



Press Release

Department of Public Information · News Coverage Service · New York

SG/SM/8207
22 April 2002

Français

TRANSCRIPT OF PRESS CONFERENCE BY SECRETARY-GENERAL KOFI ANNAN

AT HEADQUARTERS, 22 APRIL

The Secretary-General : As all of you know, on Friday evening the Security Council adopted [resolution 1405 \(2002\)](#), which welcomed my initiative to develop accurate information regarding recent events in the Jenin refugee camp. I have now established a fact-finding team to carry out that task. The members of the team are Mr. Ahtisaari, who is here with me and who does not need any introduction; Mrs. Sadako Ogata, former High Commissioner for Refugees; and Mr. Cornelio Sommaruga, former head of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). And, of course, we will have General Bill Nash as military adviser and Mr. Peter Fitzgerald as police adviser. Both General Nash and Mr. Fitzgerald have had considerable experience working in conflict areas – General Nash was in Bosnia and Mitrovica and Mr. Fitzgerald also worked in Bosnia.

I should say that I am most grateful that each of these very busy people and distinguished persons have accepted my invitation, on such short notice, to take on this important task and to be part of the team. Mr. Ahtisaari will chair the team. He does not need any introduction, as I have indicated. Many of you remember him from his distinguished service here at the United Nations and from his days as President of Finland.

The fact-finding team will start its work without delay. It will first assemble in Europe this week and then travel to the region as quickly as possible. To assist the team's task of developing accurate information, I expect the Government of Israel and the Palestinian Authority to cooperate fully with the team and provide full and complete access to all sides, sources of information and individuals that the team will consider necessary to meet in the exercise of their functions.

The team will be guided in its work by the relevant Security Council resolutions, including the recent call by the Council on all parties to respect international humanitarian law, and by universally accepted norms of international law. The team will gather information and report its findings and conclusions to me. The team will be able to draw on the resources of the United Nations here in New York and in the region.

I would like to introduce Mr. Ahtisaari. Martti, would you like to say a few words before we take questions?

If you have questions, we will take them.

Question : In case there has been a massacre in Jenin, what can the United Nations do to bring the persons responsible to justice?

The Secretary-General : I do not want to be drawn into those kinds of questions. We are sending a fact-finding mission, and I think we should wait for the results of their findings. Your question is a bit speculative and I do not want to be drawn into it at this stage.

Question : On the selection of Mrs. Ogata for this role, can you tell us what went into your selection of all three candidates, and specifically Mrs. Ogata?

The Secretary-General : I have tried to put together a team with considerable experience, and a team that is familiar with humanitarian issues and the situation we are dealing with. I think the members of the team are accomplished, highly respected and independent. I wanted to have a team that would be professional and independent-minded and I think we have that team, including Mrs. Ogata.

Question : [Inaudible – any update (?) Israel radio...]

The Secretary-General : ... and I know why you are asking that, and I think that she brings a lot to the table. Anyone who saw her perform during her days as High Commissioner for Refugees will be pleased to see her on this team.

Question : Two related questions: A) Did you consult with the United States and the Israelis on the composition of the team? and B) Israel has expressed its opposition to people like Hansen and Larsen and Robinson being on that team. Did you take that into account?

The Secretary-General : Let me say that I did consult Israeli authorities in the sense that they gave me an assurance that they would cooperate with anyone I sent down to look into what happened in Jenin, and that they had nothing to hide.

The Council endorsed my initiative to go ahead and send a fact-finding team, but the judgement was mine. I hope I have put together a team that everyone would accept as being competent and the best that we could have put together.

With regard to the second question, let me say that there was never any intention on my part to make Mr. Hansen, Mary Robinson or Mr. Rød-Larsen part of the team, so I find it rather unfortunate that there has been such public objection to their participation. The issue was never posed. Also, I want to say that it is only the Secretary-General of the United Nations who determines which assignments are given to United Nations officials.

Finally, let me say that all three of them are extraordinary international civil servants who have worked very hard, within the spirit of the Charter and the ideals of the Organization. I am rather disappointed that they have been attacked so publicly – Rød-Larsen for just talking about what he saw. He never accused Israel of massacre – in fact, he never even used the word “massacre”, although I notice that there are indications that he said that. Hansen was carrying out his work with UNRWA. Both of them, being on the ground, have been concerned about humanitarian access and have been making statements about such access – and I think that is their job.

