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

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http://www.un.org/press/en/2016/db161026.doc.htm

The following is a near-verbatim transcript of today’s noon briefing by Stéphane Dujarric, Spokesman for the Secretary-General.

\*\*Memorial Service

This morning, the Secretary-General [paid tribute](http://www.un.org/press/en/2016/sgsm18232.doc.htm) to 211 UN staff members who lost their lives in the line of duty between 1 January 2015 and 30 June 2016.  At a solemn ceremony, the Secretary-General said that in nearly a decade, he has had the sad duty to take part in many staff memorials at Headquarters and around the world.  He said that the staff we lost never intended to be heroes.  But in striving to do their best for others, they came to represent the best in us all. Today and every day, he said, let us honour their sacrifices by giving life to the mission and the values of our beloved United Nations.  His remarks are online.

\*\*Columbia University

This afternoon, the Secretary-General will give this year’s [Gabriel Silver Memorial Lecture](http://www.un.org/press/en/2016/sgsm18234.doc.htm) at Columbia University’s School of International and Public Affairs.  The lecture will touch on a range of topics, including sustainable development, Syria and the International Criminal Court.  As he is nearing the end of his tenure, the Secretary-General will reaffirm his optimism and belief in the collective goodwill of humanity.  His lecture will be available in my office and will be streamed online through SIPA’s website.

\*\*Central African Republic

As you will have seen, yesterday evening we issued a [statement](http://www.un.org/press/en/2016/sgsm18231.doc.htm) on the Central African Republic in which the Secretary-General condemned the outbreak of violence on 24 October in Bangui, which resulted in the tragic deaths of at least four civilians and the injuring of a further nine.  He deplored the attacks against the UN Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA), in which five peacekeepers were injured.  He reiterated that the UN Mission will take all necessary measures, in line with its mandate, to protect civilians and foster stability.

The Secretary-General also reiterated that the actions of those seeking to destabilize the Government and harm the country’s prospects for peace and stability must not undermine the important work of rebuilding the country’s infrastructure, promoting social cohesion, reconciliation and economic recovery, strengthening the rule of law and creating opportunities for all.

\*\*Great Lakes Region

I also want to flag a [message](http://www.un.org/press/en/2016/sgsm18233.doc.htm) from the Secretary-General, delivered by his Special Envoy for the Great Lakes Region, Said Djinnit, and that was in Angola today, during a meeting of the Regional Oversight Mechanism of the Peace, Security and Cooperation Framework for the Democratic Republic of the Congo and the Region.

The Secretary-General welcomed the steady progress being achieved in regional integration and economic development but noted major security challenges remaining, including continuing atrocities by the Allied Democratic Forces and other armed groups in the eastern part of the Democratic Republic of the Congo.  He invited participants to agree on tangible steps to accelerate the disarmament and demobilisation of all these armed groups.  He also asked them to act decisively to help resolve the crisis in Burundi and strengthen stabilisation efforts in the Central African Republic and South Sudan.

On the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the Secretary-General urged the Government to continue to engage with all party stakeholders, including those who reject the recent round of talks and the resulting agreement, and to take additional confidence-building measures.   And that statement is online.

\*\*Syria

And on Syria, the Emergency Relief Coordinator, Stephen O’Brien, will [brief](http://www.un.org/press/en/2016/sc12564.doc.htm) the Council this afternoon about humanitarian conditions in an open meeting followed by consultations.

\*\*Iraq

And more than 10,500 people have to-date been recorded as internally displaced as a result of the Mosul military operation.  The majority of the displaced are sheltering in host communities. Others are sheltering in three displacement camps outside of Mosul.  Humanitarian partners continue to provide assistance to displaced families and wherever access allows.  Meanwhile, our humanitarian colleagues report that oil smoke and sulphur dioxide from oil and sulphur fires near al-Qayyarah continue to cause health risks for the civilian population in the area.

\*\*Lebanon

And our colleagues at UNIFIL (United Nations Interim Force) in Lebanon say they have received information from the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) that an IDF soldier south of the Blue Line was hit by small arms fire originating from the vicinity of Kfar Kela on the Lebanese side.  The IDF also informed UNIFIL that they returned fire.

UNIFIL Force Commander, Major-General Michael Beary, was in immediate contact with the parties to help control the situation and prevent further escalation. He urged both sides to exercise maximum restraint.  UNIFIL personnel have deployed in the area north of the Blue Line and, in coordination with the Lebanese Armed Forces, the UN peacekeepers launched an investigation to ascertain the circumstances of the incident.

