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Secretary-General

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PRESS CONFERENCE BY SECRETARY-GENERAL BAN KI-MOON AT UNITED NATIONS HEADQUARTERS

Following is a transcript of UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon's press conference, held in New York on 19 December:

Good morning. It is a great pleasure to see you. I would like to express my sincere thanks for all you have been doing in and around the United Nations.

Best wishes for the holiday season. I look forward to seeing you tonight at the UNCA [United Nations Correspondents Association] dinner.

A tumultuous year is coming to a close. Two thousand and twelve saw tension from Syria to the Sahel, and from eastern [Democratic Republic of the] Congo to the Middle East.

Turmoil tested us, once again, on our founding obligation: to stop conflict and build peace.

At the same time, the United Nations helped to lay foundations for progress on the top challenge of the twenty-first century — sustainable development.

Let me start with the situation in Syria.

Syria began the year in conflict, and ends the year in war. Day by day, the death toll has climbed. Month by month, the regional spillover has grown.

The Syrian opposition is coming together. This is critical. I am deeply concerned about the increased militarization of the conflict and the potential for sectarian atrocities.

Earlier this month, the Deputy Secretary-General visited Lebanon, where Government officials and others voiced serious concern about the worsening regional implications.

As you know very well, I visited Syrian refugees in Jordan and Turkey to see the situation for myself. They expressed grief at the destruction of their cities and villages, and fear and anger at the growing targeting of people because of their religious or ethnic identity.

The exodus has reached more than 500,000 people. It will grow in number as fighting rages and in intensity as winter takes hold. Neighbouring countries face a huge financial burden in sheltering and caring for them. The increasing peril faced by Palestinian refugees in Syria is another growing concern. I call on the international community to respond generously and urgently to the humanitarian appeal launched today in Geneva. I am considering convening an international donor conference, in close coordination with key partners, early next year.

I also urge the international community to unite firmly behind the mediation efforts of the Joint Special Envoy, Lakhdar Brahimi. Syria needs a peaceful, political solution that brings democratic change, while preserving the fabric of Syrian society and the peaceful coexistence of its communities.

In the Sahel region, some 20 million people across nine countries are in crisis, their lives upended by a volatile mix of drought, hunger, poor governance, drug trafficking, terrorism and extremism.

The situation in Mali is especially urgent. We must do all we can to help Malians restore their democracy, recover their territory, address the humanitarian crisis and end the shocking human rights violations. Dialogue and negotiations should be pursued seriously, even as military options are carefully prepared.

We welcome the appointment of Prime Minister [Django] Cissoko as an opportunity to bring new momentum to the political process. Yet, we remain concerned over the military's continued interference in politics.

The eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) remains the scene of instability, including sexual violence committed by combatants on all sides. The time has come for the international community to rethink its approach to the DRC and the Great Lakes region. The underlying causes of the conflict in the region must be addressed in a comprehensive manner.

In North-East Asia, at a time when many countries are undergoing leadership transitions, I hope high priority will be given by the new leaders to building a more prosperous future based on stability and the peaceful resolution of disputes. The provocative rocket launch by the Democratic People's Republic of Korea has raised regional concerns and defied the international community. I look forward to the outcome of Security Council consultations on an appropriate response.

The global economy continues to leave too many people behind. As the United Nations reported yesterday in our latest economic outlook, growth continues to be weak — meaning it will take a long time to ease the global jobs crisis. Our response must protect — and invest in — the world's poorest people and nations.

The killings of health workers in Pakistan were cruel, senseless and inexcusable acts that I condemn in the strongest terms. Those killed were among thousands across Pakistan, especially women, who are working selflessly to achieve the historic goal of polio eradication. I call on all concerned to do their utmost to create the secure environment needed to provide life-saving health services to Pakistan's children.

