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**16 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 Today

As you already know, our [guest](http://www.un.org/News/briefings/docs/2009/090116_Gaza.doc.htm) at the noon briefing today will be John Ging, Director of Operations in Gaza for UNRWA, the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East.  He will provide you with an update on the situation on the ground.  He is already with us via video conference link from Gaza.

Since there were some technical problems yesterday with the video conference link, we have established an audio line backup so even if we can’t see John Ging on the screen, we will be able to hear his voice and he will be able to hear us as well.  So I hope we won’t have the problems we had yesterday.

\*\*Secretary-General’s Middle East Trip

The Secretary-General this morning travelled to Ramallah, in the West Bank, where he met with Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas and Prime Minister Salam Fayyad, and discussed efforts to obtain a ceasefire in Gaza, as well as the humanitarian situation there.

Speaking to reporters after those meetings, he emphasized once more that the fighting must stop now, saying, “We have no time to lose.”  He said that “a unilateral declaration of a ceasefire would be necessary at this time,” and that he would exert his utmost efforts to realize that goal.  He stressed his full support for President Abbas’ leadership.

Last night, he met in Jerusalem with Israeli President Shimon Peres, telling reporters afterward that the Israeli Government will make an important decision on a ceasefire and that he hopes that decision will be the right one, and that Israel will show to the world that it is a responsible member of the United Nations, abiding by Security Council resolutions.

The Secretary-General has since travelled to Ankara, the Turkish capital, where he is to meet with Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan and President Abdullah Gul.  He is to tell them that he has come determined to work with the Turkish Government to help find solutions to the terrible crisis in Gaza.

He will then travel this weekend to Lebanon and Syria, to meet with Government officials in both countries about the violence in Gaza and southern Israel, before going to Kuwait to attend the Arab Economic Summit there next Monday.  We will keep you informed through the Internet over the weekend.

\*\* Gaza

The UN’s Humanitarian Coordinator for the occupied Palestinian territory, Max Gaylard, issued a statement today, saying that the situation for hospitals, medical workers and the injured in Gaza is alarming and deteriorating.  He stressed that hospitals must be protected and remain neutral areas under any circumstances.  Civilians and the injured must have access to medical care, he added.

The Humanitarian Coordinator noted that 16 health facilities have been damaged and 16 ambulances have been also damaged or destroyed since the start of the Israeli military operation on 27 December.  In addition, 13 health workers have been killed and 22 have been injured.  Medical relief workers face extremely dangerous conditions when trying to reach injured Palestinians in combat zones or areas made inaccessible by the Israeli army, he said.  We have his full statement upstairs.

Meanwhile, the Office of the United Nations Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process (UNSCO) reports that a total of 69 truckloads of goods, including 39 for aid agencies, were allowed entry into Gaza from Israel today through the Kerem Shalom crossing.  These included 26 trucks for the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) – which contained flour, blankets, rice and bread – and one truck of medical supplies for the World Health Organization (WHO).

UNSCO adds that, at the Rafah crossing between Gaza and Egypt, nearly 15 truckloads of food and medical and relief supplies passed through today.  In addition, 18 medical cases were evacuated, and five doctors and five journalists were allowed into Gaza.  UNSCO also notes that the fuel pipelines and the Karni grain conveyor belt, both between Israel and Gaza, remained closed today.

For its part, the World Food Programme (WFP) reports that, in addition to its regular caseload, it has delivered canned meat and high-energy biscuits to 13 Gaza hospitals, enough for 6,000 patients and staff for up to one month.  WFP is also distributing ready-to-eat food to overcome the scarcity of cooking gas.  As an additional emergency response, WFP is now planning to distribute ready-to-eat meals to 16,000 people in UNRWA shelters and 7,000 people in hospitals for up to 12 days.

The Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) notes that a key challenge for the people of Gaza is their inability to access food due to the security situation.  That inability extends both to farmers trying to get to their fields and civilians trying to go to shops.  Also, the lack of banknotes means the population is unable to pay for the limited food stocks on the markets.

This is our general overview.  Of course, John will have more details in a few minutes.

\*\*Security Council on Somalia

In other news, the Security Council this morning [adopted](http://www.un.org/press/en/2009/sc9574.doc.htm) a resolution under Chapter 7 of the UN Charter that renews for up to six months the authorization of African Union Member States to maintain a mission in Somalia.  The Council expressed its intention to establish a UN peacekeeping operation in Somalia as a follow-on force to the African Union Mission, subject to a further decision of the Security Council by 1 June.

