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**15 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

Good afternoon, all.

\*\*Guest at Noon

Our [guests](http://www.un.org/News/briefings/docs/2009/090115_Gaza.doc.htm) at the noon briefing today are John Holmes, Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and UN Emergency Relief Coordinator; and John Ging, Director of Operations in Gaza for UNRWA, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East.  They will update you on the situation in Gaza.

As far as I know, the link will be established.  We spoke to John Ging this morning, and the technicians are telling us that this will happen.  So, hopefully, within the next 20 minutes, we should have John Ging with us from Gaza.

\*\*Secretary-General in Israel

The Secretary-General, speaking in Tel Aviv today, told reporters that the UN compound in Gaza has been shelled again, and that he had conveyed his strong protest and outrage to the Israel Defence Minister and to the Foreign Minister, and demanded a full explanation.

He said that Defence Minister Ehud Barak had told him that it was a grave mistake and that he took it very seriously.  Barak assured the Secretary-General that extra attention would be paid to the UN facilities and staff and that this should not be repeated.

Speaking after his meeting with Israeli Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni, the Secretary‑General said that he believed from his talks in Egypt that the elements are in place for the violence to end now.  He stressed that the time has come for the violence to stop and for us to change fundamentally the dynamics in Gaza, and to pursue again the peace talks for a two‑State solution, which is the only road to lasting security for Israel.

The Secretary-General also emphasized that civilian suffering has reached an unbearable point, asserting that the rockets must stop, Israel’s offensive must end and the bloodshed and suffering among the civilian populations must be halted.

We have his press remarks upstairs.  And I can see John now on the screen.  How are you, John?  Can you hear me?  I just want to find out before I continue how everyone is doing at the UNRWA compound? … Did you hear me? … Okay, we will try again to talk to him in a few minutes.

During his visit to Israel today, the Secretary-General has met, in addition to the Foreign Minister, with Defence Minister Barak and Prime Minister Ehud Olmert.

He also spoke by videoconference within the past hour to the staff in the UN compound in Gaza, thanking them for their hard work under difficult and often dangerous circumstances.

Also, the Secretary-General spoke by phone today to US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, to British Prime Minister Gordon Brown and, a few minutes ago, to President Hosni Mubarak of Egypt, whom he had met yesterday in Cairo.

Tomorrow, the Secretary-General expects to meet in Ramallah with Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas and Prime Minister Salam Fayyad.

\*\*Deputy Secretary-General at General Assembly

The Deputy Secretary-General today [addressed](http://www.un.org/press/en/2009/dsgsm435.doc.htm) an [emergency special session](http://www.un.org/press/en/2009/ga10807.doc.htm) of the General Assembly on Gaza.  In her remarks, she stressed that it is imperative that the UN not be prevented from helping people who are in dire need of assistance.

She also said that, if a ceasefire is to be sustainable, we need arrangements to ensure a halt to the smuggling of weapons into Gaza, the reopening of the crossings, and the reuniting of Gaza with the West Bank under its legitimate leadership.

She added that, beyond humanitarian assistance, the international community must engage in an early reconstruction effort, and she called on all Member States to contribute to that endeavour.

We have her full remarks upstairs.  And, of course, I see Enrique coming in, so you will soon get some information about the emergency special session that is going on right now.

\*\*Security Council

The Security Council has asked for a briefing on the attack on the UNRWA compound in Gaza, and they will receive an update from Assistant Secretary-General for Political Affairs Haile Menkerios on that, once they are done with consultations on the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

The Council began its work by [hearing](http://www.un.org/press/en/2009/sc9573.doc.htm) from the Secretary-General’s Special Envoy for the Great Lakes Region, Olusegun Obasanjo, about the progress of talks in Nairobi between the Congolese Government and the National Congress for the Defense of the People (CNDP).  He warned the Council that progress in that dialogue has “remained slower than desirable”.

In the past 48 hours, he said, both sides have once again become intransigent, the Government side in particular.  Consequently, he said, the facilitators have called for a brief recess to the dialogue.