\*\*Haiti

An update from Haiti, where our humanitarian colleagues report that access to affected areas by Hurricane Matthew is improving.  The International Organisation for Migration has sent 34 truckloads - that represents 150 metric tonnes of supplies - to Jérémie and Les Cayes.  Some 28,000 families have already benefitted from the assistance, with another 13,000 families to receive critical supplies in the coming days.  However, the $120 million flash appeal remains critically under-funded at just under 28 per cent.

\*\*Agriculture

And our colleagues at FAO [Food and Agriculture Organization] tell us that the head of the Food and Agriculture Organization, José Graziano da Silva, called today for data revolution to implement the 2030 Sustainable Agenda, stressing that the data requirements for the SDGs (Sustainable Development Goals) far exceed the current capacities of most national statistical systems.  And to help, the FAO is putting in place a series of initiatives aimed at strengthening the tried-and-tested systems as well as adopting innovative approaches, such as the use of mobile technology and remote sensing imagery.  More details online.

\*\*Press Briefings

At 1:15 p.m., there will be a press briefing here by the Special Rapporteur on the rights of persons with disabilities, Catalina Devandas Aguilar.  And tomorrow, you will have your hands full.  At 10:30, a press briefing by UNESCO’s (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) Assistant Director General for Communication and Information, Frank LaRue, who will speak ahead of the interactive panel on “Safety of Journalists ending impunity in conflict situations”.  That is pegged to the International Day to End Impunity for Crimes against Journalists, which is 2 November.

At 11:30 a.m., the UN Special Rapporteur in the field of cultural rights, Karima Bennoune.  My guest at noon will be Gordon Brown, Special Envoy for Global Education.  At 2 p.m., the Special Rapporteur on the human rights in Myanmar, Yanghee Lee.  At 2:30 p.m., another press briefing by Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the DPRK, Tomas Ojea Quintana.  And finally, at 3 p.m., a press briefing by the Special Rapporteur on the human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran, Ahmed Shaheed.  Luke?

\*\*Questions and Answers

Question:  I'm sure you've seen that the US intends to abstain on the GA's [General Assembly] Cuba embargo vote.  Assume that happens in the next few minutes.  Would the SG view that as a positive development?

Spokesman:  I think, you know, we've seen for the last number of years, if not decades, votes in the General Assembly on the Cuba embargo, overwhelmingly calling on the US to lift the embargo, which I think clearly shows a global opinion to that effect.  Let's see how the vote goes, and we may have something to say afterwards.  Nisar, and then Benny?

Question:  Yesterday I asked about the Toyota vehicles which were handed over to ISIS.  I said 6,000.  In fact, there are 60,000 according to the Saudi investigation… excuse me… Toyota investigation.  Do you have any answer about the duties of the states who deliver such a… now I add Jordan to the list according to the investigation.

Spokesman:  I don't have any particular comment on the investigation per se, because I have not gotten any information, independent information.  But, obviously, every state, as a matter of principle, has a duty to do whatever it can to prevent the transfer of people, weapons, or supplies to extremist groups.  But, again, I… I have not gotten any details on the investigation per se.

Question:  On Yemen, according to the authorities in Sana'a, they speak about real famine in Tihamah area.  Also, they speak about the systematic destruction of food warehouses; 638 of them were destroyed so far, 820,000 farms have been destroyed totally.  So there's a war trying to starve the Yemenis.

Spokesman:  You know, Nisar, we're well aware of the humanitarian situation, the tragic humanitarian situation, in Yemen, which we've been flagging from this podium for weeks and months.  Just recently, whether it was Stephen O'Brien or Ismail Ould Cheikh Ahmed, have called for the free flow of humanitarian aid into Yemen and, in addition, obviously, a stop to all the targeting of civilian infrastructure, which includes farmland and anything having related to food.  Our colleagues at WFP [World Food Programme] have been trying to get more food in.  The pause allowed us, I think, to move some humanitarian goods, but we need to see more access.

Question:  Just follow‑up…?

Spokesman:  I'll come back to you.  There are other people.  Benny and then Matthew.

Question:  Couple quick questions.  One, is the Secretary‑General feeling comfortable giving an award to the ambassador of the Syrian Government, as he did yesterday?

Spokesman:  It wasn't so much of an award.  It was an event sponsored by the International Association of Permanent Representatives.  A certificate… a pin was given to all those Permanent Representatives who have served longer than ten years in their post.  I think the Secretary‑General's position on Syria is well known and is clear and has been reiterated over and over again from this podium.

