
OFF-THE-CUFF

Secretary-General's press encounter at UN Headquarters

New York, 19 August 2013

Thank you, good morning, ladies and gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure for me to meet you in this newly renovated press room. I hope you will enjoy working in this room and provide all of the time good news to people around the world. It is a great pleasure to see you today.

As you know, this is a solemn day at the United Nations. It is also the tenth anniversary of the attack on our headquarters in Baghdad, ten years ago exactly today. Twenty-two of our colleagues, including Sergio [Vieira] de Mello, were killed that day – and many more since, as we have observed in honour of those fallen colleagues.

In honour of all humanitarian workers who have died in the line of duty, we mark every August 19th as World Humanitarian Day.

We still face grave threats around the world. Let me be clear: attacks against the United Nations and our partners are attacks on the people we serve.

On World Humanitarian Day, I call for greater protections for humanitarian workers and assets – and accountability for those who would do them harm.

Let me now turn to other pressing issues.

On Egypt, I am alarmed by ongoing developments and the widespread outbreak of violent protests and excessive use of force. I strongly condemn attacks on churches, hospitals and other public facilities. There is no justification for targeting civilians or destroying infrastructure and property so important for Egypt's future.

Preventing further loss of life should be the highest priority. I urge all Egyptians to exercise maximum restraint and resolve differences peacefully.

With such sharp polarization in Egyptian society, both the authorities and the political leaders share the responsibility for ending the current violence. They should spare no effort to swiftly adopt a credible plan to contain the violence and revive the political process hijacked by violence.

The United Nations stands ready to support Egyptian-led approaches to resolving the current crisis. I have asked the Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs, Mr. Jeff Feltman, to hold wide-ranging discussions in Cairo starting from tomorrow with a focus on how the United Nations can best support initiatives to restore peace and forge reconciliation in Egypt.

Ladies and gentlemen, I have just returned from a trip to the Middle East region and Pakistan.

In Pakistan, I met everyone from Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif to young students focused on education and a better future for their country. I left confident that the close bonds between Pakistan and the UN are growing even stronger. We will continue to support Pakistan as it tackles challenges at home and strengthen their relationship with neighbours.

I then travelled to Jordan, Palestine and Israel to underscore the United Nations' commitment to a just and lasting peace. There is at last a fresh opportunity for real progress towards a peace agreement. Both Israeli and Palestinian leaders must seize this historic opportunity.

There is no time to lose. Achieving an agreement will require vision, statesmanship and courage. It will take sacrifices, understanding and leadership from both sides. The negotiators and leaders will have to make tougher decisions and even more difficult choices. This is not a zero-sum game. It is possible, and indeed necessary, to arrive at a solution that clearly benefits both Israelis and Palestinians – and we will continue to support all efforts to meet that goal.

Staying in the region, after five months of effort, I am pleased to report that the United Nations Mission to Investigate Allegations of the Use of Chemical Weapons in the Syrian Arab Republic began its work today. As agreed with the Government, the team will conduct its activities in the country for up to 14 days. That period can be extended by mutual consent.

The Mission will contemporaneously investigate the alleged use of chemical weapons reported by the Government of Syria at Khan al-Asal as well as two other allegations of the use of chemical weapons reported by Member States.

As I have made clear many times, in order to credibly establish the facts, the Mission must have full access to the sites of the alleged incidents. This includes access to the reported sites to undertake the necessary analyses and to collect samples. It also includes interviews and examination of witnesses, victims, attending medical personnel as well as the conduct of post-mortem examinations.

The serious security situation inside the country will undoubtedly affect the Mission's activities in Syria. Despite these circumstances, I have full confidence in the professionalism of Dr. [Ake] Sellström and his expert team.

The Government and all other entities within Syria must ensure the safety and security of the Mission. I appreciate the assurances I have received on this.

I also applaud the staff of the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons and the World Health Organization for supporting the Mission.

This is the first probe of allegations of the use of weapons of mass destruction in the 21st century. I firmly believe that an effective mechanism to investigate allegations of the possible use of chemical weapons will help deter their future use.

Let me state again clearly that, if confirmed, the use of chemical weapons by any side under any circumstances must be held accountable and would constitute an international crime. Anyone responsible must be held accountable.

Ladies and gentlemen,

I will continue my travels later this week and depart Wednesday for an official visit to the Republic of Korea. And then I will visit the Netherlands to part in the centennial anniversary of the Peace Palace, and then Austria to participate in a retreat between the United Nations and the European Union co-organized by myself and President [José Manuel] Barroso of the European [Commission].

Ladies and gentlemen, finally, and most sincerely, I know the UN press corps is grieving.

Just this past Saturday was the funeral for Graham Usher, a distinguished writer on the Middle East.

And on Friday, television cameraman Glenn Gabel was killed in a motorcycle accident on his way to work at the United Nations.

Both men died far too young.

Their legacy is in the tremendous work they did to help people better understand the world around them.

I want you all to know that my thoughts are with you, and especially with Graham's wife Barbara, and Glenn's partner Kristen, and their two young sons, Sawyer and Jax.

Thank you, and I will now answer a few questions.

Thank you very much.

