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Spokesperson's Noon Briefing

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DAILY PRESS BRIEFING BY THE OFFICE OF THE SPOKESPERSON FOR THE SECRETARY-GENERAL

The following is a near-verbatim transcript of today's noon briefing by Martin Nesirky, Spokesperson for the Secretary-General.

Good afternoon. Welcome to the briefing.

****Secretary-General Trip**

The Secretary-General will depart New York on Wednesday, 15 May, for Russia. During his stay in Russia, he will visit Moscow and Sochi. On Friday, 17 May, the Secretary-General will hold talks with Russian leaders. He will conclude his visit to Russia on 19 May.

****General Assembly**

The Secretary-General [spoke](#) this morning at the General Assembly's high-level [meeting](#) on improving the coordination of efforts against human trafficking.

He said that human trafficking devastates individuals and undermines national economies.

Billions of dollars are generated through exploitation and abuse, and in turn, these funds support illegal drugs, corruption and other crimes.

The Secretary-General said that the United Nations is bringing partners together to protect the victims, prosecute the traffickers and end this trade in humans.

His full remarks are available online and in my office.

****Security Council**

The Secretary-General also [spoke](#) at the Security Council meeting this morning on terrorism in Africa. He said that terrorism is a threat to Africa's peace, security and development. From Al-Shabaab in the east to Boko Haram in the west to Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb in the north, several parts of the continent face a rise in the presence of extremist groups and terrorist entities.

The Secretary-General added that our joint efforts against terrorism must be carried out in accordance with the UN Charter and international law, and with due respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms.

****Darfur**

The Joint Special Representative of the African Union and United Nations in Darfur has strongly

condemned yesterday's attack which resulted in the death of a leader of the Justice and Equality Movement-Sudan and a number of his colleagues.

The Joint Special Representative noted that this group had clearly wanted a peaceful resolution to the Darfur conflict when it signed the Doha Document for Peace in Doha on 6 April.

He urged all sides involved in the fighting in Darfur — and especially the non-signatory armed movements — to cease hostilities, respect international humanitarian law and engage fully in the peaceful settlement of the conflict.

**** Lebanon**

The Under-Secretary-General for Peacekeeping Operations, Hervé Ladsous, visited Israel and met with Government officials there today. He toured the line of withdrawal (Blue Line) in southern Lebanon yesterday. He was accompanied by the Force Commander and other senior officials of the UN Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL).

After the tour, Mr. Ladsous said that he was encouraged to see that the situation along the Blue Line is generally calm. He commended the parties for their continued commitment to the cessation of hostilities and the implementation of resolution 1701 (2006).

**** Bangladesh**

The Assistant Secretary-General for Political Affairs, Oscar Fernandez-Taranco, ended a visit to Bangladesh today.

While in the country, he met with the Prime Minister, Foreign Minister and other officials, as well as with representatives of civil society and media.

Addressing the press today, Mr. Fernandez-Taranco stressed the urgent need for more meaningful and constructive political dialogue to create conducive conditions for the successful holding of elections.

He said that leaders need to display political will and arrive at a solution that will create a conducive environment for free, fair, credible, inclusive and non-violent elections.

**** Myanmar**

The Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs says that a "red storm" alert remains in effect for Tropical Cyclone Mahasen, which is moving towards India, Bangladesh and Myanmar. It is expected to make landfall on Thursday.

The Office says that, depending on the cyclone's final trajectory, it could threaten the lives of millions of people in northeast India, Bangladesh and Myanmar's Rakhine State.

In Bangladesh, the Government has initiated preparations, while humanitarian agencies have started repositioning supplies in the most vulnerable areas.

In Myanmar, the Rakhine State Government has activated its disaster reduction plan, which includes relocation and evacuation. Those who are internally displaced within the State have been informed of the storm alert.

And there is more information available online.

**** Guatemala**

The High Commissioner for Human Rights today welcomed last week's conviction of Guatemala's former de facto Head of State, José Efraín Ríos Montt, for genocide and crimes against humanity.

Navi Pillay said that Guatemala has made history by becoming the first country in the world to convict a former Head of State for genocide in its own national court.

She paid tribute to the victims, relatives and survivors whose courage and perseverance made this possible, as well as the lawyers, prosecutors and judges who carried out their duties under difficult circumstances in the face of serious threats and intimidation.

Ms. Pillay's full statement is available on the website of the UN Human Rights Office.

**** Climate Change**

The UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) said today that the global concentration of heat-trapping carbon dioxide in the atmosphere is at its highest ever. That concentration has passed the 400 parts per million mark. The Executive Secretary of UNFCCC, Christiana Figueres, called for a greatly stepped-up response to climate change by all parts of society and said we have entered a new danger zone.