While bombs and rockets have stopped falling in Gaza and Israel, it has become clearer than ever that peace must be more than the absence of war. The Middle East peace process is in a deep freeze. The two sides seem more polarized than ever, and a two-State solution is farther away than at any time since the Oslo process began. I am deeply concerned by heightened settlement activity in the West Bank, in particular around Jerusalem. This gravely threatens efforts to establish a viable Palestinian State. I call on Israel to refrain from continuing on this dangerous path, which will undermine the prospects for a resumption of dialogue and a peaceful future for Palestinians and Israelis alike. Let us get the peace process back on track before it is too late.

The United Nations has mobilized to face these and many other tests. All our tools are at work, from peacekeeping and good offices to human rights monitoring, humanitarian relief and development assistance.

Transitions are taking hold in Libya, Myanmar, Somalia and Yemen. Last month, Sierra Leone held successful elections. At the end of this month, the UN peacekeeping mandate in Timor-Leste will end, a measure of the progress the country has made from fragility to stability.

Egypt's transition is at another critical moment. I have spoken with President [Mohamed] Morsi in recent days and expressed my hope that the transition will be able to move forward in a peaceful, consensual manner.

My hope is for compromise on all sides so that Egypt can focus on its pressing socio-economic needs and build a "pyramid of democracy" in the heart of the Arab world. This is an Egyptian-led process. It will take time. It is crucial for Egyptians to resolve their differences through dialogue and build a new Egypt that respects and protects the rights of all.

In the past year, the United Nations also took major steps to advance economic and social progress and to build solid foundations for long-term peace. The Rio+20 Conference in June took us further along the path towards a sustainable world of dynamic growth, shared prosperity and environmental protection.

In September, Member States adopted a landmark declaration on the rule of law. The Doha Climate Change Conference, which I attended earlier this month, delivered what we need to keep us on track for a legally binding global agreement by 2015. That is what Governments have pledged to do, and it is what they must achieve. As a spur to what we know will be very difficult negotiations, I intend to bring world leaders together in 2014.

Finally, 2012 also saw the launch of crucially important discussions on the post-2015 development agenda and a set of Sustainable Development Goals. We aim to build on the progress we have made towards the Millennium Development Goals, and press harder as the deadline approaches.

The gains of 2012 position us for further advances in the years ahead. We have seized some opportunities, but failed on many others. Too much of our progress is lost to conflict or remains fragile for want of investment and commitment. There is too little emphasis on prevention, people and global citizenship. Far too often, short-term thinking trumps long-term vision.

I will have more to say about my forward agenda in the New Year. We continue to work with Member States and staff to build a coherent global Secretariat and to modernize the management of our resources and workforce. I count on the Member States' support and timely guidance. I will speak to staff at a town hall meeting in early January. Later in the month, I will make my annual presentation to the Member States and then speak to you again.

The New Year coincides with new beginnings here in the Secretariat building. I am glad to be back in what is now a modern, eco-friendly facility. I thank the Member States for their generous support of the renovation. Our work will benefit greatly from the improvements. I look forward to your own move back in the weeks ahead. For now, let me express my thanks to you all for another year of covering the big issues that face the United Nations. I pledge my ongoing availability to you as we go about our work together.

Thank you very much for your attention.

Question: Mr. Secretary-General, on behalf of the UN Correspondents Association, thank you for this final press conference and thank you for your availability. We are sure you will be even more available now that you have your eco-friendly office and another eco-friendly car. My question — I'll leave Syria to my colleagues — is on North Korea. Do you think that in 2013 you will be ready to travel to North Korea?

Secretary-General: I have been expressing my position when it comes to the peace and stability and dialogue and exchange and cooperation between the Republic of Korea and the DPRK [Democratic People's Republic of Korea]. The DPRK has, as you know, new leadership, and when the time comes, when appropriate conditions are created, I am ready to visit, myself, Pyongyang to discuss with the leaders of the DPRK on all the issues to help facilitate, first of all, dialogue and exchange and cooperation between the two parties of Korea, and I will do whatever I can.

Question: Mr. Secretary-General, since we're on Korea, I couldn't let that go by without a quick follow-up on whether you had any reaction to Korean elections which were, at least the results, were being announced today. My real question was on the Middle East: you said that the situation is more polarized now than it ever has been. The United Nations and you, yourself, have been stepping up your criticism of Israel on the settlement building, and I wondered whether you had spoken to Prime Minister [Benjamin] Netanyahu, and whether there is anything other than words that you think can really be done to try to get both sides back to the negotiating table?