Special Envoy Obasanjo then continued to discuss recent developments with Council members in closed consultations, and he will speak to you at the stakeout afterward.

\*\*Democratic Republic of Congo

The Nairobi peace negotiations between the Congolese Government and the CNDP rebel organization adjourned today and will resume on 25 January, said Co-mediator Benjamin Mkapa, the African Union representative at the talks.

He said that the parties have made remarkable progress by adopting the ground rules that will guide the noble task of substantive dialogue to resolve the crisis.

Mkapa thanked the parties for their demonstrated commitment to the negotiations.  He also urged them to sustain the momentum and to prepare the next phase of the dialogue.

Of course, you will hear from Mr. Obasanjo later today.

\*\* Lebanon

We expect a [statement](http://www.un.org/press/en/2009/sgsm12047.doc.htm) on Lebanon this afternoon.

Yesterday, after receiving reports of rockets fired from Lebanese territory towards Israel, the UN Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) launched an investigation into the incident in close cooperation with the parties.  During the joint search operation, a rocket launching site was found close to a school in the general area of El Hebbariye.  The joint UNIFIL-Lebanese search party discovered three rockets equipped with timers ready to be fired, which were deactivated.

UNIFIL Force Commander Major General Claudio Graziano is in contact with the Command of the Lebanese Armed Forces and the IDF.  He has stressed the importance of UNIFIL being able to complete the investigation to ascertain as soon as possible all the facts relating to this very serious incident.  UNIFIL will submit the results of the investigation to the United Nations Security Council.

In the meantime, the Force Commander has urged maximum restraint and is working with both parties to maintain the cessation of hostilities.

\*\* Iraq

Staffan de Mistura, the Secretary-General’s Special Representative for Iraq, met today with leaders of Iraq’s political blocs to brief them on the state of readiness and technical preparations for the upcoming elections, and to outline the special measures being put in place to tackle fraud.

He said that the technical preparations are well on track to have elections on 31 January, with over 20 million ballot papers to be delivered during the coming week.  De Mistura emphasized that special security features will be used to make it extremely difficult to duplicate the ballots.  Additional procedures have also been put in place to ensure that multiple voting and attempts to manipulate the polling are minimized.

We have a press release with more details upstairs.

\*\* Zimbabwe

The Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) reports that Zimbabwe’s cholera outbreak, which has claimed more than 2,200 lives, is not yet under control.

OCHA notes that humanitarian agencies are supporting 172 cholera treatment centres throughout the country.  They are also promoting cholera awareness campaigns and helping to set up operational frameworks for cholera command centres and rapid response teams.

Meanwhile, Zimbabwe’s food security situation is becoming increasingly difficult as the lean season sets in, OCHA adds.

\*\* Senegal

UNAIDS issued a statement today, deploring last week’s arrest and imprisonment of nine men in Senegal.  The men were members of an association called AIDES Senegal, which works to provide condoms and HIV treatment to those who need them.  They were sentenced for acts against nature and the creation of an association of criminals.

According to UNAIDS Executive Director Michel Sidibé, “There is no place for homophobia.  Universal access to HIV prevention, treatment, care and support must be accessible to all people in Senegal who are in need -- including men who have sex with men.”

UNAIDS adds that homophobia and criminalization of consensual adult sexual behaviour represent major barriers to effective responses to HIV.

\*\*World Economic and Social Prospects Report

Regional launches of the World Economic Situation and Prospects 2009 are taking place today in Addis Ababa, Bangkok, Geneva, and Mexico.   Beijing and Moscow will follow tomorrow.

These press events are focusing on the economic outlook of each region.  The report is a joint publication of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs, the UN Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), and the five UN regional commissions.

I see Newton Kanhema, Information Officer of the UN Department of Public Information, back there with a copy of the report.  You can probably talk to Newton after we are done with the briefing.

