

10 January 2014



Secretary-General

SG/SM/15577

Department of Public Information • News and Media Division • New York

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, 10 January:

Good morning, ladies and gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure to see you at the beginning of the New Year, and I would like to extend my warmest regards and Happy New Year to you. Thank you very much.

The year ahead needs to be a period of intensified diplomacy, inroads against poverty and action on climate change.

2014 will be crucial for the Millennium Development Goals as the 2015 deadline approaches fast.

We need clear progress on the post-2015 development agenda, a set of sustainable development goals and the financial means to make it happen.

And if we are to adopt a new global agreement on climate change in 2015, we need to arrive in Lima in December of this year with a solid draft for negotiation, as was agreed by Member States in Warsaw last year. The Climate Summit which I will host on September 23rd this year aims to advance bold action on the ground and mobilize political will for an ambitious agreement.

As we focus on these long-term foundations for prosperity and peace, the United Nations also faces an overflowing inbox of conflicts and disasters of growing severity, frequency and complexity. These will require much more from the international community — more political attention, more resources, more support.

The situations in Syria, South Sudan and the Central African Republic have gone from bad to worse.

These are avoidable tragedies in which millions of civilians are paying an unconscionable price. I am especially alarmed by the spread of sectarian animosity, and by the dangerous regional and global spillover effects. Years of development are at stake. A generation of young people is at risk.

The United Nations is doing its utmost to ease the suffering and to stay and deliver aid wherever we can even as people flee their homes and countries. UN personnel are all showing tremendous courage and professionalism in volatile conditions.

Humanitarian assistance, vital as it is, can be only part of our response. The international community must pull together to help these countries find the path of peace. Together, we must send a strong message that there will be accountability for the killing, raping, chemical weapons attacks and other atrocious crimes that have been committed.

This past Monday, I have issued formal invitations to the Geneva Conference on Syria, which will begin on January 22nd, that is in just 12 days. I appeal to the warring parties, and all those with influence over them, to recognize that there is no military solution to this conflict and to work for a political solution that implements the Geneva Communiqué.

More immediately, there must be an end to all violence, including the Syrian Government's use of barrel bombs and other heavy weapons that kill and maim so indiscriminately.

All parties must improve humanitarian access to people in besieged areas. The situation in Eastern Ghouta is shocking: 160,000 people have gone without aid for more than a year. The United Nations is prepared to enter the area to provide assistance, but we need the full cooperation of the Syrian Government.

Ladies and gentlemen,

I welcome the beginning of talks in Addis Ababa on the crisis in South Sudan, in a process led by [the] Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD). There must be no further delays in agreeing on a cessation of hostilities.

I called President Salva Kiir yesterday again and urged him to demonstrate leadership and political flexibility by immediately releasing political prisoners. South Sudan is at a crossroads; this crisis can be resolved only at the negotiating table; and I urge the two sides to negotiate in earnest.

In the Central African Republic, we must strengthen the African-led mission and do more to prevent the spiral of violence from spreading.

Earlier today, the President of the Transition and the Prime Minister resigned. I take note of their decision. I urge all political actors in the country to work urgently to restore security and law and order, and to address the root causes of the persisting instability.

In each of these crises, humanitarian needs are escalating and funding is falling short. I urge all donors to show their solidarity, including at the humanitarian pledging conference for Syria and the affected neighbours that I will chair next Wednesday, January 15th, in Kuwait.

Ladies and gentlemen,

2014 is also a year in which the United Nations will support the people of Afghanistan at a time of transition.

We will continue to help other countries where transitions have gone astray, fragility is growing, institutions are failing and democratic governance has faltered.

Over the past three days I have been in touch by telephone with Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra of Thailand and the leader of the opposition Democrat Party, Mr. Abhisit Vejjajiva, in an effort to help them bridge their differences. I am very concerned that the situation could escalate in the days ahead, particularly next Monday, January 13th, when protestors said they will shut down Bangkok. I urge all involved to show restraint, avoid provocative acts and settle their differences peacefully, through dialogue.

In the months ahead we will look to Israelis and Palestinians to make decisive progress in resolving their conflict and drawing back from a perilous status quo. I am alarmed by this morning's announcement of well over 1,000 settlement units; such activity is not only illegal but also an obstacle to peace.

