

New York, 15 February 2005 - Secretary-General's press encounter upon arrival at UNHQ

SG: Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. It's good to be back. I had a good trip to Europe. [I was] in London where I had very good discussions with Prime Minister [Tony] Blair on many issues – UN reform, African development, the Middle East peace process, as well as Iraq and other issues. And in Germany, I attended a security conference where we discussed future security prospects, the transatlantic alliance, [and] the future role of NATO. And of course I was able to discuss with them the UN reform and our determination to press ahead with reform this year, as well as press for the implementation of the Millennium Development Goals, making quite clear that today everyone accepts the link between security and development, and we need to try and move forward on both fronts.

Q: Mr. Secretary-General, the Security Council seems to want you to have a report on what happened in Lebanon. How do you do such a report? And do you think that the next step, which is the written report from you, will you send special envoys? And I'd like a follow up please.

SG: It was very tragic what happened in Lebanon yesterday. I have had a chance to send my deepest sympathy to Mrs. Hariri and to the family. I considered Mr. [Rafic] Hariri a friend, a man who has done a lot for Lebanon, and a great patriot. And I think his loss is not just one for the family, but for the whole Lebanese people and for the region.

I will be attending the [Security] Council meeting where this issue will be discussed. We will give them whatever information we have, which at this stage is not much. We still do not know who did it, but I trust every effort will be made to identify the perpetrators and they should be brought to justice.

Q: We have been told in the media, at least we have read in the media, that your envoy on [Security Council resolution] 1559, Terje Roed-Larsen, had warned the late Mr. Hariri and Walid Jumblat of things coming their way. Has he told you such a thing? Can you share with us whether [there was] such a warning? And what did you say in your letter to Bashar al-Assad, Mr. Secretary-General?

SG: Yes, Mr. Larsen was in the region last week at my request. You are right, I sent a letter to President Assad and also to President [Emile] Lahoud, and also to the Lebanese authorities. Mr. Larsen has reported back to me. I am not in a position, at liberty to go into details as to what he reported to me. But he did have a very good trip and frank discussions with all concerned. My letter to the President dealt with efforts to move ahead with implementation of [resolution] 1559 and my expectation from the parties.

Q: So he did get warned, to your knowledge?

SG: As I said, I don't want to get into details of my discussion with Larsen.

Q: Mr. Secretary-General, how did the assassination of Prime Minister Hariri affect, in your opinion, the implementation of [resolution] 1559? The US has also responded by putting more pressure on Syria. Do you share that position? And secondly, the Lebanese opposition is asking for an international investigation. Do you favour such an investigation and will you be appointing someone to lead it?

SG: Let me say that former Prime Minister Hariri's loss is a great loss. A great personality and a great political leader has been removed from the scene. And of course we will need to determine how exactly his departure, what impact his departure will have on the political scene. As far as the implementation of [resolution] 1559 is concerned, the mandate is clear and we are working with the parties to honour it. And it was in that spirit that I sent Mr. Larsen to the region, where he spoke to all concerned. And his talks in Damascus were very fruitful and very frank. And we will continue to press for its implementation.

On the question of the investigation, I think it should be investigated. At this stage I'm not sure who should do it. The Council is going to discuss it and I'll wait to see what action or decisions they take.

Q: Could you just get into a little bit more details about what kind of recommendations you might have made in the letter towards implementing resolution 1559?

SG: The resolution does call for withdrawal of Syrian forces from Lebanon. The discussions we had with them was that we needed to see more progress and hope that there will be actual action and actual, clear signs of withdrawal by the time that I submit my next report to the Security Council, which is due in April.

Q: Have you received any response from Mr. Assad on any of these issues?

SG: Well, they had a very frank and open discussion. And obviously, time will tell. The next couple of weeks or months will tell what comes out of it.

Q: Do you think this event would complicate your call for withdrawal of Syrian troops from Lebanon or is it going to make it faster or slower – the assassination of Mr. Hariri?

SG: I think it depends on where one sits. Where you stand depends on where you sit. Some would think it should make it easier; others would think it should make it difficult, and we should be cautious that it can lead to further destabilization.

Q: The statement that the Security Council is looking at now makes a reference to [resolution] 1559. And some members in the Council are saying that that politicizes the issue. What is your assessment of how the language of the statement is built up at this particular point in time? And also, some Lebanese opposition figures are calling for an international force in Lebanon. Is that something that the UN would be prepared to look at?

SG: I think as to the language, let me say that we have the resolution 1559 and of course we have had this brutal assassination of a prominent Lebanese leader. And I would want us to focus on the assassination and try and find out who did it and ensure that they are brought to justice. On [resolution] 1559, as I indicated, we are pressing ahead, working with the parties for its implementation, and it was on that basis that I sent Larsen to the region last week. And we are going to press ahead on that.

On the question of international investigation, the issue is before the Council now. I will be joining them later and I'll wait to see what decisions or how they decide to proceed.

Q: What about the international force?

SG: On an international force, obviously we have a force in southern Lebanon, which has been there for some time. But the question of an international force for Lebanon has not been posed as such. This is the first time that any indications of that kind is being posed for an international force, and this is something that would have to be looked at very, very carefully, and it is not something one rushes into. And I'm sure the Council and other members will consider this very, very carefully.

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