Q: On behalf of the United Nations Correspondents Association, thank you very much for holding this briefing and also we thank you for the sentiment expressed for our colleagues. My first question to you is, given the harrowing situation that exists in Egypt right now and that you were in that Middle East area, don't you think if you could have gone to Egypt, your high moral authority could have somehow helped abate the situation in Egypt and could have avoided the killing of so many people. And that is one thing that people have been wanting, for you to exert your moral authority to end what is happening in Egypt. Thank you.

SG: I agree with your point. While we have really been exerting all our diplomatic and humanitarian efforts to support the people in Syria and to resolve the Syrian crisis by peaceful means through dialogue, at the same time our attention had to be focussed on the current situation in Egypt. So many people have been killed by violent protest and use of excessive force by the current authorities. I have strongly condemned such violent actions, and before this unacceptable situation had happened, I had been speaking to all the leaders of the Egyptian interim authorities and also leaders around the region. And, after that, I have been also speaking a lot with world leaders, even though I have not been releasing each and every telephone call of all diplomatic efforts. I have been doing all that I have had to do and finally, I decided to dispatch Under-Secretary-General [Jeffrey] Feltman to Egypt. I have been urging them that this not a time for retribution, this is a time for reconciliation. And whatever grievances might be there, these grievances and complaints by both sides should be resolved through dialogue. For that, I have been urging that political space for the Muslim Brotherhood should be expanded, because their political space has been very limited; by allowing Morsy to be freed, released and, if not, a transparent legal process should be taken. And all these efforts will have to continue. And I urge again the leadership of the current authorities and also leaders of political parties and all other society leaders, they should engage in dialogue. This is an Egyptian problem and the Egyptian people, they have the right, the responsibility to resolve by themselves for their better future. And I will continue to focus on that. As you know, finally, the Security Council last week took up this matter and I appreciate the Security Council for [putting] such good attention on that.

Q: Mr. Secretary-General, you mentioned that anyone who used chemical weapons, or found responsible for chemical weapons, must be held accountable. How do you intend to

hold them accountable, since the mandate of the Ake Sellstrom mission is to find out whether chemical weapons have been used or not, but not to find out who used them. So do you intend to enlarge the mandate of this mission, to include finding out the identity of the culprit who used the chemical weapons? Otherwise, how can you implement accountability? Thank you.

SG: As you said, it is right that the current mandate of this expert team to investigate chemical weapons use does not have the authority to determine who has used against whom. They will have to determine, through their investigation, whether the chemical weapons were used. Then on the basis of their final and scientific and expert level investigation report, then it is up to, again, the international community to determine what course of action should be taken to prove this, first of all, accountability and what needs to be done. Under any circumstances, whatever the reasons may be, use of chemical weapons is a violation of international law and international human rights law. Thus those whoever might have used should be accountable. That is a firm principle.

Q: On Friday, you said to students that, at the United Nations, Israelis suffered from bias and discrimination sometimes. What do you, as Secretary-General, intend to do about it and can you elaborate - what did you mean by that?

SG: During my visit to Palestine and Israel, I had quite moving experiences of meeting young students. In Ramallah, I had a videoconference with students joining from Gaza and there were many students from the West Bank. And in Jerusalem I had quite a number of young students who came to Government House. Discussing and exchanging views with the young people was quite inspiring and moving and I was able to learn what their aspirations and what their challenges and their frustrations were. Later, I found that, in one case, what had happened was that incitement against Israelis and Jews by a certain group of people at the summer camp. This was raised and reported. And this investigation is going on. But the United Nations doesn't have any role in that. It was simply a summer camp conducted in UNRWA [UN Relief and Works Agency] facilities. The investigation is going on.

Now, incitement against any group of people or any religion or tradition and disrespect against any traditions and region and people, ethnic group is unacceptable. We are living in an interconnected world, a very diversified society. You are coming from all different countries, Member States. They have all their own different unique traditions and understandings and history - so all these traditions should be fully respected. That is why the United Nations has launched the Alliance of Civilizations. Through this initiative, we have been really trying to promote mutual understanding, better understanding and respect for others. When we have experienced many conflicts here and there, I think it is all the more important at this time to fully appreciate and respect other traditions and understandings and history.

Q: But you said that at the UN there was discrimination against Israel according to quotes that I saw.

SG: No, I don't think there is discrimination against Israel at the United Nations. There may be some what I can say... the Israeli Government in fact, you know, raised this issue that [there's] some bias against Israel. But Israel is one of the 193 Member States, thus Israel should have equal rights and opportunities without having any bias, any discrimination. That's a fundamental principle of the United Nations Charter and thus Israel should be fully given such rights.

Q: Thank you Mr. Secretary-General. A different topic completely - Zimbabwe's President Robert Mugabe will be inaugurated for the seventh time this coming Thursday. I wonder if you sent him your warm congratulations. What are your thoughts on whether it was a free and fair election in Zimbabwe and what do you make of SADC's [South African Development Community] call this weekend for sanctions against Mugabe and some of his senior officials that those sanctions be lifted?

SG: For any sanctions imposed upon Zimbabwe is something which needs to be discussed and done by the Member States, by, you know, intergovernmental bodies. For the democratic process in Zimbabwe, I had been urging the Government of Zimbabwe and President Mugabe himself, on many occasions, that there should be fair and credible elections, there should be full respect for human rights and they should accelerate more to improve the well-being of their people. That has been my consistent message. I have taken note of the election which was held recently. I know that there have been some assessments by different groups of monitors and I hope that all these controversies or current assessments should fully reflect the will of the people, in line with international democratic principles.