Governments will be meeting 3-14 June in Bonn for the next round of climate change talks. A central focus of the talks will be negotiations to build a new global climate agreement and to push for greater immediate climate action.

The full statement from Ms. Figueres is available online.

Questions, please. Yes, Edie?

**** Questions and Answers**

Question: Martin, on two different subjects: First, on the Secretary-General's visit to Russia, has, was this a long-planned visit? And how high do you expect the Syrian conflict to be on the agenda?

Spokesperson: Well, this is a visit that has obviously been in the works for some time. And the focus is on a number of areas of common concern, and plainly, Syria will figure quite prominently in those discussions.

Question: Can you tell us what some of the other issues that are going to be on the agenda are?

Spokesperson: Well, first of all, generally speaking, the Secretary-General wishes to further enhance the relationship that is already there with the Russian Federation, and particularly to discuss the Secretary-General's own five-year agenda that he set out at the beginning of his second term. He relies very heavily on the support of Member States, and obviously the Russian Federation is an important Member State. You would anticipate also, I think, discussions on other parts of the world, potentially the Korean peninsula as well.

Question: And on a completely different subject — the Prime Minister of Britain today used the figure of more than 80,000 deaths in Syria, and I wondered if the UN was confirming that as the new number.

Spokesperson: Well, we have also seen media reports quoting at least one Syrian opposition group

using a figure of that magnitude. I would anticipate that in the coming days you would hear an estimate from, probably, Ms. Pillay's office. But I would need to check further on that. But certainly, we are aware of the reports and also Prime Minister Cameron's reference to them. Yes, Joe?

Question: Yeah, Martin, this question again deals with resolution 1701 (2006), and also you just quoted Mr. Ladsous who talked about the calm in the area and praising the cooperation of all parties. Well, my question deals with, number one, Hizbullah's threat, just quoted a few days ago in saying that they will be obtaining from Syria game-changing weapons, weapons that were never in their possession before. Secondly, in response to my previous question, you had sent me a statement, I guess from UNIFIL, indicating its limited mandate south of the Litani River. But there is pretty incontrovertible evidence of Hizbullah weapons stored in villages south of the Litani River. UNIFIL has done a bit in trying to locate them, but withdraws every time there is any push back. And there was a letter back in 2007 from the Lebanese Prime Minister to Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon specifically asking for UN aid in stopping illegal shipments of arms into Lebanon, mentioning Hizbullah specifically, which triggers, then, UNIFIL's mandate under 1701 to help stop the stem of, uh, the stream of weapons if Lebanon requests it. So, I guess I have to come back to you and ask: why there is this notion that everyone is cooperating with respect to 1701. Several commanders or high-level officials at UNIFIL have actually praised Hizbullah's cooperation when we are seeing evidence of the opposite.

Spokesperson: I'll need to check further on this, Joseph, I don't have anything beyond what I had provided last week. But certainly, I am happy to take it up again and see if I can provide anything more, okay.

Question: Thank you.

Question: A follow-up on the same?

Spokesperson: Yes, Nizar, please.

Question: You said Ladsous raised the issue of enhanced Israeli incursions, I mean aerial sorties over Lebanon and mock raids carried out, which were reported everywhere in the media in Lebanon and by the officials of... Lebanese officials, especially in the last couple of weeks. And were the Lebanese air space, was the Lebanese airspace, used during the raid against Damascus?

Spokesperson: On the...

Question: ...a week ago?

Spokesperson: On the last part, I don't have anything for you, Nizar. On the earlier part of your question about the general proposition of raising this topic of Lebanese airspace, I think we had said last week that UNIFIL had raised this matter quite clearly and forcefully with the Israeli Defense Forces. I don't have anything beyond that at this point.

Question: Another question regarding Benghazi's bomb explosion today. Are issuing any statement about that, and is the United Nations doing anything with regard to the increased danger in Libya in general, and many diplomats are considering evacuation from Libya?

Spokesperson: I'll check with our mission there, Nizar. I don't have anything right at the moment. Yes, Tim? And then Matthew. Yes, yes, Tim?

Question: You said that Syria will take a prominent part in the Secretary-General's visit to Russia, so I guess they will be discussing a possible conference on the future of Syria. Does the Secretary-General have any opinion on who should take part in the conference and whether Iran, in particular, should take part?

Spokesperson: No, I think the point here is, Tim, that it is obvious that Syria is of great concern to the international community. And so I think it is self-evident that when the Secretary-General meets with Russian leaders that this would figure prominently in their discussions. I am not going to pre-judge precisely what those discussions would be about in detail. Yes?