As you may recall, the global outlook of the report was launched in Doha in December, at the Financing for Development Conference.  There will be no press event here in New York, but for further information and copies of the reports, please see Newton Kanhema, who is here with us.  Newton will be happy to brief you.

\*\*United Nations Children’s Fund

According to UNICEF’s State of the World’s Children report, launched today, women in the world’s least developed countries are 300 times more likely to die in childbirth or from pregnancy-related complications than women in developed countries.  And for every woman who dies, another 20 suffer illness or injury, often with severe and lasting results.

At the same time, a child born in a developing country is almost 14 times more likely to die during the first month of life than a child born in a developed nation.

The report highlights the link between the health and survival of mothers and their newborns, and suggests ways to close the gap between rich and poor countries.  These include providing essential services through health systems that integrate home, community, outreach and facility‑based care.

There are press kits from UNICEF upstairs, and we also have a press release from the UN Population Fund (UNFPA) calling for more action to achieve universal access to reproductive health by 2015.

\*\*Economic and Social Council

Later this afternoon, Deputy Secretary-General Asha Rose Migiro will [address](http://www.un.org/press/en/2009/dsgsm436.doc.htm) the Economic and Social Council during the [election](http://www.un.org/press/en/2009/ecosoc6373.doc.htm) of ECOSOC’s new president.  She will stress ECOSOC’s role in promoting the UN’s development work.  And of course, you will have more on that a little later.

\*\*Readout of Meeting between Secretary-General and Prime Minister Olmert

I have a readout of the Secretary-General’s meeting today with Prime Minister Olmert.

The Prime Minister started the meeting by apologizing for the firing by the Israel Defense Forces on the UNRWA compound.  The Secretary-General protested again and said it was unacceptable.  They went on to discuss the overall situation in Gaza, and the Secretary-General called again for an immediate ceasefire.

This is what we just got from our people on the ground.

[The following statements attributable to the Spokesperson on [Lebanon](http://www.un.org/press/en/2009/sgsm12047.doc.htm) and [Darfur](http://www.un.org/press/en/2009/sgsm12048.doc.htm) were read following the end of John Ging’s briefing.]

Secretary-General on Lebanon

The Secretary-General condemns the firing of rockets from southern Lebanon towards Israel on 14 January.  The United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) has launched an investigation into the incident in close cooperation with the parties.

Thus far, the investigation team has found evidence that two rockets were fired towards Israel.  A rocket launching site was found near the village of Rachaya el-Foukhar.  Fragments of two rockets were discovered in the area of Ain Arab inside Lebanese territory.  The Israel Defense Forces fired two retaliatory artillery rounds, which landed near Rachaya el-Foukhar and south-east of Khiam.

The Secretary-General remains deeply concerned about any escalation of tension or hostilities along the Blue Line, and urges all parties to exercise maximum restraint.  The parties must fully adhere to Security Council resolution 1701 (2006) and respect the cessation of hostilities.

Secretary-General on Darfur

Within the last few days, the Secretary-General has received several reports of aerial bombings in different locations in South Darfur.  Yesterday, the Government of Sudan confirmed that Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) aircraft bombed rebel Justice and Equality Movement (JEM) positions in Southern Darfur’s Muhajeria area on 13 January.  Such actions are in violation of both Security Council resolutions and relevant agreements.  The Secretary-General has also received reports of clashes between the JEM and Sudan Liberation Army/ Minni Minawi (SLA/MM) in the Muhajeria area on 15 January.

The Secretary-General condemns these attacks and calls on all parties to halt the violence, as well as any preparations for further military action.  He calls on all concerned to commit to an immediate and unconditional cessation of hostilities.  Military action is not a viable solution to ending the conflict in Darfur and can only result in the unwarranted death and suffering of the civilian population of Sudan.  The Secretary-General calls on all parties to intensify efforts to agree to a comprehensive political solution with the assistance of the African Union-United Nations Joint Chief Mediator.