Secretary-General: As for the presidential election [in the Republic of Korea], as you know, the counting is still going on. I know that the main opposition candidate has made a concession statement, and also the ruling party candidate, Park Geun-hye, has also made [a] statement. For me as Secretary-General, it would be prudent and correct to wait until the final result will be announced by the authorities concerned of the Republic of Korea. At this time, what I can tell you is that the Republic of Korea and [its] people have shown maturity — political and democratic maturity — by conducting, peacefully and in an orderly manner, the presidential election. This is another good achievement and the people have heard and listened to the visions of the candidates, and the candidates have been able to lay out their visions and their priorities to the people. So, it is what the Korean people have decided. I believe that the result will be announced very soon and I will make some official statement after that. Thank you very much.

About the situation in the Middle East, as you are, I am also deeply concerned about what is happening across the Middle East. First of all, the situation in Syria: we do not see any prospect of any end of violence or any prospect of political dialogue to start. Lakhdar Brahimi, in his capacity as Joint Special Representative, has been actively engaging the parties concerned, not only the Syrians and all the countries in the region, but key partners of the Security Council, including the United States and the Russian Federation. I also myself have been discussing with leaders in the region. So, I sincerely hope that the world community, in a unified manner, [will] help those parties to stop violence, first of all, then immediately commence political dialogue.

I believe that is the only way to resolve this issue. I again urge the international community to be united, particularly the Security Council, to give a very strong political direction, unified political direction, and at the same time, we are doing our best to provide the necessary humanitarian assistance. Valerie Amos, head of OCHA [Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs], was in Syria just recently, three days ago. We are raising our voices, appealing to the international community

to have generous support. That is what I said in my remarks and I am considering convening an international donor conference soon, early next year.

Martin Nesirky, Spokesperson for the Secretary-General: If I could just add very briefly, Secretary-General; just before we came down here, that Ms. Amos, when she was in Damascus, asked for fuel imports to be allowed for humanitarian aid deliveries. I can tell you that Ms. Amos has been advised by the [Syrian] Deputy Foreign Minister that he's confirmed that the Council of Ministers has approved the request for fuel imports for humanitarian aid delivery. So, that's just the latest update as we were coming down here.

Question: There are reports that the Syrian authorities are moving their chemical agents, maybe inside the country and possibly towards Lebanon, according to new reports published today in *The Washington Post*. What should be done now if Syria starts using chemical weapons? My other question: How are you going to address the refugee influx into Lebanon from Syria? They are adding more pressures on Lebanon, a fragile situation already. What is your main message now for President Assad regarding the Palestinian refugees in Syria? Thank you so much.

Secretary-General: As for the possible relocation of chemical weapons stockpile, as well as possible use of chemical weapons, I have made my position very clear, very strongly, to Syrian authorities. I have written two letters separately to President [Bashar al-] Assad, urging him that under any circumstances, these chemical weapons and any weapons of mass destruction should not be used. I received a reply to my letter of July from Syrian authorities. And a few days ago, I spoke to Foreign Minister [Walid al-] Moualem of Syria, discussing this matter. I warned them that this will be an outrageous crime; whoever may use these will be brought to justice; and I urged them not to use it. Foreign Minister Moualem told me that under any circumstances, they will not use chemical weapons. This, I'm making it clear for the record.

For the refugees, it is not only Lebanon — four countries: Iraq, Jordan and Turkey and Lebanon. They are suffering hugely because of this burden — financial and socio-economic burden — posed by the influx of refugees. The officially registered number of refugees in four countries has surpassed more than half a million. By the end of January next year, we may expect more than 700,000 people. In all, 4 million people have been affected by this crisis at this time. At least more than 2 million people are internally displaced inside Syria. I really appreciate those countries who are supporting and who are opening their borders to Syrian refugees. It was quite sad, but at the same time I was very touched by the generous support and caring hands of those countries. Our appeal for humanitarian support has been funded less than 50 per cent. We need urgent support from the international community. In Geneva today, we made another appeal and I am going to do it again. We have to do all that we can so that these refugees will be able to return to their homes. This is our top priority at this time.