The Council also requested the Secretary-General to submit a report for a UN peacekeeping operation by 15 April and to develop recommendations in that report on the mandate of such an operation.

Just for your information, we have upstairs a statement from the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) on reports that Somali armed groups opposed to the peace process are occupying key areas recently vacated by Ethiopian troops.

\*\*Security Council on Nepal and Central Africa

Ian Martin, the Secretary-General’s Special Representative for Nepal, [briefed](http://www.un.org/press/en/2009/sc9575.doc.htm) the Security Council for his last time in that post about the work of the UN Mission in that country.

Speaking in an open meeting, he warned that, for all of the important achievements of Nepal’s peace process, he fears that there is now a danger that the fundamentals of the process are being challenged and eroded.  Martin stressed the need for a political consensus required for completion of the peace process and the drafting of a new constitution and for an end to impunity.

He said that, during his time in Nepal, the demand by the country’s people for peace, for change and for inclusion was unmistakable.  “I hope that their political leaders will not let them down,” he said.  That open briefing was followed by consultations, also on Nepal.

Then, later in its consultations, the Council expects to hear from Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs John Holmes about the humanitarian consequences of the activities of the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA) in Central Africa.  So you understand that Mr. Holmes will not be able to come to the briefing later today, but of course we’ll have John Ging.

\*\* Democratic Republic of the Congo

The UN Refugee Agency says that a UN team travelling under the protection of peacekeepers was able to visit the village of Duru in north-eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC).  Duru was the scene of repeated attacks by the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA).  Last week the LRA killed 4 residents of Duru and caused the survivors to flee into the bush, leaving behind what UNHCR calls a “virtual ghost town.”

The agency says that survivors were however able to meet with the UN team and describe their acute need for immediate food aid and other life-saving help.  UNHCR estimates that LRA attacks have claimed more than 560 civilian lives in north-eastern DRC since September.

\*\* Sri Lanka

The United Nations Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, John Holmes, in a statement today expressed increasing concerned for the well-being of tens of thousands of civilians caught up in the conflict raging in the northern Vanni area of Sri Lanka.

The humanitarian chief said that while the civilians have had access to basic food, in large part due to the Government and the UN assistance transported through the lines of fighting, they lack reserves.  The conditions of their basic shelter, water and sanitation are increasingly inadequate as many have been displaced multiple times over the past months.

In accordance with international humanitarian law, the United Nations calls upon the LTTE to allow civilians to be able to move freely to areas where they feel most secure and for the Government to receive newly displaced people according to internationally agreed principles.

The UN also calls for civilians to be protected from the fighting and for civilians to continue to have access to basic humanitarian assistance.

\*\* Cyprus

On Cyprus, the Cypriot leaders met today in Nicosia under UN auspices.  After their meeting, the Secretary-General’s Special Adviser on Cyprus, Alexander Downer, spoke to the press.  He said today’s meeting had focused on deadlock-resolving mechanisms and that the leaders would meet again on 28 January to discuss the issue of property.

Downer stressed that the leaders’ meeting had been “very good.”  In response to questions, he said that there was a real possibility of reaching a settlement and that he remained “cautiously optimistic.”  He also noted that it wouldn’t be helpful to the negotiations to impose a timeline on them.  We have the full transcript upstairs.

\*\*International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia

Stanislav Galić, a former senior Bosnian Serb army commander, was transferred yesterday to Germany to serve his life sentence for war crimes committed in Sarajevo during the war in the Balkans.

The International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) says that Galić was initially sentenced to 20 years in prison in December 2003 for murder, inhumane acts and acts of violence on Sarajevo’s civilian population.  But after both the prosecution and defence appealed the verdict, the ICTY appeals judges ruled in November 2006 that Galić deserved no less than life imprisonment.  There is more in a press release upstairs.

\*\*Economic and Social Council

Ambassador Sylvie Lucas of Luxembourg was elected yesterday as the 65th President of the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), making her the second woman to lead that body.

Deputy Secretary-General Asha-Rose Migiro congratulated Ambassador Lucas, and told her that, in the face of multiple global crises, ECOSOC’s work will be especially challenging in the months ahead.  The effects of the recent financial turmoil continue to reverberate around the world, she said, adding that years of painstaking efforts hang in the balance.  We have her statement upstairs and on the web.

\*\* Zimbabwe

On Zimbabwe, UNICEF Executive Director Ann Veneman is in Zimbabwe on a three-day visit to see firsthand the impact of the current humanitarian crisis on the country’s children.  During her visit, she will meet with Government officials, the UN Country Team, non-governmental organizations and donors, as well as talk to children and women.

