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**13 JANUARY 2009**

**Daily Press Briefing by the Office of the Spokesperson for the Secretary-General**

Good afternoon all.  We will continue in a few minutes our daily updates from Gaza.

\*\*Guest at Noon Today

Our [guest](http://www.un.org/News/briefings/docs/2009/090113_Gaza.doc.htm) at the noon briefing today again is John Ging, Director of Operations in Gaza for UNRWA, the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East.  It will be via video conference link from Gaza.  In fact, it already is.  Welcome, John.

\*\*Secretary-General on Gaza

The Secretary-General briefed the Security Council in closed consultations this morning on his visit to the Middle East, which will take him over the coming week to Egypt, Israel, the Occupied Palestinian Territory, Jordan, Turkey, Lebanon, Syria and Kuwait.  Council members expressed strong support for his trip, he said afterward.

At each stop, he told the Council, he will repeat his call for an immediate and durable ceasefire and insist that Security Council resolution 1860 be respected.  He will also demand that urgent humanitarian assistance be provided, without restriction, to those in need, and he will encourage the diplomatic efforts under way among concerned parties.

As he told you in his [press conference](http://www.un.org/press/en/2009/sgsm12044.doc.htm) yesterday afternoon, his goal is to step up the pace of joint diplomatic efforts regarding Gaza and southern Israel.  The Secretary-General sent a simple and direct message to all sides:  the fighting must stop.

He said he expects the parties now meeting in Cairo to do what is required.  They must agree to the elements of an immediate ceasefire.

At a minimum, he said, that means a halt to rocket attacks by Hamas militants and a withdrawal of Israeli forces from Gaza.  The international community must come together to stop the smuggling of weapons into Gaza, he added, but, by the same token, border crossings into Gaza must be re-opened in full.  We have the full transcript of that press conference upstairs and on the Web.

\*\* Gaza

The Office of the UN Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process (UNSCO) reports that the Kerem Shalom crossing between Gaza and Israel is open today.  Nearly 80 truckloads of goods, along with 200,000 litres of fuel, were expected to pass through today.  But the actual arrival of those materials in Gaza has not yet been confirmed.  We will have, of course, John Ging to talk about this issue.  In addition, the Rafah crossing between Gaza and Egypt is open today for aid supplies and medical evacuations.  But the Nahal Oz fuel pipeline and Karni crossing, both between Israel and Gaza, remain closed.

According to the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), as of this morning, 60 per cent of Gazans were not receiving any power.  OCHA adds that Gaza’s electricity provider’s warehouse in Gaza City has been hit, which has led to the destruction of desperately needed spare parts.

OCHA also says that many water wells and sewage pumps are still not functioning due to the lack of electricity, diminished fuel supplies for back-up generators and the lack of spare parts.  Five hundred thousand Palestinians in the Gaza Strip still do not have access to running water.  That includes 60 per cent of the people in Gaza City.  In addition, 80 per cent of the drinking water in Gaza is not safe for human consumption, according to World Health Organization (WHO) guidelines.  In Beit Hanoun and Beit Lahiya, which are both in northern Gaza, sewage is flowing in the streets.  Again, we will join John Ging on that specific issue.

In other developments, WHO reports that the emergency room of the Dorah Pediatric Hospital in Gaza was directly hit yesterday.  Staff are continuing to work despite the damage caused to the infrastructure.  And OCHA says that the number of people who have fled their homes in Gaza remains unknown, but is estimated to be in the tens of thousands.

Meanwhile, in Geneva today, the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, which is currently in session, expressed deep concern at the devastating effects that the current military engagement is having on children in Gaza.  We have more on that upstairs.

\*\* Somalia

On Somalia, the Secretary-General’s Special Representative for Somalia, Ahmedou Ould-Abdallah, has called on Somalis to seize the opportunity of the withdrawal of Ethiopian troops from Mogadishu to ensure peace and stability in their country.  He urged them “to stop the senseless killings and violence”.  He also urged them to press ahead with the election of a new President.  And he appealed to Somali lawmakers to increase their numbers and create a Government of national unity.  There is more in a press release upstairs.