Question: Let me go back to the East Asia issue again. You've touched on a little bit in your statement. South Korea is electing a new President, Japan has just voted in a new leadership, China and North Korea have now new leaders. What, in concrete terms, what do you expect those new leaders to work for peace and stability in the region and beyond, contributing to world peace?

Secretary-General: This is quite an important and exciting time for those countries in North-East Asia, starting from China, Japan, now the Republic of Korea. They are all undergoing transition in their leadership. I hope that the new leaders of the region will embrace the spirit of mutual understanding, respect and cooperation for regional peace and stability. The peace and stability and their cooperation in the region have wider regional implications. East Asia is a dynamic economic force, a contributor to UN peacekeeping, human rights and development, and we have a very strong coordination and partnership with those three countries. They are also a major source of innovation and ideas shaping our future. I expect the new leaders to be forward-looking, with broader global vision, to coordinate and cooperate among themselves.

And I have taken note of all of these situations in Japan, and I'd like to extend my warm congratulations to Abe Shinzo, a former Prime Minister, who is going to be elected as Prime Minister. I have been working with him very closely when he was Prime Minister and I'm also looking forward to working with him on all of the matters of our mutual concern when he officially [is] inaugurated as Prime Minister. Thank you.

Question: Recently in Morocco, the majority of countries that are members of the Friends of Syria recognized the Syrian opposition as the legitimate organization representing the people of Syria. Recently, the United States and major European countries joined this action. Do you think that President Assad is still legitimately representing the Syrian people, or do you think the Syrian opposition is the legitimate representative of the Syrian people? Thank you.

Secretary-General: I have very closely followed this situation where these opposition members, they have created the Syrian National Coalition, [in a] more coherent, more structured way, and that is a welcome development and that is also critical for the partners' dialogue once the political negotiations begin. And I have also noted that many countries have recognized the Syrian National Coalition as the legitimate representatives of the Syrian people. As far as the United Nations is concerned, it is up to the Member States to recognize or not to recognize their decision. As Lakhdar Brahimi is going to continue to discuss with the parties concerned, he will also very closely coordinate and discuss all the matters with the Syrian National Coalition. At this time, again, both parties must realize that there is no military solution. There is no military solution. This crisis should be resolved through political dialogue. Many parties concerned have been discussing what to do with the future of President Assad. This, I hope, will have to be discussed and resolved through negotiations as soon as possible.

Question: Mr. Secretary-General, Recently there has been very heavy fighting in the Yarmouk Palestinian refugee camp in Damascus. And today, Palestinian President [Mahmoud] Abbas offered to host the Palestinian refugees fleeing the fighting in Syria in the West Bank and Gaza. He appealed directly to you to facilitate that. What is your response?

Secretary-General: I have received the request from President Abbas. I am deeply concerned about all the violence taking place against Palestinian refugees in Yarmouk camp. There are more than 160,000 Palestinian refugees who are being housed in that camp. There are some accounts that about two thirds of the residents — or more than 100,000 people — have fled. We will discuss this matter as a priority agenda, how we can support and help those people. At this time, I would urge again all the neighbouring countries to open their borders so that there should be free and unhindered movement of refugees, and I will discuss this matter very seriously.

Question: Does that include Israel, to allow them to cross through Israeli territory into...?

Secretary-General: Yes, all the countries who can give support and cooperation, including Israel.

Question: On behalf of the Free UN Coalition for Access, thanks for giving this press conference, and we hope that in 2013 you will ensure that your other Under-Secretaries-General hold press conferences and seek at least to take questions, without discrimination or censorship. I wanted to ask you about the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo. You mentioned sexual violence there, and I wanted to ask about your human rights due diligence policy as it applies to the rapes that are now numbered to be 126 in the town of Minova. What is MONUSCO [United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo] going to do? Are they willing to disclose which units of the Congolese army they currently work with? And as the estimate has now come up to 126, how can you be sure that MONUSCO is not working with the very same units that committed those rapes at the time? I have tried to ask Mr. [Hervé] Ladsous about that, and even last night at the stakeout he declined to take the question and moved the microphone, so it is your policy, how do you make sure that your human rights due diligence policy is fully implemented in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and elsewhere?