This year marks a milestone in Sierra Leone, as the last UN mission prepares to close — a measure of the tremendous distance the country has travelled since the years of conflict. The long engagement of the United Nations in Sierra Leone demonstrates the value of staying the course through the hard process of keeping, consolidating and building peace.

2014 will see the United Nations strengthen disaster resilience and push for progress towards a nuclear-weapon-free world.

We will deepen our work on the new Rights Up Front initiative, highlighting the integral role of human rights in the Organization's global mission.

And with the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, we will finish the job of eliminating Syria's chemical weapons materials and programmes, building on the progress that has been made despite wartime conditions and the complex nature of the task.

Last year's chemical weapons attacks in Syria reminded us of the horrors in the fields of Flanders during the First World War. The revulsion at that senseless conflict sparked a deeply felt need among all humankind for an effective instrument of common progress — a need that was met decades later with the birth of the United Nations.

In this year that marks the 100th anniversary of the First World War, we will strive to push the boundaries of [diplomacy] and collective action. Despite crises and concerns, 2014 also brings major opportunities to build a safer, more just and prosperous world.

I am determined to make this a year of progress for people and the planet.

I thank you, and I wish you and your families continued good health, happiness and prosperity in this happy new year. Thank you.

Question: Thank you, Secretary-General. On behalf of the UN Correspondents Association, Happy New Year and thank you for doing this press conference. I wanted to ask you about South Sudan. What warning signs of this crisis were missed, do you think? And the United States is considering targeted sanctions on South Sudan. Do you think this could help end the crisis?

Secretary-General: At this time, while the situation is very dire and deteriorating, worsening, with violence continuing while peace talks are going on in Addis Ababa, and there is a huge humanitarian crisis and also human rights violations, and I have been urging all the parties there to refrain from taking violent actions. The United Nations is, at this moment, accommodating around 75,000 displaced persons in several United Nations camps. We urge the President, Salva Kiir, of South Sudan to exercise political flexibility to facilitate this ongoing dialogue, ongoing peace talks. There is no military solution. They have to, first of all, stop violence and let the United Nations and the international community deliver the necessary humanitarian assistance. I appreciate the [efforts of the] African Union, IGAD [Intergovernmental Authority on Development] and other parties in the region to facilitate this negotiation.

Question: And do you think sanctions could help?

Secretary-General: That is something which, you know, I am not in a position to make comment on, because sanctions are something [on] which the Security Council has to take decisions. As you know, because of very serious human rights violations, I'm going to dispatch Assistant Secretary-General Ivan Šimonović of the Office for the High Commissioner for Human Rights this weekend. He is going to visit South Sudan to monitor the human rights violations cases.

We will strengthen our monitoring capacity in South Sudan, and I have been urging and making it quite clear that those perpetrators of serious human rights violations will be held accountable. So let us see. We will try to collect all the evidence and we will also make it available to the international community. Of course, we will closely consult with the Security Council on the future course of action.

Question: Mr. Secretary-General, Happy New Year to you, sir; thank you so much. Your Special Coordinator of the Joint Mission with the OPCW [Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons], Sigrid Kaag, has been briefing in closed session the Security Council this week. My question to you, sir, is come 30 June, and the aim is to remove all of the chemical weapons from Syria and to destroy them, come 30 June, and this has been done according to the Joint Mission, can you put your hand on your heart and say that all chemical weapons have been removed from Syria, reminding you that these weapons that are going to be removed are based on a manifest given by the Syrian Government to the OPCW? And I do have a short follow-up. Thank you so much.

Secretary-General: I met the Joint Special Coordinator of the Joint Mission, Sigrid Kaag, earlier this week, and she briefed me about further progress that has been made towards the removal and elimination of the Syrian chemical weapons programme. As you know, the first quantity of priority chemical weapons and materials has been shipped out of Latakia port, and this process will continue. Even though there was a bit of delay in our programme, I think everything is now moving on schedule. The deadline of 30 June is, of course, very tight, very tight, because of the continuing violence in the region, but we will spare no effort. The Joint Mission is working day and night. So let us see, and our position at this time is to provide full support. In that regard, I would really like to thank those countries which have been providing logistical support by providing transportation, ships and naval escorts.

