

Daily Press Briefing by the Office of the Spokesperson for the Secretary-General

 press.un.org/en/2013/db131018.doc.htm

18 October 2013

Spokesperson's Noon Briefing

—

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

The following is a near-verbatim transcript of today's noon briefing by Martin Nesirky, Spokesperson for the Secretary-General.

So, good afternoon. Welcome to the briefing.

****Security Council**

The Secretary-General spoke at the Security Council meeting on women, peace and security this morning. In his remarks, the Secretary-General called for the Security Council's continued support for making measurable change in the lives of women and girls in conflict and post-conflict settings. He said that women must be involved at every stage of efforts to reaffirm the rule of law, and their needs for security and justice must be addressed.

The Secretary-General also said that the United Nations is working to ensure that women are represented on all UN mediation support teams. He noted that, for the first time in history, five UN peacekeeping operations are led by women — in South Sudan, Liberia, Cyprus, Haiti and Côte d'Ivoire.

Following the Secretary-General's remarks, UN-Women (United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women) Executive Director Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka briefed the Council on the Secretary-General's report. She said that, although the report shows good practice over the past year, the progress in women's participation is not consistent. Their full remarks are available in my office.

****Syria — Chemical Weapons**

The advance team in Syria from the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) and the United Nations reports that inspection activities have been conducted at a total of 14 sites so far. The Special Coordinator for the Joint Mission, Sigrid Kaag, is scheduled to visit The Hague soon for briefings and discussions.

****Syria — Refugees**

The United Nations refugee agency is concerned about the severe difficulties faced by growing numbers of Syrians seeking safety in Europe during their passage and at borders. This includes cases of hundreds of Syrians drowning at sea and incidents where Syrians have been dangerously hindered in their journeys. [The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees] is working with Governments, the European Union and other partners to put in place a comprehensive response to saving lives of refugees and migrants at sea. The agency is calling for a number of measures to prevent further tragedies and increase responsibility-sharing.

**Press Conference

On Monday, at 12:30 p.m., there will be a press conference here by James Anaya, the Special Rapporteur on the rights of indigenous peoples; and that will be along with Paul Kanyinke Sena, the Chair of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues; and Myrna Cunningham, a member of the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues.

**Acting Deputy Spokesperson

And finally, you'll recall that my Deputy, Eduardo del Buey, retired over the summer. And we are still in the process of recruiting a new Deputy Spokesperson. I just wanted to let you know that my colleague, Farhan Haq, has been appointed acting Deputy Spokesperson until the new Deputy is named.

Okay, all right, so, questions, please? Masood?

**Questions and Answers

Question: Yes, sir. Sir, this question is about... I think maybe you spoke about it earlier in your briefing, about Saudi Arabia declining to accept the seat that it was elected on in the Security Council, and do you have... and the Secretary-General's point of view on this issue, and besides the fact that you will say that the Member States to decide and the region groups to decide, is there a way forward that the Secretary-General sees in this issue?

Spokesperson: Well, Masood, as you seem to be suggesting that, perhaps, the [Secretary-General] was going to say something, but then you seem to suggest that you knew that he had said something. And in fact, as you know, he did speak just a

little while ago, having been in the Security Council, and I would refer you to what he said. Indeed, he did say that membership in the Security Council is a decision by Member States, and he said that he had taken note of the media reports regarding the decision by the Government of Saudi Arabia. But, he also cautioned that we have not received any official notification so far in this regard. So, that's what we have. I think you will have seen the transcript put out.

Question: Yes. So, is there a precedent to such an election and decline by the Member States about this happening in the past?

Spokesperson: Well, I think that is something for the historians to check on. I can tell you that my colleagues who deal with these matters both in dealing with General Assembly, which is where the vote took place after all, and of course, dealing with the Security Council where the seat is, and colleagues with long memories cannot recall such an instance, but they are checking back further into the depths of history to see, to be absolutely certain about that.