Ms. Veneman will brief media on return to South Africa about her impressions and provide an update on education, nutrition, health and child protection.

It may be possible to set up one-on-one interviews in New York on Sunday.  If you’re interested, please contact UNICEF today.  We can provide you with more information, of course, upstairs.

And this is all I have for you in terms of information today.

\*\*Press Conference Today

Later today, at 3 p.m., David Nabarro, Coordinator of the Secretary-General's High Level Task Force on the Global Food Security Crisis, will hold a [press conference](http://www.un.org/News/briefings/docs/2009/090116_Nabarro.doc.htm) on the upcoming High Level Meeting on Food Security for All, which will take place later this month in Madrid.

I will take your questions briefly.  I don’t want to have John waiting too long.  Before we have John, we’ll go to Enrique.  As you know the special emergency session is still going on in the General Assembly.  I’ll briefly take your questions.

\*\*Questions and Answers

Question:  Concerning the cut-off of gas to millions of European homes, the European Commissioner, Barroso, said he was considering some kind of legal action against the Russian monopoly and Ukrainian companies.  Has the Secretary-General expressed any opinion on this situation and will the UN get involved or is this strictly a European Union issue?

Spokesperson:  It’s a European Union issue, and if there’s a legal pursuit of the situation, I think it will be done by the European Union.

Question:  Now that Israel has rebuffed the Secretary-General’s proposal for a unilateral ceasefire, apart from having bombed the UN headquarters while he was in the area, does the Secretary-General have any new ideas to end this conflict?

Spokesperson:  The Secretary-General is pursuing his goal.  His goal is to get to that ceasefire.  Regardless of any public statements that are made by leaders in the region or elsewhere, the Secretary-General will continue his mission.

Question:  Are there any details available yet about which UN officials will be playing a role or taking part in the World Economic Forum in Davos later this month?

Spokesperson:  Yes, we have the information.  I can give it to you upstairs, of course.

Question:  This is sort of a compound question.  There were a series of UN- OIOS reports that were released on a site called Wikileaks.  One of them concerns the Congo and reports 217 allegations of sexual abuse – only one of which the UN was able to corroborate – but it doesn’t say what happened to that person.  So I wanted to ask about that particular report.  Is it possible to know what happened to the individual the UN felt it had proof against?  And does the Secretary-General feel that this type of release is a good thing and could lead to more accountability?  What does the Secretariat say?  I understand that he’s busy.

Spokesperson:  We’ve been made aware of the presence of what is purported to be confidential UN documents on the Wikileaks.org website.  Those are reports that are publicly available to Member States, at their request, to ensure transparency in our own work.  Many of the allegations in these reports have already been well documented publicly.  At least one Member State has already placed a majority of them on its own UN mission website in the past.  So it is really nothing new.  The one you are referring to is not a new report.  What is not in the Wikileaks apparently, is what was done afterward.  I think that you should be pursuing this with the UN Secretariat, because in every single one of these cases the recommendations were followed through and remedies were taken.  I’m not going to answer each one separately.  But you can certainly, Matthew, follow up on this.

Question:  When you say the UN Secretariat, that’s why I’m asking it here.   Who should I ask?

Spokesperson:  I will let you know.  Because in the case of sexual misconduct in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, there were a number of measures that were taken, in particular preventive measures, so that this would not occur.  And these preventive measures, if I remember correctly, included a curfew, a list of out-of-bounds establishments, recreation facilities and continued training and awareness-raising on the UN’s zero tolerance policy.  I think we had already a briefing on this.

Question:  We had it on the preventive one, but what we didn’t have was what actually happened to the peacekeeper that in this report the UN felt there was sufficient evidence that they should be prosecuted at home.  Were they, in fact, and what was the sentence?

Spokesperson:  Yes, you’ll be free to follow that.

Question:  Has the Secretary-General received sufficient answers from his perspective to the bombing of the UNRWA compound in Gaza yesterday?  Is he satisfied with it?  What is the significance, on his behalf, that the same day he arrives there that this bombing takes place?  What kind of message does he think Israel is sending him?

Spokesperson:  I will repeat what I said earlier about whatever the message was that was to be sent to him.  I don’t know what the message was.  The Secretary-General has pursued the accountability issue as well as a number of other issues, including a ceasefire as soon as possible.  He has already expressed very strongly how he felt about the attack on the compound and I’m sure we’ll have some update about what was done on the ground on the operational level, with John a little later.  In terms of the Secretary-General, he has already expressed to Prime Minister Olmert how he felt about what had happened.  In terms of pursuing this and having an investigation, of course we have asked for one.  But, it occurred yesterday, so we don’t have the answers yet.  Of course not.

