Full Transcript of Secretary-General's Press Encounter

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Office of the Secretary-General

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Ladies and Gentlemen,

Good morning.  It is a great pleasure to see you all once again.

Before I take your questions, I would like to highlight three challenges that affect the wide sweep of our work today.

First, we need to keep up momentum on the development agenda and climate change.

In April, a record-number of Member States signed the Paris Agreement on Climate Change.  Now we need to bring that Agreement into force this year.

I thank G7 leaders for committing to this goal.

I welcome the announcement two days ago by Prime Minister Narendra Modi of India that he will join this effort.

To help advance the process, I will convene an event during the September high-level week of the General Assembly for countries to deposit their instruments of ratification.

The second challenge I would point to is the need to build on the progress of the World Humanitarian Summit which was held in Istanbul, Turkey.

The Summit generated nearly 3,000 new commitments.  Now we need those who attended, and those who did not, to follow through with robust leadership.

Third, we must do more to resolve major threats to international peace and security.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Let me say a few words about some situations which are taking place now.

In Syria, as my Special Envoy said this morning in Geneva, the time is not yet mature for a third round of talks.  We don’t want to have talks for the sake of talks.  At the same time, I want to underline the great urgency of the deadline of early August set by the co-chairs of the International Syria Support Group - ISSG.  We have to have at least the beginnings of a serious agreement by then.  Without a political horizon and discussions on the transition, a further escalation is all too likely.  We need unhindered humanitarian access and increased protection of civilians; that is the law, and must not be a bargaining chip.  Withholding humanitarian assistance to civilians in desperate need is a war crime.  I also call for the release of prisoners and detainees, thousands of whom are held in utterly inhumane conditions.

Hundreds of Syrians and other refugees and migrants continue to die in the Mediterranean while making perilous journeys out of war and persecution.

I have listened to the stories, hopes and fears of many refugees in recent months, to understand this challenge based on their first-hand experience.

Today I am announcing that I will visit the Greek island of Lesbos next week, to assess the situation and to show my solidarity.

As we formulate a global response to adopt at the September 19th high-level meeting on large-scale movements of refugees and migrants, I look forward to continuing to work with Member States to meet this test of our common humanity.

Finally, Ladies and Gentlemen, I would like to say a few words about Yemen.  All parties to this conflict must do far more to protect civilians, uphold international humanitarian law and find a political solution that will end the violence and destruction.

My latest report on children and armed conflict has documented the harrowing situation of Yemen’s children.

There has been fierce reaction to my decision to temporarily remove the Saudi-led Coalition countries from the report’s annex.

This was one of the most painful and difficult decisions I have had to make.

The report describes horrors no child should have to face.

At the same time, I also had to consider the very real prospect that millions of other children would suffer grievously if, as was suggested to me, countries would de-fund many UN programmes.  Children already at risk in Palestine, South Sudan, Syria, Yemen and so many other places would fall further into despair.

It is unacceptable for Member States to exert undue pressure.  Scrutiny is a natural and necessary part of the work of the United Nations.

I stand by the report.  We will assess the complaints that have been made, but the content will not change.

I fully understand the criticism, but I would also like to make a larger point that speaks to many political challenges we face.  When UN peacekeepers come under physical attack, they deserve strong backing by the Security Council.

When UN personnel are declared persona non grata simply for carrying out their jobs, they should be able to count on firm support from the Member States.

And when UN reports come under fire for raising difficult issues or documenting violations of law or human rights, Member States should defend the mechanisms and mandates that they themselves have established.

As the Secretariat carries forward the work that is entrusted to us, I count on Member States to work constructively and maintain their commitment to the cause of this Organization.

Thank you very much. I am ready to answer some questions.

Question:  Mr. Secretary General, thank you very much for this press briefing.  This is Talal Al-Haj from Al-Arabiya. My question to you concerning the removal of the Coalition from the blacklist.  It's not about actually the essence of whether to add them or not; it's about the process. Last year, when you had Israel on the list, you had conducted talks and negotiations and dialogue with the Israelis and the Americans, and you took the name of Israel off before the report was published. In this case, you published and then, afterwards, you removed the Coalition from the blacklist. Doesn't this bring the image of double standards and actually tarnish the process in this international organisation?  Thank you so much.

Secretary-General:  In the course of making reports available to the Member States or in the course of preparing these reports, we have realised and observed that the countries were more concerned about -- that their country's name is listed together with some non state actors like terrorist and extremist groups.  Therefore, I think the main reaction of the Coalition is also that their names are included and together listed together with some terrorist and extremist groups.  Therefore, we are now in the process of considering what would be the better modalities of listing those countries. For example, there may be a way to listing differently, you know, separately from non state actors like terrorist groups and countries, or we can just state and describe the situations as we have documented, as we have evidenced, so let the Member States judge.  Those are not yet decided, but we will have to discuss this method.