Question: Will they let us know if there is anything new that they find?

Spokesperson: I would certainly do so, but as far as we are aware, there isn't another case like it, as far as we are aware.

Correspondent: Thank you, sir.

Spokesperson: Yes? I'm sorry, could you use the microphone, please? And I nearly knocked this microphone. You're a TV reporter.

Question: Yes, that's right, I should know better. Does that mean there is no... so, obviously, this is... it appears to be unprecedented, but is there a plan to move forward with a new election or can you say if there is been any discussion of what happens next?

Spokesperson: Well, I think... well, there are a number of things here. One is that, as we have said, it is a matter for Member States, and the voting that took place yesterday, as you will have seen, took place in the General Assembly. So, therefore, it is logical that my colleague Afaf, at some point, may have something to say about the procedures that may or may not take place within the General

Assembly. But, it is there that that would play out should it come to that. But, as I say, we haven't received any official notification so far. So, that is why we are trying to be a little bit cautious here. Mr. Abbadi?

Question: Thank you, Martin. Indeed, as far as I know also, my 44 years here, there is no precedent for such development. I know you said the... it's up to Member States and Secretary-General thinks so, but would the Secretary-General be in favour of certain regional groups or perhaps even the Assembly making an appeal to Saudi Arabia to retain the seat in the Council?

Spokesperson: Look, this is... is very much for Member States. I would simply reiterate what the Secretary-General himself said when speaking to you just a short while ago, that he encouraged all Member States to fully engage with the principal organs of the United Nations while continuing to advance efforts to improve their working methods, okay. Yes, Matthew?

Question: Sure, thanks a lot. I... on... on this same topic, is it... I was trying to go back through and see whether a... any readout had been issued during the general debate of a meeting between the Secretary-General and any representative of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. So, there may be one, I just haven't... going against time, but I am wondering, can you say when the last time the Secretary-General spoke with the representative, you know, of the Kingdom was, because it seems like they are dissatisfied with a lot of things. And also, this is a... a... a subset I meant to ask you yesterday, which was, in the voting yesterday there were... there were gifts given out by a number of the people running and I know the... I don't know, they may not have been very high value, I think they were dates in the case of Saudi Arabia, but I wanted to ask you, are there any rules regarding that? Are there any... is there any limit to what could be given... what... what... what... what... what would be the...?

Spokesperson: Well, that's a question for Afaf. That's a question for the General Assembly, not for me.

Correspondent: Okay.

Spokesperson: With regard to the Secretary-General's interactions with Saudi Arabia and the leadership there, he has periodic, of course, contacts, and I can check back to see when the most recent, for example, telephone call or meeting

with the Foreign Minister, for example, was. But, bear in mind also that Jeff Feltman, the Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs, was also in the region not so long ago.

Question: And did he meet with the Foreign Minister?

Spokesperson: Say again?

Question: Did he meet with the... who did... did he meet with the Foreign Minister while he was there?

Spokesperson: Let me check, let me check.

Correspondent: Okay, thanks.

Spokesperson: Yes, Talal? Could you use the microphone, please?

Question: Did your office or...?

Spokesperson: I know you are very good at karaoke, so it should come naturally, but...

Question: [inaudible] did your office have any indication that such a move is coming from Saudi Arabia, because it caught a lot of people by surprise? But, were you also caught by surprise or did you have...?

Spokesperson: I don't think that terribly many people knew about it; that's one thing that seems to be fairly certain. Yes, Erol?

Question: Obviously, as a follow-up, that so many people were caught by surprise: yesterday, I made an interview with the Permanent Representative of Saudi Arabia, he was praising his role as a future President during the month of Ramadan and month of Haj that should be on their side, but saying that the Secretary-General is cautious, that the United Nations are cautious, is that mean... are you suggesting that something is going on behind the closed door in a way of convincing the decision should be changed...?