Question: Sure, I want to ask about UNDOF (United Nations Disengagement Observer Force) and also Abyei. I saw the, the statement by the Secretary-General thanking Qatar for, uh, in regard to the release of the peacekeepers, and so I just wanted to know if you can just unpack that a little bit. Is it that, they are, have some sway over the Yarmouk Martyrs Brigade? Are they viewed by the UN as providing weapons to the Yarmouk Martyrs Brigade? What was their role and, and... and... and what can you say about that?

Spokesperson: I'll say what it says in the statement, which you have referred to only in part. He appreciates the assistance of Qatar and of others involved in securing their safe release. I don't think you would expect me to go into much more detail about how negotiations are conducted for the release of people being held against their will.

Question: But can you see why, it's said that the UN doesn't want outside countries to be supporting armed groups inside Syria. And it's, it's both from the statement, from other reports it seems that it's accepted that Qatar has some communications and in with the Yarmouk Martyrs Brigade. Can you see why it seems contradictory to what the same hand being thanking, I mean, does... does... does the Secretary-General understand that there is a connection between Qatar and the Yarmouk Martyrs Brigade?

Spokesperson: All I wanted to say is what I have already said, which is that he appreciates the assistance of Qatar and of others involved in securing their safe release. The most important thing here is that four peacekeepers were being held and had been detained since 7 May, and they were released and are in good shape, it would seem. And that happened over the weekend. And it is absolutely crucial that everyone understands the impartiality of the peacekeepers who are there. This is obviously a difficult place to operate at the moment. And the Secretary-General again calls on all parties to respect the freedom of movement [of] the United Nations Disengagement Observer Force, and also the safety and security of its personnel. That's the top priority. Yes?

Question: Just to follow up on that. Do you know if those four peacekeepers will be returning to the Philippines when [inaudible]...UNDOF?

Spokesperson: I do not know that at this point. I do know that they have been having medical checks. They seem to be in good shape, and if I have anything further on their movements, I will let you know. Yes, Jonathan?

Question: Thanks, Martin. At the end of this month Iran is going to be the chair of the Disarmament Committee in Geneva, and I am just wondering, I mean, I don't anticipate that you have an answer now, but if you do, that would be great. But the Secretary-General's position on countries such as North Korea or Iran that are subjects of a lot of scrutiny over... over weapons issues, taking on leadership roles at these conferences, which generally are based on rotation processes, and, as part of Secretary-General Ban's efforts for reform, is this something he is looking into, and to try to make recommendations to address these issues? And, and, also, it would be helpful, we've gone through now, I guess a couple of months waiting to see some UN action with regards to the chemical weapons issue in Syria, and the UN has yet to get on the ground and to be able to do that, and we all understand the diplomatic issues are central in that. But perhaps we can get a briefing from a UN official to bring us up to speed on where things stand and what the impediments are and try to get to the bottom of these issues.

Spokesperson: Well, on the first, on the [Conference on Disarmament], I think you have raised already the key point, which is obviously that it is by rotation. The other key point is that this is driven by Member States and, therefore, it is for Member States to decide how that works.

[The Spokesperson later added that the presidency of the Conference on Disarmament rotates every four weeks in alphabetical order in English.]

On the second question related to the chemical weapons investigation, our efforts continue, of course, to seek access for on-site activities. We don't yet have that access lined up. And therefore, in the meantime, Dr. [Åke] Sellström, the head of the investigation team and his colleagues continue to try to gather information from outside and to analyze the information that they have to hand. I don't really have any further update beyond that. I think it is unlikely, at this point, given that it is an investigation that is under way, that anyone involved in that investigation would be briefing on it. So, you are stuck with me, I am afraid. So, any other questions, please?

Question: But in terms of a policy of rotation, let's say, I mean, given the current set up, uh, Nazi Germany, for instance, had there not been enough voices about position would have been able to chair the Disarmament Committee. And, then, that's not an extreme thing I am saying...

Spokesperson: Well...

Question: ...it is actually true that the regulations of the UN are such that unless there is some sort of effort to stop something, then it doesn't...

Spokesperson: No, no, I... I understand your the intent. It's a rather bizarre example that you are giving. I understand the general principle at stake here just as well as I think you do. But it is, to my knowledge, it is Member State-driven, and therefore it is for Member States to look at how the logistics, the procedures, work for this particular committee. It is rotational; in the future, it will be another country, Member State. In the past, it was a different Member State. So, I don't really have anything to say beyond that except, of course, again, generally speaking, the Secretary-General simply wants to see movement on the Conference on Disarmament. He wants to see movement in this crucial area. And he has been quite critical in the past, and indeed quite recently, on the lack of progress there has been. So, I think that it is, that's the bigger question — is how you ensure that there is movement in that process. I think that's the bigger picture.