Mary Robinson, as High Commissioner for Human Rights, was given a mandate by the Commission to go to the area. She has not been able to go, and as far as I know, she has not made any statement about the situation in Jenin that one can take exception to. She is a very competent officer. She has a tough job – perhaps one of the most difficult in the system. And I think we should be careful not to undermine the work of these excellent officers.

Question : Mr. Secretary-General, do you have a time line in your mind for this investigation? Mr. Ahtisaari, some allegations have already surfaced about the destruction of documents and records. This is something that other United Nations investigative teams have grappled with in other countries, and I would like to get your thoughts on how you will deal with this issue.

The Secretary-General : I think we would want to get the facts as quickly as possible. That is why we have moved so fast. Let us not forget that the Council passed the resolution at 9 p.m. on Friday, and here we are on Monday morning, with a strong and effective team. Mr. Ahtisaari and the team have assured me that they are going to move as quickly as possible. I will leave him to say something about that.

Mr. Ahtisaari : The Secretary-General tried to reach me on Friday night; to his surprise, he found me in New York the following day. So you cannot blame the Secretary-General for not trying hard to get hold of me. I happened to be here for a rather unfortunate reason; one of my colleagues was hospitalized, and was in intensive care. So I did not feel that I could leave New York. So in that sense it was a positive thing that I was around.

To answer your question, I do not think that I want to start speculating here about what is or is not available. We will, of course, go after all the necessary information, as the Secretary-General implied in his statement.

Question : The Palestinians have said that what happened in Jenin amounted to war crimes. Will this team look at the possibility that war crimes were committed in that camp? Secondly, I would like to go beyond that to the situation in the Congo –

The Secretary-General : Can we stick to the issue that brought me here first? After we have dealt with it, maybe I will take one or two questions on other issues.

Let me deal with the issue you have raised. I am not sending a team of prosecutors or criminal investigators, and they are not going to be dealing with the legal issue that you have raised; they are going to establish the facts.

Question : I am afraid that I am going to talk not about the Middle East, but about a much milder place a few hundred miles from the area that you are involved with, Mr. Ahtisaari. A while ago, you said that you thought that Cyprus would be –

The Secretary-General : Can we come back to that? My response is the same as to the question from your Nigerian colleague.

Question : Do you consider that your initiative is also going to result in the sending of troops to the Middle East? Are you considering something else, like a comprehensive conference?

The Secretary-General : Can we stick to the fact-finding mission first?

Question : All right. What were the main reasons why you engaged these two military and police advisers? Is their Bosnian experience one of the reasons that you are sending them there? How can you connect that?

The Secretary-General : This has nothing to do with the precedent of police and military advisers, and the team has nothing to do with the recommendation that a multinational force be sent to the region. We have had an operation in the region which was a military operation. I think it is important to have someone who understands how military campaigns are mounted to be able to guide and work with the team on a very effective basis, for them to have an appropriate understanding of what might have happened there. Of course, we are also dealing with populated areas and crowd control and how one brings about order in these areas. I think that the police also have some advice on it. It has nothing to do with an international force.

Question : A couple of things: when you say that the team will get support from both New York and the region, do you foresee that you will need people like Mr. Rød-Larsen and Mr. Hansen to go with the team and be helpful, or do you accept that they are excluded? Secondly, when you say “full access”, are you expecting there to be interviews of Israeli officials or Israel IDF, just for explanations?

When we say “How long?”, I do not mean that you should tell us it will take a week or two days. But in general with regard to this sort of thing, where do it feel it takes you time-wise?

The Secretary-General : Let me say that on the question of access, I hope we will have access to everybody. In my discussion with senior Israeli officials, who have indicated that they have nothing to hide, I have been given their assurance that the team will have access to everyone that they want to see, and they will provide the information that they need.

On the question of how long it will take, I do not think that either Mr. Ahtisaari or myself can answer that question. They first have to go down to Jenin and determine what needs to be done and make an assessment of how long it will take. Any indication of how long it will take now will be speculative.