Secretary-General: The situation currently happening in the eastern part of the DRC is a source of grave concern and a priority. I have been deeply involved in this crisis, trying to find out some broader political framework. If I may disclose, recently — just during the last four or five days, including the weekend — I have been speaking to at least eight African leaders in the region: President [Joseph] Kabila of the DRC; President [Paul] Kagame of Rwanda and President [Yoweri] Museveni of Uganda; then Presidents of [the United Republic of] Tanzania, Republic of Congo-Brazzaville, Angola, South Africa, and I am going to speak with Madam [Nkosazana Dlamini-] Zuma this afternoon. We have a certain broader political framework on the basis of which we can really resolve this one as soon as possible.

Now, about MONUSCO, I have been discussing again with the members of the Security Council and major troop-contributing countries, including the European Union, on how we can have some different approaches, strategic approaches, to change the mandate, if necessary [for] MONUSCO. MONUSCO, I think they have been doing their work properly, but sometimes when they are not able to closely cooperate, work together with the FARDC [Forces armées de la République démocratique du Congo] of DRC — the national armed forces — then it is very difficult for MONUSCO to operate alone. We have been trying our best to protect the civilian population. We have been trying to protect the major facilities, like Goma airport, and MONUSCO is patrolling very regularly Goma city and in and around there. So, we will try to [discuss] what would be the best way to address this issue, politically, in terms of security, and how we can enhance the capacity of MONUSCO. So, this will be done very quickly. And I am very seriously discussing this matter with the Security Council members.

Question: What about the rapes? Just to make sure that MONUSCO doesn't actually work with the units that committed the rapes. I'm sorry for the follow-up; I just wanted to know your thoughts.

Secretary-General: That is our priority. Human rights due diligence policy is always in force. I convened recently a policy committee meeting among senior advisers. We have very strict vigilance and protective measures to protect women and girls, to protect them from rape violence.

Question: With the development of the situation in Egypt and the recent attacks on Al-Wafd party, the oldest liberal political party in Egypt, and with people trying to burn down their newspaper and the attack on the independent media, and the surrounding of Media City, which houses the studios of independent television, and the rigging of the referendum in Egypt and the prevention of the NGOs from observing the referendum, and the attacks by the fascist-style militias of the Muslim Brotherhood and the Salafi groups on the opposition and the National Salvation Front, what kind of pyramid of democracy do you foresee that Egypt is going to build? And what kind of guarantees, did your conversation with the Egyptian President Morsi, was he willing to offer, since there are more and more attacks on opposition, more attacks on free media, and independent ones, and the situation doesn't really look like going in the direction of anything rather than Somali-ization of the country? Thank you.

Secretary-General: We have seen the process of the Arab Spring. In the course of the Arab Spring we have seen some successes and we have seen some unsuccessful results, as we are seeing now in Syria. Egypt's transition is very important, for the Egyptian people and for the region as a whole. That is why the whole world, including myself, is following very closely the situation there. My hope is for compromise on all sides so that Egypt can focus on its pressing socio-economic needs and build a pyramid of democracy in the heart of the Arab world. There is a constitutional referendum going on; this is again an ongoing process. I hope the second round of the referendum will be carried out in a peaceful manner so that the people of Egypt can express their views freely. Whatever course the Egyptians decide with respect to the Constitution and its interpretation is crucial for the transition process to be inclusive and respect fundamental rights and [freedoms]. I sincerely hope that there should be no further violence, and protests must be protected. Protests must be carried out in a peaceful manner so that the people will be free to express their views. All parties must act to prevent violence and respect human rights and uphold their national laws.