\*\*Questions and Answers

Question:  The coordinates of the UNRWA building were given to the IDF.  The Israelis have the most modern and precise weapons.  The Secretary-General, head of this Organization, is a guest of Israel on an official visit right now.  It almost seems like a humiliation, as if the Israelis are saying we don’t give a damn by doing this.  Does the Secretary-General accept that this was a grave mistake or is he calling for an investigation?

Spokesperson:  Obviously, he does not accept it.

Question:  What is he asking for now, then?

Spokesperson:  Of course an investigation was asked for.  But we will join in a few minutes John Holmes, who has the latest from the ground.  And of course, John Ging was there, and he was in the building that was bombed yesterday.  He can tell you about some of the circumstances surrounding that bombing.

So we will get to you in a second, John.  Thank you for being here.  Any other questions?  Before I have to give it to Enrique before we join John on the ground.

Question:  One quick question?  I just want to ask concerning the role of the Secretary-General.  Is he planning to go to Sderot and southern Israel to check the cities that are being hit by Palestinian rockets?

Spokesperson:  No, he is not.

Question:  The Secretary-General said he needs an explanation, not an investigation.

Spokesperson:  Well, he needs an explanation first.  But of course he has asked, and we have asked steadily in the case of the UNRWA school that was attacked the other day, for an investigation.

Question:  So, you confirm that?

Spokesperson:  Yes.

Question:  How come the Secretary-General always remembers Gilad Shalit, the prisoner of Israel, and he does not remember one single Palestinian prisoner, although there are over 12,000 or 13,000 prisoners?  Why does he always call for the release of one Israeli prisoner, while he is ignoring all these other prisoners?  Are they not human beings?

Spokesperson:  The Secretary-General has called over and over again for the release of Palestinian prisoners.  So, we are not going into this.  We have more urgent matters to deal with at this point.

Question:  The attack on the UNRWA compound yesterday, was that during the press conference we had, the sound that we heard?

Spokesperson:  No, I think it was after that.  And I think John will give you more information on what exactly happened.  Of course, there was the sound of a shell while John was speaking yesterday.

Question:  Is the call for the release of Gilad Shalit part of the initiative of the Secretary-General?

Spokesperson:  No, it is something that he has called for over and over again.

Please, Enrique, I’ll give you the floor.  We have John Holmes coming, as well as John Ging on the ground.

Briefing by the Spokesperson for the General Assembly President

\*\*Questions and Answers

Question:  Why is this meeting not taking place in the GA hall?  Why is it taking place on a conference room?

Spokesperson for the Secretary-General:  Let me answer this one.  There was a leak in the ceiling that was discovered yesterday, and they had to protect the ceiling of the General Assembly.  That is why we had to put it in a different conference room.

Question:  There was not a leak in the Spokesman’s Office?

Spokesperson for the Secretary-General:  No, there was not.

Question:  Was it so urgent that it deserved moving the meeting from the hall to a conference room?

Spokesperson for the Secretary-General:  As you know, it is snowing right now, and they wanted to avoid having snow on top of our delegates’ heads.  I haven’t investigated the issue, but of course I will let …

Question:  Is it that serious that it deserved to move the meeting?

Spokesperson for the General Assembly President:  I am not an architect, but it looked pretty bad.

Question:  Can I ask another question on the resolution?  How far along is the effort by the President of the GA to draft a possible resolution outcome out of this meeting?

Spokesperson:  Right now, I know that there are several ideas going around among the Ambassadors, and we might have a draft resolution later today, although I have heard that also some of the Ambassadors are asking the President of the General Assembly to present himself a draft resolution for the member countries to discuss.  I think in a couple of hours we will have a much clearer idea.

Question:  Are we sure that the hole was not caused by a grave mistake?

Spokesperson for the Secretary-General:  I think what happened is that some of the insulation material fell and we had some water damage in the hall itself.

Question:  Was that this morning?

Spokesperson for the Secretary-General:  This morning, yes.

Question:  Can you please clarify the spat that happened at the beginning of the meeting between the President and the Israeli delegate?