Question: Thank you. I'll stop here on this one little rebuttal to what you said: I don't think it's so unusual a question. Because it is really what the dynamic is at the UN that there is this system that's in place that allows these things to happen. And the question is, as the moral authority of the United Nations, whether the Secretary-General decides to use his good offices as a platform to espouse certain notions that he may have on reform and ways in which the Organization can work toward the benefit of mankind.

Spokesperson: Well, I think you will find if you look back at what the Secretary-General has said about the Conference on Disarmament, he has been quite vocal about what he wants to see happen with regard to the process there. Simply, I don't for a minute question the question you have raised. It was simply that you reached quite a long way back into history to make the parallel then. That was simply my point. Any other questions? Yes, Matthew?

Question: Sure, I wanted to ask about Abyei, Madagascar and Sri Lanka. In Abyei, the Abyei youth union has called for the... the end of the mandate of UNISFA (United Nations Interim Security Force for Abyei), saying that it has failed to protect Dinka and... and said that beyond the Paramount Chief there was, there was another individual, uh, Awet Ngor, who they say was killed within walking distance of UNISFA's base in Mulmul days before the killing of the Paramount Chief. So, I am wondering, I got, I... I know I had, I had asked some questions about what the mandate of UNISFA is in terms of protection of civilians from non, non-State groups like the Misseriya, and I... I... I want to, I am reiterating that in case, is that death confirmed, why wasn't that death reported at the time by UNISFA as having been a problem, and is it true that the Ghanaian senior police advisor to UNISFA is still being denied a visa or has that been changed?

Spokesperson: Let me check on those points. But as a general principle, I think you are fully aware

where mandates for UN peacekeeping operations emanate from.

Question: Yeah, but, Francis Deng said, he said at the stakeout that the mandate seems to permit UNISFA to do what, but that the Force Commander had told him with...[inaudible]

Spokesperson: I remember, I remember...

Question: Yeah.

Spokesperson: ...And if I have anything further on it, I will let you know.

Question: Okay. And the, the Madagascar question, is, is, there has been since I last asked this, the SADC (Southern African Development Community) has come out and said that three candidates they have encouraged to... to... to withdraw their candidacies, saying they are not consistent with the road map. This is Mr. [Andry] Rajoelina, also Lalao Ravalomanana and another candidate. And so I want the, one, I wanted to know if there is a UN response to that, but two, since Ms. Ravalomanana was... was... is being barred for having been out of the country, and this was a forced exile by the Government, I am wondering whether the UN has any view on one, forced exile, and two, that being used as a... as a basis to bar a candidate from running.

Spokesperson: We can check for you on that, Matthew. I don't have anything right now.

Question: And the, what, maybe, and this is, this may be just a factual one. There is a, there is a Muslim leader in Sri Lanka, Azath Salley, who, he's recently been arrested under anti-terrorism charges. He may be released having issued some kind of confession, but the news there is that he says that he wrote recently to... to Ban Ki-moon asking him and the UN system to look into the crackdown on Muslim community by Government-allied Buddhist extremists and... and... and was the letter received, is there any response or comment?

Spokesperson: We'll have a look. I think, as we have said many times — either I have said it or colleagues have said — many letters are received, and they are logged. I don't automatically have immediate knowledge of the letters being received, but when people ask, we check whether they have been.

Question: Yeah, just one, beyond just the letter, just, is there, is there, is there concern on the part, as, is, I said about Myanmar...

Spokesperson: No, I understand, but...

Question: Okay.

Spokesperson: But first of all, I would like to see if we have received the letter.

Question: Okay.

Spokesperson: ...and then we can respond to it.

Question: Okay.

Spokesperson: Thanks very much. Yes, last question?

Question: Okay. This also related to Iran, and it is really a follow-up. We had a video press conference here a few weeks ago where the person from UNDP (United Nations Development Programme) in charge in Iran was discussing disaster relief for the victims of the earthquake in Iran.

Spokesperson: Right.

Question: And the questions were limited to that. And I was advised in following up from the, I think it was DPI representative here, to send my further questions to that individual; he gave me contact information. I have done this twice; and my question is related to the UNDP's budget and also the money, he said he coordinates on behalf of other UN agencies in Iran currently. And also to get a listing of those projects. I have sent two communications to that individual whose name slips my mind right now, but I haven't gotten any response, so I would like to ask for your Office's assistance in getting that connection.

Spokesperson: Well, we can certainly look at that. I think what is useful to do is to be in touch with the UNDP communications people here in New York, at UNDP's headquarters. They have a well-established communications office, and I am sure that they will be pleased to help you, too. But, obviously we can help to make that happen too, okay.

Question: Thank you very much.

Spokesperson: All right, thanks very much. Have a good afternoon. Thank you.

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