Question: Sorry, sir, my question was: Once 30 June comes and you certify that Syria is empty of chemical, based on the manifest that the Syrian Government itself gave to the OPCW, are you prepared then, if an attack happens after the certification, to blame the opposition, because you have given a certification to the Syrian Government by then?

Secretary-General: That certification and verification of the process, whether all of these chemical weapons and materials and facilities have been destroyed — that is up to the Joint Mission and the OPCW to do that, after 30 June, that we have to watch at this time.

Question: Mr. Secretary-General, also Happy New Year to you. The Syrian Government has a different interpretation of the terms of reference when going to Geneva II. They're talking about the fight in the war on terror, whereas you say very clearly that the terms of reference are the implementation of Geneva I. So in the countdown to the Geneva II conference and the countdown also to the tribunal on Lebanon, you would see that there's an escalation, not only in Syria, but also in Lebanon next door. It seems that the international community is dismissive of a country that is on the verge of a breakdown, as everybody fights it out there. Is it time that you do something about it, is it time that you bring this attention of Lebanon to the forefront, because it is falling

apart? And do you disagree that the Syrian Government should not go there only with idea of fighting terrorism, as it claims this war is all about? Thank you.

Secretary-General: First of all, for the first part of your question, let me again remind all of you that the key goal of this Geneva Conference is to reach an agreement on a transitional governing body with full executive power by mutual consent. That was the exact wording of the Geneva communiqué of 30 June of 2012. There are some different expectations and interpretations, but this is what the parties agreed, the participating countries agreed, in 2012. The main goal will be how to implement this joint communiqué. And that is, I think, a priority of our talks. Nobody thinks that it will be an easy process; it will be extremely difficult.

First, I will convene this international conference for one day. Then, there will be a one-day pause to move from Montreux to Geneva for Syrian-led negotiations, facilitated by [Joint Special Representative for Syria] Lakhdar Brahimi. We expect that all of the participating countries will come with a strong and determined will to help this process move towards the right direction, so that we can see the end of violence as soon as possible.

About this recent situation in Lebanon, I am deeply concerned about the escalation of violence witnessed in Lebanon in recent months. I have spoken with Prime Minister [Najib] Mikati recently on the current situation. As you know, I strongly condemned all of this violence which has happened in Lebanon. I call on all Lebanese parties to act with restraint and for the Lebanese people to come together to support the institution of the State. Still, it is a caretaker Government. It is important that the [Lebanese] Government and people should establish the Government. The Prime Minister is already nominated, but it has almost been a year ago, so the Government cannot take any important decisions. That may also create a certain kind of political vacuum. We sincerely hope that there will soon be the establishment of a Government. I may have an opportunity of meeting either Prime Minister Mikati or President [Michel] Sleiman this month and I will discuss this matter with them.

Question: Where?

Secretary-General: In Kuwait or in Geneva, or wherever. In Kuwait, maybe.

Question: Thank you. On the Syria peace talks, can you say anything about which countries will be attending and what your expectations are of those talks?

Secretary-General: The names of the countries have already been announced by Lakhdar Brahimi. And we expect that those countries who will be participating will come with a firm position to support and help the Syrian parties so that they will be able to agree on that. And those, whoever may have influence on those parties, should exercise their influence so that they will cease violence as soon as possible. That is my expectation.

Question: Mr. Secretary-General, thank you for this briefing. The fight or the combating of terrorism looks like the world is not winning so far; to the contrary, it is a growing phenomenon and it is threatening the world at large, not just certain areas. How do you view this battle in Al Anbar in Iraq, and especially that the fighting is overlapping in Syria and between Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, and other areas in the region? How do you view the recent reports from the Iraqi Government that vehicles sold only to Saudi Arabia have been captured by Al-Qaida in Al Anbar and that a recent cache of \$150 million were held by one of the Al-Qaida members who was arrested by the Iraqi Government who confessed that he got the money from the Saudi intelligence? How do you view the role of Saudi Arabia in combating terrorism after over 12 years after 9/11?