Question:  And, secondly, does the Secretary‑General have any comment on the series of resolutions at UNESCO determining the Temple Mount to be solely a Muslim site?

Spokesman:  I think, as we've said here before, the Secretary‑General reaffirms the importance of the Old City of Jerusalem and its Walls for Jews, for Christians, for Muslims.  I think the shared heritage of the three monotheistic religions of the holy sites should not be put into question.  The Secretary‑General again calls for the status quo to be kept in Jerusalem.  Mr. Lee?

Question:  Sure.  I wanted to ask some questions about Haiti.  One is about this teenage girl that was shot and killed while awaiting aid.  I wanted to know whether the… the media reports say that the UN peacekeepers fired rubber bullets and teargas and that… but they… they… they believe that the girl was killed by Haitian National Police with whom the UN was working.  What does the UN know about this death?  And… and, again, it seems like you have this teargas and rubber bullet deployment on… on, in this case, a teenager.  I mean, I guess it depends on the age.  But what was the rationale for the UN using teargas and rubber bullets?

Spokesman:  My understanding from the update we received from the mission is that, indeed, one civilian died; two more were injured yesterday around Dame Marie.  The harbour was, indeed, secured by the Haitian National Police with the support of MINUSTAH [United Nations Stabilization Mission in Haiti].  The incident took place as the humanitarian assistance was being offloaded from a ship.  There was a demonstration.  Uncontrolled movements by the crowd upon the [arrival of the] humanitarian aid led MINUSTAH and the Haitian National Police to attempt to contain the potentially dangerous situation.  MINUSTAH used crowd control measures, including rubber bullets.  The Haitian National Police also participated in crowd control separately.  According to initial findings, a woman who was badly injured then died in the hospital.  Two other civilians were slightly injured.  The investigation is now being launched by MINUSTAH.  MINUSTAH extends its condolences and sympathy to victims and family of the deceased.  And we, of course, call on all to respect the delivery of humanitarian aid.  I think we all understand the frustration of the people in Haiti, but it's important that people respect humanitarian aid. There's an investigation going on.  If there is uncontrolled movements of people in a dangerous situation, obviously, they will use appropriate measures including teargas, including rubber bullets, if needed.  I'm not going to second‑guess the actions of those colleagues on the ground for the time being, but, as I said, MINUSTAH has now launched an investigation.

Question:  And I wanted to ask you, in this room yesterday, as I'm sure you know, Philip Alston, the Special Rapporteur, said that he… among other things, he said that he believed the Secretary‑General had given in to US pressure on his legal position on… on not acknowledging that the UN brought cholera to Haiti and not… and I also wanted to… in looking at Mr. [Jan] Eliasson's response, Alston had asked him to respond to five questions by 12 October.  And the letter… that's why I asked you yesterday… it wasn't clear to me, because he did not… there's certainly no numbered bullet points in his response.  But what the questions were, what are the political and policy issues that… that make it impossible for the UN to acknowledge or make some legal recognition in payments?  Will the illegal [*sic*] advice of OLA [Office of Legal Affairs] be released?  And will the payments, to the degree they're made, be solely ex gratia in order to avoid any type of legal accountability for the cholera?

Spokesman:  I think… I'm not going to go into the advice that the legal counsel gave to the Secretary‑General.  That is privileged, as any relationship between the legal counsel and the Secretary‑General.  We've explained our position here over and over again.  We very much heard what Mr. Alston had to say and what other Member States had to say.  The legal position does not prevent us from putting forward effective steps to stop cholera and to bring assistance to those who were impacted by the cholera outbreak.  More details of the two‑track approach will be released by the Secretary‑General, and hopefully, that will answer some of your questions.

Question:  But do… it's not my questions.  I'm thinking about Mr. Alston's questions.  Does the Secretary‑General believe that Member States, for example, that get letters from Special Rapporteurs with five questions should, in fact, answer the questions?  And I'm asking you because Ms. [Cristina] Gallach didn't answer…

Spokesman:  No, I understand… obviously, there's dialogue between Mr. Alston and the Secretariat.  That dialogue will no doubt continue.  Questions are asked, and they're answered to the best of our ability.  Yes, sir?