Question:  [Off mic, inaudible]

Secretary-General:  I have answered this process. This is the process.

Question:  Thank you.  Hi, Secretary General.  My question is on the South Sudan and the call that you've seen just this week from President Salva Kiir and Vice-President Riek Machar that the international community drop its insistence of the international tribunal or the AU's hybrid court for the sake of a truth and reconciliation commission almost on the style that we saw in South Africa.  What are your thoughts on this call that this international tribunal be taken away?  It was to try the atrocities that you've condemned so vociferously.

Secretary-General:  There are many aspects when it comes to South Sudan which we have to consider.  For me, as for the United Nations, at this time, the most important priority would be that the President Salva Kiir and the first Vice-President Riek Machar, as partners, as leaders of South Sudan, should work together. I don't know how many times I have been meeting and telephoning them to urge them to get together and to establish a national government of unity.  They have established this government, transitional government of unity.  That's fine.  Now they should go beyond their own personal or whatever differences may be, perspectives may be, go beyond that, work for the country. There are so many people, millions of people have been suffering still.  The United Nations, we are now accommodating almost 200,000 refugees.  UN missions have never been designed or never been prepared to accommodate so many refugees and displaced persons at this time.  Therefore, there's a hugely serious humanitarian situation, very serious political instability. Then, of course, this accountability -- accountability process should also take place in due course or at the same time.  That's what I'm telling you at this time.

Question:  A follow up question on the Children and Armed Conflict report.  You talk about undue pressure.  The fact that you backed down to that undue pressure, does that affect the credibility of the United Nations?  And do you believe you were threatened by Saudi Arabia?

Secretary-General: This is what, you know, I have been explaining at length during my remarks this morning.  There are many Member States, when we make reports available publicly or in the course of, in the process of making reports, a lot of complaints saying that those facts are not correct or exaggerated, etc., etc.  But I have been making quite clear that our facts -- the facts that are contained in the report -- have been evidenced by many agencies, United Nations agencies present on the ground and also many international humanitarian agencies working on the ground.  Therefore, as I said, I stand by my report. But as how to present this report, particularly in listing, we will have to discuss this matter.  That's why I have accepted the proposal by Saudi Arabia to have some review on this matter.  I invited them to come and we will have discussion on this matter. And as I said again, this was a very difficult and painful decision I had to make because of -- there are so many, so many much more serious issues.  Because of this, you cannot burn down whole house.  I'm Chief Administrative Officer of this Organization. I have to take care and consider so many crises happening at the same time. Then, while it was quite painful for me or I accept all this criticism, that's due criticism, the impression was not a good one as I understand.  But despite all this kind of things, I had to make a decision just to keep all United Nations operations, particularly humanitarian operations, continuing.

Question:  After your South Korea and Japan visits, there are many medias, including South Korea media, are saying that you would run for presidential election of South Korea next year. So they are criticizing that you couldn't do your best to your duty as UN Secretary General because of your interest in something like running for... running for President next year after your time.  What do you... what is your real mind related to that?

Secretary-General:  I and the Spokesperson of the United Nations have answered these questions many times before.  And those criticisms are undue, undue, unreasonable criticism.  But I would like to make one thing clear again today, as I have been during last nine plus years, this is my last year as the Secretary General. I have made it quite clear on many occasions that I will never be distracted from my mandate as the Secretary General of the United Nations entrusted by the Member States.  I will exert all my efforts and time as the Secretary General of the United Nations until the very last minute of my mandate.  That's my answer, and this is my firm conviction.

Question:  Mr. Secretary General, you said in your opening statement that withholding humanitarian assistance to civilians in desperate need is a war crime in Syria.  Do you consider that airdrops should start?  And what can you do to push for it?

Secretary-General:  Airdrops have always been on our consideration, and in fact, many airdrops have been made.  But it cannot be a substitute to land deliveries. Land deliveries are most sure and that's the most convenient and speedier one, but because of a very dire security, very dangerous security situations, many roadblocks and very cumbersome administrative bureaucracies, we have not been able to deliver [this] humanitarian aid to many people, millions of people in besieged areas or hard to reach areas. Now, I'm encouraged that, recently, Syrian government has allowed to have 23 land deliveries out of 34 requests.  But we have sent back our request to Syrian government that all 34 requests for land delivery should be granted.  We are now negotiating with them.  At the same time, airdrops [are] always on our option, but airdrop is easy to tell you but it's very difficult.  First of all, you have to make sure that the aircraft or crews who are engaged in these airdrops -- their safety and security should be guaranteed.  And there should be clear understanding and assurances from Syrian government.  And it has to be done at very high altitudes, around 7,000 meters high.  So it is affected easily by wind and weather, and sometimes we cannot assure that these airdropped pallets, you know, coming down by all these parachutes, it's very difficult to make them land at the designated targeted area.  So, in any way, we are very seriously considering together with the land deliveries and airdrops. Okay.

Thank you.