Secretary-General: First of all, I have been following very closely the current situation in Iraq, including the Anbar governorate. I have strongly condemned all of the violence there. The Government of Iraq has a responsibility to protect all its citizens from violence and acts of terrorism while exercising restraint in the use of force and protecting human rights. I have been urging Iraqi Government leaders, including Prime Minister [Nuri Kamel] al-Maliki, that the policies of their Government should be inclusive and promote the reconciliation among all different ethnic groups, embrace all the people in the country. I think that is the best way to, first of all, have good governance and to address the grievances of those people who may not be satisfied with what is going on.

For the second part, I am not aware of any information about that.

Question: Secretary-General, you touched on the Central African Republic and the stepping down of the interim leader, Mr. [Michel] Djotodia. Do you see this as a positive move for peace and security and reconciliation in that country? How do you view today's development?

Secretary-General: The situation in Central African Republic has really been source of great concern for the international community. Upon decision by Security Council, the African Union regional group has deployed MISCA [the International Support Mission in the Central African Republic] and the French Government has deployed its own troops. Even with all [this] support, the situation has been deteriorating. First of all, the 6,000-mandated ceiling has not yet been filled and I urge the African Union to expedite the full deployment of these soldiers.

At the same time, there are serious human rights and humanitarian situations there. I think almost half, 2 million people — the total population is about 4 million people — then about 2 million people have been affected. At least 1 million people in [the country] are now displaced and there are serious human rights violations. We are now strengthening our human rights violations [teams]. The United Nations are fully committed to help the Central African Republic emerge from this terrible crisis and to build peace.

In that regard, this announcement of resignation of transitional President Djotodia and also Prime Minister [Nicolas] Tiangaye — I know that this is a decision of themselves, upon the discussions of the regional countries in N'Djamena yesterday. It's going on. And I have taken note of it. I sincerely hope that there will be quick restoration of institutions. There is no functioning government, unfortunately. There is a limit for the international community and the United Nations when there is no functioning government, no functioning institutions. Then there should be a full and quick restoration of institutions there. And we will continue to provide humanitarian assistance, despite the very difficult and dire situation.

Question: The High Commissioner for Human Rights said the other day that they had given up trying to count and verify the number of dead in Syria, which was last fixed at 100,000 in late July. Who is responsible for impeding access to this information? And more broadly, what does it say about the level of violence and chaos in Syria if they can't even count the dead?

Secretary-General: This is a very important question. The High Commissioner, Navi Pillay, has announced last year — I think that statistic was as of the end of April last year, which was announced in June — around 100,000 people. We believe that by this time, well over 100,000 people have been killed. And hundreds of thousand people have been wounded.

It has become quite difficult for the Human Rights Office to follow up on all those statistics of people killed and injured because of the very difficult security situation. We do not have much to the sources of information access but we will try our best to update these statistics. What is important at this time is that the parties must stop the violence. They are killing among themselves. More than 40 per cent of hospitals — that means two out of five hospitals — have been destroyed and another 20 per cent of hospitals are not properly functioning. Schools have been destroyed. So most of the infrastructure and institutions have been destroyed. Then they must think about their future, how can they reconstruct their country. I am afraid that they have lost maybe decades of their developments by this time.

Question: My question is about the last month resolution in GA [General Assembly] about the vote against violations and extremism, which Iranian President [Hassan] Rouhani proposed to you and in GA meeting. I need your comment and especially about article 14 of this resolution [inaudible].

Secretary-General: The United Nations position is quite clear: that we are against all forms of violence and discrimination, whoever and wherever it may be. In that regard, I am urging all the parties and countries to respect human rights. As I said, we are going to put the priority and focus more on human rights protection. The Rights Up Front Action Plan is based on that. We are going to do much more, focusing on protecting human rights. While all this conflicts and violence are taking place, people are being affected, who being killed and whose human rights are not being properly protected. In that regard, I cannot emphasize more the importance of human rights.

Thank you very much for your support and cooperation. I hope we will work together. We need the support of the media. Whatever we do at the United Nations or as the international community, I think you are the connectors; you are the persons who really communicate, help communicate from us to the people on the ground. I sincerely hope that you will also be closely engaged. And I will make myself available as often as possible, whenever opportunities arise. Thank you very much. I wish you the best.

* * * * *

For information media • not an official record