Question:  Thank you, Steph.  What does the Secretary‑General feel about the announcement by the Government of Gambia of their intention to withdraw from the ICC [International Criminal Court]?  There is an exodus, and it's safe to assume that there's going to be more African countries specifically exiting from the IS… ICC. How does the Secretary‑General feel the future of the ICC, if it's going to be still around, and whether he… there is a need for intervention to reshape or to… to modify the Rome Statute that's covering its… its mandate?

Spokesman:  Well, we're… like all of you, we've seen the media reports regarding Gam… the Gambia's decision.  We have not yet received any official communications from the Gambia, nor have we received an official letter from Burundi in case someone asks on the same topic.  Obviously, if this would come to pass and we were to receive an official letter from the Gambia and this were to be true, this is something the Secretary‑General would very much regret and… as he would regret the departure of any Member State from the International Criminal Court.  The International Criminal Court is a key component of international justice already in its work, and it's brought a number of people to justice, to face justice for the crimes they have committed.  There is obviously a debate, a very open debate about the ICC, how it functions and so forth.  I think those debates and those concerns should be raised within the Assembly of States Parties to the ICC before taking any drastic action, such as leaving… withdrawing from the ICC.  Yep?

Question:  [inaudible]  I was wondering if you could clarify the number of displaced people in Mosul.  It was 9,000, you said, if I'm not wrong, yesterday, and today the number was 5,000, both internally displaced and the ones who left the country.  And the operation for Raqqah is expected within a few weeks.  Is the UN prepared for it?  And what is your expectation for those who will be displaced in Raqqah if there's… in Raqqah if there's an operation?  Thank you.

Spokesman:  Those… the number I was given today as having been displaced by the operations in Mosul was 10,500.  So that's today's number.  We're obviously also watching Raqqah and the potential operations there.  Operations there would pose, obviously, even… probably more complicated challenges to the UN.  The humanitarian system is already underfunded and overstretched, whether it's in Iraq or Syria.  And I have no doubt my colleagues in the humanitarian world are preparing the best way they can for any operation that may take place.  Nabil, you had…

Question:  Yes.  I have two questions, one on Yemen.  Does Mr. Ould Cheikh Ahmed feel or see that going back to negotiations is possible soon in light of his visit to Sana’a?

Spokesman:  On your first, I'm not going to speculate, whether for him or for me on his behalf, but I don't think we're going to qualify it in any way at this point.

Question:  And the GA… I think the First Committee will discuss the elimination of nuclear weapons.  What's the SG's position on this issue?

Spokesman:  He is for a global elimination of nuclear weapons.  Masood?

Question:  Yes, Stéphane.  Do you have any… any… does the United Nations world body as such have any position on the drones which are now entering in mass scales into the market?  Not only from United States, from China, from Russia and so forth.  They're entering the so‑called civilians, what do you call, dimension also.  So does the United Nations has any position on that?  Anybody can sell them now?  Anybody can buy them.

Spokesman:  You know, I think there is a debate and a deep debate to be had on the evolving technology and the weaponization of technology on… international law doesn't always keep up with the technological advances as quickly as it should, but there is a debate to be had to see what technologies should be labelled as weapons and what should be regulated.  It's obviously a question that needs a lot of studying.  I wanted to add something, because one of your colleagues had asked me outside of the briefing regarding the decision by Kenya to commute the sentences of death row inmates, and I wanted to say that the Secretary‑General welcomes the decision by the President, [Uhuru] Kenyatta, to commute the sentences of 2,747 death row convicts into life imprisonment.  We encourage the Kenyan Government to establish a moratorium on executions, with a view to abolishing the death penalty.

Question:  Stéphane, just… I mean, if the drones are used for peaceful purposes, it's acceptable, but when the drones enter the market, I mean, anybody can pick them up and use it for their purposes.  It could be most probably terrorists using it for their purposes.

Spokesman:  I don't disagree with you.  Luke.  Round two.

Question:  Confirm your readout on the Haiti protester death concerning the rubber bullets.  That was the first time that your office has made note of that.  Is that correct?

Spokesman:  That's… well, it's the first time I've read it.

Question:  Just sort of caught my attention; do you have any more extemporaneous sort of reaction?  This is a very inopportune time for a tragedy like this.  Any more…

Spokesman:  No, it is.  And I think we obviously… as I said, we understand the frustration of the people of Haiti who have been impacted by the hurricane.  I think the lines of communications, the roads… things have improved in order to get more aid in.  Obviously, people are desperate for aid, but it's important that aid deliveries be respected, that people… that aid agencies, whether it's UN or others, be able to offload cargo and distribute it through organised distribution points.  Nizar?