Question: A couple of days ago, the General Assembly approved a resolution to schedule a meeting to discuss the UN Convention on Drugs in 2016, and at the same time the States of Washington and Colorado here in the U.S. legalized the possession of small quantities of marijuana. The Uruguay Congress is discussing a similar measure. So, it seems that political opinion is changing. I know that it is up to Member States to modify these conventions of the UN, but what are your personal thoughts on this? And what would you recommend these UN Member States to consider during these discussions? Thank you.

Secretary-General: Drug trafficking is a crime, and the United Nations and the international community are doing all to prevent such illegal drug trafficking, which has been causing a lot of social and economic problems, as well as political instability in many countries in the world, as we have seen. I do not have a comment on domestic laws or regulations, whereby drug sales have been legalized in some parts of the states within the United States and some other countries. As far as the United Nations is concerned, the UN Office on Drugs and Crime — the UNODC, based in Geneva — is very closely coordinating with the Member States. Whenever we see that more needs to be done, we try to establish our regional offices there. When we address political instability in some countries, particularly in West African States, drug trafficking is now seen as one of the very serious elements which we have to address in our comprehensive dealing with this matter.

Question: My question to you is regarding the settlements. You called on the Israeli Government to refrain from activities. Yesterday, the Americans expressed their deep disappointment — a recurring sentiment — on the transfer of Palestine [inaudible]. Will you support Palestinian efforts, first to join the International [Criminal] Court, and second, that they pursue criminal charges against Israel to stop settlement activities?

Secretary-General: I was very deeply involved in facilitating the ceasefire between Israel and Hamas, together with President Morsi and the Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton. I have been urging them not to provoke each other. When I heard this announcement, I said that this is a near-fatal blow to a very fragile Middle East peace process. You have seen my statements in the past, how many times I have been condemning these illegal settlements. This is clearly a violation of international law, and it is a violation of the Quartet guidelines, and it is obstructing the Middle East peace process. It is encouraging that this ceasefire is holding, but still it is very fragile, and therefore, either side should not take any provocative action which may derail this very fragile process. The Middle East peace process must be put on track as soon as possible. I am urging the Israeli Government to refrain from taking any measures of establishing settlements.

Question: What about the Palestinians joining the International Criminal Court?

Secretary-General: I have no comment on that because, with the enhanced status of the Palestinian Authority in the General Assembly [with] non-member observer status, I think they have the right to sign the Rome Statute, but it is up to the Palestinian authorities. It is not in my hands. But, as the depository of the Rome Statutes, whenever there is any such application or whatever, then I will only review on a technical basis.

Question: Mr. Secretary-General, on Mali, you mentioned negotiations. Can you be specific about who would negotiate with whom, and can one negotiate with extremists — Al-Qaida and its offshoots — without military action?

Secretary-General: The situation in Mali has many difficult dimensions, not to mention humanitarian aspects, where 18 million people are affected by this, not only political instability, but a long spell of drought and climate change impact and other issues.

As far as the political and security situations are concerned, then first and foremost, constitutional order should be restored. All these issues should be resolved through political dialogue. In that regard, we welcome the appointment of Prime Minister Cissoko. I sincerely hope that he will continue to have dialogue. As you know, I have appointed Special Envoy for the Sahel Romano Prodi and my Special Representative for West Africa, Said Djinnit — he has been continuously discussing with the Malian authorities.

There may be a case or situation where the people may not have a proper dialogue, may not be able to address through dialogue. That is why I have recommended to the Security Council that as one of the elements, as part of the political process in dealing with the terrorist element, extremist elements in the northern part of Mali, there may need to be a military operation. That is what the African Union and ECOWAS [Economic Community of West African States] have been recommending to the United Nations. Based on their concept of operations report, I have also made my own recommendation to the Security Council; it is now being actively discussed by the Security Council. What is important is that we must resolve all these issues through a political dialogue and process, while the possibility of establishing [inaudible] an African-led support mission in Mali could also be discussed.

Again, I am looking forward to seeing you this evening, and more officially and personally, I would like to wish you all the best to your family and yourselves — happiness and prosperity and good health. Thank you very much.

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