Still on Somalia:  The Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs says that the situation in and around the north-eastern town of Guri Elle is tense following heavy fighting in December.  The fighting claimed 40 civilian lives and displaced some 50,000 people.  Conditions for the displaced are made worse by the fact that humanitarian agencies can hardly access the region because of the widespread insecurity.  But, despite the challenges, the World Food Programme (WFP) intends to deliver food aid to some 1.5 million Somalis every month.  Last year, the agency shipped some 260,000 tons of food to Somalia, almost four times the amount in 2007.

Meanwhile, UNHCR [Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees] reports that more than 65,000 Somalis have sought refugee status in Kenya in 2008 alone.  UNHCR estimates the total number of Somalis in refugee camps in north-eastern Kenya to be about 230,000.  And last month, the United Nations and its partners launched a $913 million appeal to help some 3.25 million Somalis.

\*\* Democratic Republic of the Congo

On the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the United Nations Refugee Agency says it is increasingly concerned about continued attacks by the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA) in the Democratic Republic of the Congo’s Oriental Province, which borders Uganda and South Sudan.

UNHCR’s team in Dungu reports that LRA has killed an estimated 537 people, and kidnapped 408 others, since violence broke out there last September.  According to rough estimates, more than 100,000 people have been forcibly displaced.  Many are still hiding in the bush, particularly in areas around the town of Faradje.  UNHCR is working with local authorities and other agencies to find ways to deliver aid in these insecure and inaccessible areas.

Also, Olusegun Obasanjo, the Secretary-General’s Special Envoy on the Great Lakes Region, will brief the Security Council on the Democratic Republic of the Congo talks this coming Thursday.

\*\* Chad

On Chad, the World Food Programme (WFP) is about to begin delivery of food aid to some 250,000 Sudanese refugees in Chad.  WFP convoys are now travelling some 2,800 kilometres through the Sahara desert from Libya in a bid to reach the refugees before the onset of seasonal rains.

WFP notes that Libya has been helping it with its aid convoys travelling across the Sahara since 2004.  Libya’s assistance to the WFP ground transportation corridor extends from the port of Benghazi through the Sahara to Chad.

A first convoy of 58 trucks left Al Khufra in Libya in late December and will reach north-eastern Chad later this month.  A second convoy of nearly 100 trucks also departed Al Khufra this past weekend.

\*\* Zimbabwe

In today’s update on the cholera situation in Zimbabwe, the World Health Organization reports that the death toll there has now topped 2,000.  More than 100 deaths -– and nearly 1,500 new cases –- were added just today.  In all, there have been close to 40,000 cholera cases reported in Zimbabwe so far.  Virtually no part of the country has been spared in the epidemic, WHO says.  It has affected all 10 of Zimbabwe’s provinces, and nearly 90 per cent of the country’s 62 local districts.  There is more information upstairs.

\*\* Fiji

The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs says that heavy rains in Fiji have caused severe flooding in the North, Central and Western Divisions of the islands since 8 January.

The Fiji Interim Government has yet to request international assistance at this time, but another tropical depression is expected to bring more rainfall this week, which may extend and compound the current situation.  OCHA is discussing the United Nations response in case international assistance is requested.

\*\*United Nations Staff

The United Nations Staff Union reports that at least 34 UN personnel lost their lives as a result of malicious acts in 2008.  That’s down slightly from at least 42 United Nations staffers in 2007.

Those killed include at least seven World Food Programme truck drivers in Sudan and Somalia, and 10 peacekeepers in Darfur.  In addition, a suicide car bombing against a United Nations compound in northern Somalia claimed two lives.

We have, of course, more information for you in our Highlights and, of course, more information for you upstairs.

I will take briefly your questions before I give the floor to John so we can get back to Gaza.

