple of non-Gaza questions:  over the break, General [Laurent] Nkunda and CNDP took issue with MONUC denying that the Congolese Army had retaken control of some access and roads around Goma.  And they said this might undermine even their participation on the 7th in Nairobi. What’s the current status?  What’s MONUC’s response and is it the UN’s understanding that CNDP will go forward with those talks on the 7th?

Spokesperson:  As far as I know, the talks will go forward on the 7th.  In terms of what the situation is right now on the ground, of course, we can try to get some updated information for you today.

Question:  If I could, about this town hall meeting:  I’ve been told that one of the questions asked was about the elimination of “permanent contracts” at the UN during the most recent General Assembly human resources resolution.  Some said that this violated the Charter, that the Charter talked about permanent, independent civil service staff, but it wasn’t clear.  Maybe I just don’t understand…  What’s the Secretary-General’s response to the argument made by some that one of his reforms may either violate the Charter or decrease the independence and ability to blow the whistle of UN staff?

Spokesperson:  What has happened, we have had a simplification of the number of contracts that existed within the system, and from [11] we now have 3 different types of contracts, which really simplifies and makes it more easy for the system to function.  The fact that they have temporary contracts, they also have what they call continuing contracts, you know, which is not against…  It is not in the Charter that there is supposed to be a permanent place for a staff member throughout his life.  It’s not part of the Charter.

Okay.  Thank you all very much and see you tomorrow.

Briefing by Spokesperson for General Assembly President

Unfortunately, this is not a very happy new year start, at all, but good to see you all in any case and let’s hope that the year gets better.

I know you are all focused on Gaza.  However, let me say for the record that today, the President of the General Assembly, Miguel d’Escoto, opened the inaugural meeting of the Commission of Experts of the President on reforms of the international monitoring and financial system.  The meeting, as you know, is the group of experts -- the 18 experts that have been named by the President of the General Assembly -- that are meeting under the coordination of Professor Joseph Stiglitz for two days in the Desmond Tutu Center here in Manhattan.

I just wanted to say that for the record.  I am available for you if you have any particular questions.

\*\*Questions and Answers

Question:  I know that when the President of the General Assembly came Saturday to the Council and made a statement at the stakeout and he went inside -- some people asked -- and I wanted to know -- can you give sort of a readout?  Did he go into the consultation room, had he been invited, does he think that there is any need to be invited?  What are the sort of protocols for the head of the GA visiting the Security Council?  What are his thoughts after his visit in terms of the Security Council’s work that night and going forward?

Spokesperson:  Well, as you know, first of all, the President of the General Assembly and the General Assembly itself, it’s getting into a major effort of reorganization of… restructuring of some of the bodies.  And you know he has been looking into the reform of the Security Council.  This is one of the issues that member countries want to do during this year, and this was a very good example on how very often -- and in this practical occasion, as the President of the General Assembly mentioned -- the Security Council was not responding to the expectations of many Member States and the international community at large.  And he wanted to see for himself what was going on, what was the situation.  He went there, he had a very friendly talk with all the different ambassadors who were available, but, of course, he is very respectful of the work of the Security Council and he is not going to intervene in the Security Council as such.  The Security Council is working on its own, with Member States and the members of the Security Council currently there.

But he went there to talk with ambassadors and after that he made himself available to the Member States if they consider that he should take any action at the General Assembly.

Question:  Did anybody?  Did anybody want his advice, his support, whatever?

Spokesperson:  Let’s be very clear:  the bottom line is that this Organization, and the Security Council in particular, was created to prevent conflicts and war, not to block peace.  And this is the bottom line of the President of the General Assembly.  Many people are disappointed -- and we have seen statements not only from Member States, but in the Secretariat, in the field, the international community -- many people are very disappointed that there is no agreement at the Security Council.  And if there is no agreement in the Security Council on this particular issue, there are many Member States who are thinking that there are other possibilities that could be explored, among others, going to the General Assembly.  And this is basically what is going on right now.  It is not a secret.  As you know, Member States have expressed this openly, and the President of the General Assembly has made himself available [inaudible] if the Member States want this to be taken up at a different level.  Right now, as you know, the Security Council is still meeting on this issue, we have the Foreign Ministers here, coming for the special session of the Security Council, and everybody still hopes that something is done, basically, to stop any more massacres in Gaza.

And this is the bottom line.  As I said, the President of the General Assembly is talking to different ambassadors and there is a general opinion that the Security Council should not block peace, should help to create peace in the region.

Question:  [inaudible] in this regard, so the General Assembly… We can expect the meeting of the General Assembly on this subject if the Security Council does not provide any solution?

Spokesperson:  As I said, this is an option.  Right now, a decision has not been taken.  This is an option among other options.  There are many diplomatic efforts also going on in the region, trying to get an immediate ceasefire, and some Member States, some ambassadors are thinking of that possibility.  But I still think that -- and also the President of the General Assembly believes that ‑- there is activity going on in the Security Council.  We would hope that as soon as possible -- also the Secretary-General has underlined that we have hoped that the Security Council gets an agreement.

Question:  He said on Saturday evening that he thought the Security Council was dysfunctional.  Is it fair to say that this is a reference to the US blocking the passage of the presidential statement on Saturday, based on wanting to have the Hamas rocket fire and attacks… things like that.  What was he referring to when he said it was dysfunctional?

Spokesperson:  The President of the General Assembly, as you know very well, has said since day one, since he arrived here, that one of the problems that we have in the Organization is that some instances, including the Security Council, are not working properly.  And this crisis is a very clear example why the Security Council is not making, after more than one week, any clear decision on this tragedy.  Meanwhile, people are still dying in the field in Gaza.  Therefore, the President of the General Assembly believes certainly that there is huge room for improvement in the work of the Security Council, and he is discussing with the Member States, and not only in this particular case, but in general.

Question:  Is his Special Adviser, Richard Falk, going to come to the UN in New York?

Spokesman:  He is going to come to New York as soon as possible.  This week.

If there are no more questions, Michèle, do you want to…?