Spokesperson: No, not at all. It's simply... I think it is normal in diplomatic practice that notification would come in the form of a note verbale or some other letter. There would ordinarily in diplomatic practice be some kind of official communication with the United Nations, whether it is to the President of the General Assembly, whether it is to the Secretary-General, but typically, one would expect in diplomatic practice that there would be some kind of letter or note verbale, in diplomatic parlance. And so, that's why we are simply being cautious, but everybody has seen the media reports that there are, and the Secretary-General is among them. Yes, Pamela?

Question: On this note, I... on Saudi Arabia, has... did the Secretary-General receive any comment from Saudi Arabia or any explanation of why they had cancelled the Foreign Minister coming to the general debate, which seems to have been somewhat of a foreshadowing of this event? Did he get anything on that, and does...?

Spokesperson: No, no.

Question: ...and even though it is Member States issue, will he, in any way, reach out to anyone in Saudi Arabia personally?

Spokesperson: Well, on the first, no. We were obviously informed that there would be no speech made during the general debate, but not in the form of an explanation. And with regard to the second part of your question, well, the Secretary-General did say when he was asked, I believe by Ali, just at the stakeout just now, he said he would be thinking about how to handle this matter. But again, he said that he would be very closely following how Member States decide on this.

Question: And just to follow up on Syria, the... will the Secretary-General or anyone from the UN be participating in the newly announced London II talks that Secretary... the Foreign Secretary of [the United Kingdom], William Hague, just announced?

Spokesperson: I'd need to check. I don't know the answer to that.

Question: Just a follow-up on that?

Spokesperson: Please.

Question: on the [inaudible]?

Spokesperson: Microphone, microphone.

Question: On the speech of the Saudi Foreign Minister, Saud al-Faisal, to the General Assembly, did they inform you of cancelling the speech the same day of the speech, or was it well in advance that he knew that the Saudi Arabia is not going to do a speech?

Spokesperson: No, I don't know the exact details, but I do not believe that there was huge advance notice, I do not believe that's the case. Yes, Mr. Abbadi and then I am coming to Ali. Yes?

Question: Thank you, Martin. What does the Secretary-General think of the publicly asserted opinion of Saudi Arabia that there exists a double standard in the Security Council?

Spokesperson: Look, we are not going to parse statements like this. The Secretary-General has made his views clear on the need to engage fully with the principal organs of the United Nations and at the same while advancing efforts to improve their working methods, which is another way of saying that, of course everybody agrees that the Security Council needs to undergo reforms, but it is for Member States, as we have said many times, to decide the shape of those reforms. Yes, Ali?

Question: Thank you, Martin. How much does the [Secretary-General] and United Nations as a whole value the role of the Saudi Arabia in the United Nations? How significant is the role that the Saudi Arabia is playing in the United Nations? Thank you.

Spokesperson: Well, again, as the Secretary-General himself said, he said that we look forward to continuing to work with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in addressing many important challenges, and amongst those, he noted, of course, ending the war in Syria, achieving a viable State for the Palestinians, helping with the transition process in Yemen, extending humanitarian assistance to all those in need, and helping to combat terrorism and nuclear proliferation. So, the Secretary-General has said he looks forward to continue working with Saudi Arabia on these many challenges in the region. Did you have a question?

Correspondent: [inaudible]

Spokesperson: Could you use the microphone? Thank you.

Correspondent: Actually, Matthew took my question.

Spokesperson: Okay.

Correspondent: I was going to...

Correspondent: I didn't mean to.

Question: No, I know. That means it is a good question if he thought of it also. I just wondered if there was any kind of precedent for gifts being given out directly in the General Assembly before a vote. Couldn't that be seen to influence the vote?

Spokesperson: Well, again, I think that's a question for the General Assembly President's Office and the Spokesperson there. I think that's where that should be addressed. Yes, Matthew, and then I am coming back this way, okay?