Question : [*inaudible*] Rød-Larsen or Hansen –

The Secretary-General : I think that I have indicated quite clearly that I had no intention of making Hansen, Rød-Larsen or Mrs. Robinson part of the team. But of course, the team will be able to talk to anyone on the ground with information to offer, including Hansen and Rød-Larsen.

Question : Could you tell us when the team is due to arrive in Israel. That is my first question. Secondly, will the team deal strictly with Jenin events, or are they going to visit or deal with other cities and other events in the area?

Mr. Ahtisaari : Our intention, as the Secretary-General said, is to meet as soon as possible in Europe. Hopefully, we will be on the spot some time during the latter part of this week. I hesitate to give you a time when the plane will arrive, because I do not know yet. But I hope to be in Europe on Wednesday, and from there things will follow. I have to meet with the team and discuss with them before we go.

I think it is premature to start talking about where we will visit. I think the mandate in the resolutions is clear, and, as the Secretary-General said, we will do everything

possible in order to be able to report to him. I want to make this point now, so do not expect me to talk too much to the press before I talk to my boss.

Question: What decision will you take after studying the results of the report?

The Secretary-General: I will have to see the report first.

Question: People on the ground from the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) -- Mr. Rød-Larsen and Mr. Hansen -- have not used the word "massacre", but they have already talked about indiscriminate firing, about the cutting off of water supplies, about civilians being locked away and about the impossibility of ambulances and medical personnel getting in. In your mind, do these not already count as violations of the international rules of law?

The Secretary-General: I think I myself have indicated that, in this conflict, the red lines have been blurred and there are probably no red lines in the conflict. But these are some of the facts that the team will have to check out. Yes, they have said that, but let us wait until the team is on the ground and has spoken to everybody, checked the facts and submitted this report to me. I also want to say that from now on, once the team has been named and Mr. Ahtisaari and his team are gathering the facts, I will say very little about it, and I would urge all United Nations staff members and everybody else associated with it to say nothing about it until we get the facts and the report from Mr. Ahtisaari. We should let them have the time and space to do the investigation before we come to conclusions.

Question: I would like to get something clarified, Sir. Mr. Ahtisaari said that he is not going to predict where he might be going, but earlier you referred to a broader question of respect for international humanitarian law. Trying to understand it, are you sending them with the idea that they would be going to locations other than the Jenin camp?

The Secretary-General: I think there was a focus on Jenin. But of course we are going there to do fact-finding, and, as Mr. Ahtisaari said, he does not know at this stage where the search for facts will lead. So we will have to wait until they get down on the ground, but they will focus on Jenin to begin with.

Question: So you interpret resolution 1405 (2002) as giving you the mandate to expand investigation beyond the camp?

The Secretary-General: I think you should read resolution 1405 (2002) in its entirety. The opening paragraph deals with the condition of the Palestinian population, particularly in Jenin.

Question: The group is a fact-finding group, and there was some confusion about its work. Will it also be investigating, and what is the difference? Do they have to come with soldiers, and then there will be a second phase to go investigate what the reasons were behind what they saw?

The Secretary-General: I think the mandate is very clear and that the fact-finding team that is going has a clear idea of what it has to do. As I have indicated, they will present their findings and conclusions to me, and then I will report to the Council.

Let us move on to the other concerns.

Question: From the beginning of the creation of the State of Israel, they have always had the impression that the United Nations is plotting against them. What can be said here today to remove this suspicion that the United Nations is always plotting against Israel?

The Secretary-General: I think the recent resolutions that have been passed by the Council are an indication of the Council's determination to play a constructive and impartial role. I think that the resolutions that the Council has passed recently, if they were to be implemented, would be beneficial to both sides. The United Nations and its staff on the ground are impartial. They have to be impartial, but they are not [*inaudible*]. "Impartial" means that they will speak out when they see one side or the other doing something wrong -- when they see one side or the other taking actions that they consider to be against international humanitarian law or against the laws of war. They have spoken out and I have spoken out, and this should be seen in that context. The Council's recent actions should reassure our Israeli friends that the Council is not out to work against their interests, but is trying to work with them, the Palestinians and the entire international community to find a way out of this tragedy.

/...

* * * * *

For information media - not an official record