\*\*Questions and Answers

Question:  Yesterday, the Secretary-General was questioned on Lebanon.  I wanted to know, are there any anticipated discussions with Iran or with any representatives from Iran while he’s going to be in the Middle East?  He’s visiting so many countries and there have been so many direct fingers pointed at Iran.  And if the peace negotiations are in fact going to be observed and resolution 1860, is he planning on meeting with any folks over there?

Spokesperson:  Not at this point.  No.

Question:  It has now been six days since the resolution was adopted by the Security Council.  As you know, the Security Council insisted on an immediate ceasefire and also a durable ceasefire, which means it will take time.  The Secretary-General continues to insist, rightly so, on an immediate ceasefire.  But this is creating the opposite in the international community because it is not immediate.  Is the word “immediate” the right word to use or should we call simply for a ceasefire because everybody knows that it is going to take a long time?  But we are still using “immediate”.  As I said, it does not create the right impression.

Spokesperson:  For the Secretary-General, “immediate” is the word.  Because that is what he’s striving for.  That is what he is going to work for.  And to him, the call for an immediate ceasefire remains.

Question:  But the word “immediate” in this sense is not immediate.  It has taken six days and is going to take another four or five days.  So, what’s immediate about it?

Spokesperson:  The call is immediate.  The call for an immediate ceasefire remains.  That’s what I’m saying.  Whether it has been observed and respected on the ground, at this point, is what you are referring to.  What I’m referring to is the call for an immediate ceasefire.  How it is going to be respected and applied in the field is something the Secretary-General is working for.  But, I think he’s called for an immediate ceasefire or as soon as possible.  The time for negotiations can come afterward.  But, for the time being, the price is too high.  There are too many people being killed.  And I think this is essentially what his approach is.

Question:  I understand, but I’m talking about the impact on the international community of this word “immediate”.  People are waiting for an immediate stop to the hostilities, and it’s not going to be like that.

Spokesperson:  Well, the word “immediate” maybe is going to force the international community to play their part in getting that to be immediate.

[A correspondent then asked two questions in French, which the Spokesperson answered in French.]

I am sorry, for those of you, she was asking about [Robert] Fowler, and what I said was that we do not have any comment at this point about the statement that was made by the President of Niger today.  As you know, the United Nations, the Government of Canada and the Niger Government have been working together in partnership to try to bring them back home safely, to get more information about where they are -- we still don’t know where they are -- and to be able to get them to come back home safely.

Question:  Two quick questions.  It’s been reported that Satyam, the Indian company described as the Indian Enron, continued to get United Nations contracts even after it was disbarred by the World Bank sort of in contravention of this whole thing called the UN Interagency Procurement Working Group.  What comment do you have on this company, despite being disbarred by the World Bank, continuing to get UN contracts?  Is it going to keep its contracts through 2013?  What’s being done about this?

Spokesperson:  Before I can answer you, I have to get the information first, which I don’t have.  The information you have is news to me.  I didn’t know if they are still having contracts.  If they are, of course we will get back to you on this as soon as we get the information.

Question:  You said that LRA has now killed 500 and some people.  It’s reported that they continue to reach out to Joaquim Chissano to somehow intervene so that the attacks on them stop so that LRA can apparently stop killing civilians.  Has Chissano received that call and what is the United Nations thinking as they continue to rampage now through the Central African Republic?

Spokesperson:  I think I answered that question before.  As I told you, Mr. Chissano is in contact with them, but they have three times now refused to go to the point where they were supposed to sign an agreement.  The agreement was never signed because, as you know, they did not show up.  At this point, I can not answer you directly.  Mr. Chissano, of course, is in touch with all the actors in the region, including LRA.  And I’ll get some additional information for you from him.

Question:  Yes, I remember what you said before.  I just want to know if he’s been in contact with him recently or if now it’s all bets are off until either Kony signs or is killed or whatever?  If there have been some new communications with him?

Spokesperson:  We can try to reach Mr. Chissano to find out.

I’m sorry, John, to have kept you waiting.  We are getting back to Gaza and I know a lot of you are here for that.  John, please.  Welcome.