Question: Sure, I wanted to ask about the... the... the meeting yesterday of the Secretary-General and the Foreign Minister of Chad. I... I... I... I saw the readout, and I just wanted to ask you if you can't say whether the issue of Darfur, which, obviously, Chad is next to and has had some role... had role... different roles in over the years, and also whether this issue of the... the Chadian peacekeepers in MINUSMA (United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali) that one, you know, left their post due to a pay dispute it is reported, and also these rape allegations, were these issues discussed, and also is there any UN update on... on accountability, particularly in the case of rape given what is being discussed today in the Security Council?

Spokesperson: Well, on the MINUSMA question, I think that you addressed that to the Special Representative of the Secretary-General, Bert Koenders, just the other day, so I would leave it with what he told you at that point. I can check whether we have anything additional to say beyond the readout, but I doubt it. Yes, Pamela, and then Ali?

Correspondent: Martin, sorry to belabour the Saudi point, but there was, in the heady days of...

Spokesperson: You don't think I didn't expect you to, but...

Question: In the heady days following, or around the passage of the Syria chemical weapons resolution, there were a lot of statements — Foreign Secretary William Hague, the Secretary-General himself — that this had given the UN credibility; that Russia, the United States, all permanent members of the Security Council, are now agreeing to something. Do you think any... can you find out if the Secretary-General believes this, the comments... the specific comments, if verified by the Foreign Minister of Saudi Arabia, that the Security Council is not in a position to be peacemaking and all of the things they said today and the Middle East failures with Palestine, does he believe that there is any lack of credibility or does their view hold?

Spokesperson: Well, the Secretary-General himself over many weeks and months was critical himself about the lack of unity within the Security Council. But, of course, when there was unity, when it counted for this resolution regarding chemical weapons, and when it came to the presidential statement — let's not forget that — on humanitarian access, he was both encouraged and encouraging in the sense that he would wish to see further unity in the coming days and weeks and months when dealing with this crisis in Syria, and of course, with other matters. And just on humanitarian access, the Secretary-General remains — and indeed the Deputy Secretary-General, who was just recently in Washington — they remain, I would say, very exercised about the lack of access. And they would want to see greater access inside Syria so that our humanitarian colleagues can deliver the aid that people there so desperately need. Other questions, please. Yes, Ali? And then Ivan, yes.

Question: On Syria, also, can you please tell us that, whether Mr. Brahimi is going to go... who is travelling tomorrow to the region, but is he going to go to Syria, whether he is going to meet with President Assad. And also, you, yesterday, told us that the UN sees that Iran should be on the table for Geneva II. Do you think that Saudi Arabia should be on the table or not?

Spokesperson: Well, first of all, what I think I said was that the Secretary-General believes it would be useful. But, what I also said was that this is something that needs to be discussed amongst the parties in the region, and that would also include Saudi Arabia, of course. There are views and voices that need to be heard

in that deliberation. With regard to Mr. Brahimi, the Joint Special Representative for Syria, he will start his tour of the region tomorrow, travelling to Egypt as his first stop, and he will meet there the Egyptian Foreign Minister tomorrow. And he will stay in the country until Sunday. And then, arrangements are being made for his subsequent stops, and we will announce those as time goes by, but not right now. That's where I think I would leave it, except to say that, of course, his deputy Nasser al-Kidwa is also travelling in the region, and this is all with the aim of working with regional Governments to ensure that the Geneva II conference can take place as soon as possible, and that when it does that it is successful. Yes, Ivan? And then Sylvian.

Question: Thank you. Do you have any details on incident with another helicopter of the United Nations in the Democratic Republic of the Congo?

Spokesperson: Well, what I can tell you is that, what our colleagues from the Mission (United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo), MONUSCO, have said, which is that today, a MONUSCO helicopter was fired at by armed individuals near Goma in North Kivu while carrying out the Mission's mandated activities. There was no damage to the helicopter, and there were no injuries to personnel. And, I would remind you that the last time a helicopter was fired at, last week, the Secretary-General's Special Representative, Martin Kobler, condemned this act and said that the Mission would continue with its mandated activities, including helicopter flights. Sylvian?