Question:  Yeah.  Going back to Yemen, when would the United Nations, I mean, declare Yemen as a crisis or emergency zone, given that they have dengue; they have cholera, and they have famine in many areas?  Pictures coming from Yemen show that there is real starvation akin to that which we witnessed many decades in Ethiopia.

Spokesman:  We have… I think no one has disputed or said anything to the contrary that Yemen is a humanitarian crisis.  As you mention, just cholera, for one, that we're very concerned about the increase of cases of cholera.  Water… you know, clean water trucks are being sent into the impacted areas.  As of October, only 45 per cent of all health facilities in Yemen remain fully functional.  If that's not a crisis, I don't know what is.  So I think we have talked about the humanitarian crisis in Yemen over and over again.

Question:  But we hear more here and everywhere else of the United Nations system talking about Aleppo, ten times more than we hear about Yemen.  Why aren't you in this case coming…

Spokesman:  No one is… populations are suffering… or populations that are suffering, no one should rank them in terms of what is more important.  I think we have talked a lot about Yemen here.  We talk about Yemen almost every day.  We flag what we're doing.  We're also… keep putting political call… engaged in political discussions, put calls out for the cessation of the violence.  Just like in Syria, those who have their finger on the trigger need to remove that.  We need to have the guns fall silent in order for us to get humanitarian aid in, let alone to start rebuilding the country.  Mr. Lee, then Mr. Avni.

Question:  Sure.  I'm sorry.  Just on that, is there any… any movement on putting Saudi Arabia back on the Children and Armed Conflict list?

Spokesman:  That discussion continues.

Question:  Okay.  So I wanted to ask you, you said… actually, here's another… just… maybe you'll have something.  On Burkina Faso, there was this reported attempted coup.  I wanted to know whether any UN official has… has… has engaged with the authorities there about the arrest of ten people allegedly affiliated with Blaise Compaoré…?

Spokesman:  I don't have any update from Burkina today.

Question:  And on Wonder Woman, you'd said… at this very podium, you had said that Cristina Gallach, I guess it was, had consulted that… although staff… some staff protested it, she'd consulted with UN Women and UNICEF (United Nations Children’s Fund).  And I want to say that yesterday I asked the head of UN Women, and I don't think it's the case.  So I wanted to know, can you get me who she spoke with in UN Women?

Spokesman:  You know, I… UN Women has been involved in this project from the start.  Full stop.  Okay?  Mr. Avni?

Question:  Two questions, one on the ICC.  So without the US, China and Russia and now with African countries, three, at least, announcing they're leaving, is it the end?  Is it disintegrating?  Is it over?

Spokesman:  I think the… I was trying to paraphrase a quote about the… but I won't, because I can't remember it properly.

Question:  The reports of my death…?

Spokesman:  Yes, thank you very much.

Correspondent:  Mark Twain, by the way.

Spokesman:  I don't think it's… Hemingway.

Correspondent:  No, Mark Twain, I think.

Spokesman:  There you go.

Correspondent:  Anyway…

Spokesman:  Sorry.  Let's start again on an important subject.  Of course, these reports are worrying, but I don't believe that it's the end or the disintegration of the ICC.  Whether it's South Africa, whether it's even the… or even… or the Gambia, those are countries that have been active in the Rome Statutes and the ICC from the beginning.  The prosecutor of the ICC is from the Gambia herself.

Question:  Doesn't that tell you something?

Spokesman:  It is not… if there are issues to be raised, if countries have questions about the functioning of the ICC and how it works, those are issues that should be raised within the Assembly of States Parties.

Question:  Okay.  Second question.  Does UNIFIL, which is quite representative in Southern Lebanon, does it have independent information about what happened this morning?

Spokesman:  Benny, I think you may have come in after I read…

Question:  No, no, you read the statement… But you read it from an announcement of the Israelis.  You didn't say anything about what UNIFIL… whether UNIFIL has observed it.

Spokesman:  No, no… what I read and I will reread it.  There we go.  It's not a good day for English for me.  UNIFIL personnel have deployed in the area in coordination with the Lebanese Armed Forces.  The UN peacekeepers launched an investigation to ascertain the circumstances of the incident along the Blue Line.  It's clear from the statement that I don't think they had first-hand eyewitness… UN eyewitness of the incident.  Thank you.

Question:  One… all right.  The speech.  You're talking about the Columbia speech.  Can you just please explain?  If he gives private speeches, can we just get a list of where they are, even if you don't give the text?  Can you do that?

Spokesman:  I can do that.