Question:   Israel has used phosphorous gas, that’s being alleged at this point, on the civilians.  Has there been any documentation on how many civilians have been killed and the impact on the civilian population in Gaza?  Similarly, Israel had also, in the war in Lebanon, used 500 cluster bombs to kill several people and still continues to do so.  Is there going to be international accountability for Israel at this point in time, or at any further point in time?

Spokesperson:  What I’m going to do is give the floor to John in a few minutes.  He has been raising the accountability issue every since he has been coming to our noon briefing.  And, of course, about the white phosphorous, your question was answered yesterday by Mr. Holmes saying that white phosphorous is not a banned weapon in terms of existing international conventions.

Question:  In civilian areas it is banned.

Spokesperson:  In heavily populated areas, yes.

Question:  What about the cluster bombs?

Spokesperson:  We have already talked about cluster bombs over and over again.  If you want, Masood, we can return to that subject later on because I would like to give the floor to Enrique, who is going to talk about the special emergency session taking place now, and to John, who has been patiently waiting for us and who has really a lot to tell us.  As you know his briefings have been really helpful and unique for us.

Please, Enrique.

Briefing by Spokesperson for the General Assembly President

Thank you, Michèle.  Good afternoon.  I will try also to be very quick because I want us to go to Gaza as soon as possible.  But I only wanted to give you some practical information about what’s going on.  As you know, the [special session](http://www.un.org/press/en/2009/ga10809.doc.htm) on Gaza is going on right now.  There are around 45 speakers for today who have requested to intervene.  We are now at number 15.  We had 27 speakers yesterday.  We hope that the session will end later today.  It is expected that a resolution will be passed.  At the request of several Member States, as you know, the President of the General Assembly was requested yesterday to draft a resolution.  That resolution has been circulating among the Member States and they are discussing whether to adopt it this afternoon.

That is basically it.  Unless we have an urgent question, I would like to give the floor to John.

\*\*Questions and Answers

Question:  Just a quick one, can we see a copy of the draft?

Spokesperson:  Yes, it’s an official document.  It’s online.  But I’ll give you a draft immediately.

Question:  Was there any outcome of the inquiry which the General Assembly President asked for on the threat on his life by the Israelis on the Internet?

Spokesperson:  I didn’t hear your question.Question:  I see, so the investigation is still going on.

Spokesperson:  No, I didn’t hear your question.

Question:  About the threats against the GA President?

Spokesperson:  No, we don’t have any further information on that.

Question:  Is that investigation still going on or is it closed?

Spokesperson:  I understand that it’s still going on.

Question:  I was told that there are some European amendments to the copy of the draft resolution prepared by the PGA.  I was wondering if you can update on that and whether there is a still a door open for amendments to the resolution?

Spokesperson:  The different groups are still discussing.  So I wouldn’t say that there’s an agreement right now.  They are discussing - the Europeans, the G-77 and the Non-Aligned Movement.  We hope to have an agreement.  But, you know how the procedure works.  It’s up to the countries to decide.  From the President of the General Assembly’s perspective, what is important is that we finish today, that we don’t delay a decision until the weekend or Monday.  We need to send a very strong message to the people in Gaza and the parties in the area by the international community requesting an immediate ceasefire, among other things.

Question:  Just recently, in his speech, Alejandro Wolfe of the US, the Deputy Perm Rep, ended with this call on the PGA to do consultations to try to reach consensus.  Is he going to do those types of consultations?  Does he or you view that as sort of a stalling tactic?  Can those consultations be held and still you have a vote today?

Spokesperson:  Sure.  The nature of this Organization is about negotiations.  You have different positions and people try to get an agreement.  Sometimes the parties who are negotiating, like in this particular case, request the services of the President of the General Assembly to try to facilitate that dialogue.  It is part of the normal political discussions that are always taking place.  I don’t see any difference from the past.

Question:  If there’s a sense that some countries are trying to somehow delay action, as some in the PGA’s office seem to think, can you just say why you think they would be delaying it?

Spokesperson:  The bottom line is many, many countries want to participate, which is fair and normal in this particular case given the gravity of the situation.  We have a limit.  We have the weekend in the middle of the General Assembly session.  The President would like that we take action as soon as possible.  In his opening remarks this morning, he asked them please to be quick and speedy in taking a decision.  What that decision is will be up to the Member States to decide.

I’m not going to take any more questions because I think we’ve already kept John waiting for a long time.