[The Spokesperson later added that the Head of MONUSCO, Martin Kobler, and the Secretary-General's Special Envoy for the Great Lakes Region, Mary Robinson, had issued a press release in which they strongly condemned this new attack by the M23 (23 March Movement) against an unarmed MONUSCO helicopter, the second in less than a week. Martin Kobler and Mary Robinson are currently in Kampala with the special envoys of European Union, United States and African Union to observe the talks between the Congolese Government and the M23. MONUSCO believes that nothing should distract or disturb a successful outcome of the Kampala talks.]

Question: Thank you, Martin. I would like to come back to Mr. Brahimi's trip to the Middle East. It is well known that Mr. Brahimi is persona non grata of... in Saudi Arabia. Will he be able to go or to be... to talk with directly with the authority there, with the...?

Spokesperson: Well, as I've said, arrangements are being made for his subsequent stops around the region, and we'll announce those as we go along, but I am not in a position to announce them right now, okay. I am going to come to you last Masood, but I am coming to you next, Matthew?

Correspondent: Okay, great, thanks a lot. I... I wanted to... you'd mentioned that James Anaya is coming on Monday, so I'm... I'm... this may... you may say that it is for him, but I wanted to ask for this reason, there was a protest yesterday...

Spokesperson: If you think I may, then it is probably likely to be the case.

Question: No, no, no, but it's a... there is an energy... there is a... there is a... there is a... there is a... there is a green energy part of the question. There is a... the First Nations of the Elsipogtog in... in Canada yesterday had... were... were arrested and pepper-sprayed as they protested fracking or shale gas extraction near their land. So, I wanted to know, one, if... if the Secretariat is aware of this, if they have any... any comment on Canada's response, but I also wanted to know, what... does the Secretary-General, since he is... he is... he is big in this field of gree... you know, green energy and various kinds of energy, does he have any view of... of this fracking which many... many environmental and... and... and other activists say is... is destructive, but is trying to kind of get the last, you know, rinds out... out of the earth in terms of hydrocarbons?

Spokesperson: Well, first of all, we are obviously aware of the reports from Canada, but I don't have any comment on that at the moment. And with regard to the broader question of fracking, I will have to have to look and see what I can tell you on that, but I don't have anything at the moment, okay. This is the last question, Masood, please?

[The Spokesperson later said that natural gas had an important role to play as we transition to lower-carbon sources, but that we must be aware that it cannot meet all our needs. He added that we must ensure that development of gas resources should go hand in hand with promoting clean energy solutions.]

Question: Yes, sir. Just a question on Syria and the Geneva II process which you were... yesterday, I believe were saying that you have no idea as to whether this will continue, how long will it be delayed, do you have any idea?

Spokesperson: Gosh, you are very good at paraphrasing me in a very creative fashion. But, any way, carry on.

Question: Yeah. Do you... any idea whether now that Mr. Brahimi is moving around that that process is, in fact, going to be delayed indefinitely? Do you... do you believe that is going to be the case?

Spokesperson: Quite the reverse. The whole reason for going to the region is to help to move things along. And his presence in the region, plus Mr. al-Kidwa's presence, the various other conversations that have taken place recently, including in Brunei just last week with Secretary of State Kerry and Foreign Minister Lavrov, this shows that there is an energy and a dynamism. That doesn't mean that it is an easy task to make it happen, but the Secretary-General remains determined to have this international conference in Geneva in mid-November, as we have said, okay.

Question: Mid-November, that's the date which is... which can... which is intractable... can be changed?

Spokesperson: He said he is determined to do that, and the Secretary-General is a fairly determined individual.

Have a good afternoon. Thanks very much.

* * * * *

For information media • not an official record