Spokesperson for the General Assembly President:  What had happened basically, the Israeli delegation made a point of order, saying that according to their beliefs, the session should not take place.  That reinforced a letter that was officially sent by the Israeli ambassador to the President of the General Assembly saying that they thought it was against the rules to convey the meeting today.  That’s what happened.

Then the President of the General Assembly replied, basically by saying first that he was very surprised by the sudden interest in legality issues by the Israeli Mission, when there are many other legal issues -- like many resolutions ‑- that he would have expected Israel to comply with.  And he added something that he did not mention in his speech, namely that this was nothing surprising, because the Israeli Foreign Minister has officially said that all the diplomatic efforts at the UN right now are targeted to try to provide time to the military operations in Gaza.  So this is simply part of these efforts.

Question:  Do you consider this as a part of the spat with the President and what happened before with the Israeli delegation?

Spokesperson:  No, we know very well what the situation is.  In this particular case, we have 192 countries and there was only one country that raised an issue.  And they thought they had some legal complaints about the validity of the meeting and they wrote about it.  And then the President let those declarations take place, and then he took the decision, advised by the Legal Office, to continue the meeting.  He made it very clear this is part of the campaign that publicly has been said by Israel, not against him, but in general, on their policy at the UN.

Question:  Two questions.  You mentioned UN operations of, among other things, hospitals in Gaza.  Is the UN in the hospital business?  Aren’t they run by the Ministry of Health or private organizations?  I know the UNRWA has schools, and they have other compounds and food distribution.  Is the UN actually running hospitals?  Secondly, if the President of the General Assembly is in the General Assembly as its presiding officer and is not there as a representative of Nicaragua or any other Member States, how does he have the right to introduce any resolution on any subject at all?

Spokesperson:  On the first question, I think I am going to let people like John Ging reply.  They know much better what the situation is.  Second, your question on the role or the mandate of the President of the General Assembly, it is precisely his role.  One of the roles under the mandate for the President of the General Assembly is to try to facilitate the political dialogue among the different parties.  It is not the first time -- not for this President or any other Presidents in the past -- that Member countries might request him to put forward a proposal.  I am not saying that is going to happen, I am saying that it is one of the possibilities.  If we have any other resolutions put forward by the countries, and countries are happy with it, he…

Questions:  To verify:  am I correct that he may be participating in the formulation or the drafting process that will produce such a resolution, but he is not literally going to table it himself as a participating party?

Spokesperson:  He is going to do whatever the Member countries request him to do.  The meeting has just started.  We have had only two speakers when I left, so let’s leave a little bit of room to see where the Member countries are.  The President of the General Assembly is going to always respond to, and echo the needs of the Member countries.

Question:  Would you be able to elaborate on the legal ramifications of the dispute between the Israeli representative and the President?  The Israeli representative was citing a paragraph from an advisory opinion of the International Court of Justice (ICJ) on the building of the wall, so as to contend that the deliberations should not continue, and then the President’s legal adviser refuted that claim.  Would you be able to elaborate on exactly which stipulations were cited?

Spokesperson:  I am not going to elaborate too much, because I am not that knowledgeable of the rules of procedure.  Basically, as I said before, it is not a dispute between the Israeli Mission and the President of the General Assembly.  This has to be very clear.  The President has simply echoed the will of the majority of Member countries calling for this meeting.  He has done it, as I explained to you, and called the meeting of the Emergency Special Session on the Illegal Israeli Actions in Occupied East Jerusalem and the Rest of the Occupied Palestinian Territory at the request of Member States.  Member States requested it, in writing and verbally.  Many Member States requested it.  That is clear.  As I said before, the President of the General Assembly was shocked and surprised to see the interest of the Israeli delegation in these legal provisions, and he would expect that Israel would show the same interest in legal provisions that mandate Israel, as a Member of the Organization, with some resolutions, including the last one that has been passed by the Security Council calling for an immediate ceasefire.

I am going to leave it here, because I don’t want to delay John Holmes and John Ging.