Off-the-Cuff: Secretary-General's Remarks at Press Encounter [scroll down for Q&A]

April 9, 2015

United Nations

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Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. It is a great pleasure to see you.

As you may know, I will be leaving this afternoon for the Summit of the Americas in Panama. Thereafter, I will be visiting Doha, Qatar, to participate in the United Nations Congress on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice.  I will return to New York on Monday morning.

Before I depart, I wanted to say a few words about the rapidly deteriorating situations in Yemen and Syria – where countless civilians are being willfully abandoned to misery.

Even before the latest crisis, Yemen’s overall humanitarian needs were on a scale similar to all nine countries of the Sahel region – combined.  And Yemen had almost double the number of people classified as severely food insecure.

The crisis has only multiplied in recent days.

Ordinary Yemeni families are struggling for the very basics – water, food, fuel and medicines.  Hundreds of civilians have been killed.  Hospitals and schools are shutting down – some of which are direct targets of the fighting.

As I have repeatedly said, attempts by the Houthis and their allies to take territory by force and undermine the authority of the legitimate government are in clear violation of Security Council resolutions and their commitments in the UN-facilitated political process.

Since the initial advances by the Houthis, the situation has greatly escalated through the Arab coalition military operation led by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia at the request of President Hadi.

The Coalition air raids -- and the continuing attempts by the Houthis and their allied armed groups to expand their power – have turned an internal political crisis into a violent conflict that risks deep and long-lasting regional repercussions.

The last thing the region and our world need is more of the chaos and crimes we have seen in Libya and Syria.

The UN-brokered negotiations, endorsed by the Security Council, remain the best chance to help get the transition back on track and preserve the country’s unity and territorial integrity.

For over two months, my Special Envoy Jamal Benomar has facilitated all-inclusive negotiations.  Although disagreements remain on some critical issues, many others had been resolved.

There needs to be a return to political negotiations. All parties to those negotiations must participate in good faith. There is no other solution.

As the fighting rages on, all parties to the conflict in Yemen must adhere to their obligations under international humanitarian law.

I call on all of them to protect civilians and enable humanitarian workers to safely deliver life-saving assistance wherever it is needed.

I expect Member States to do everything possible to make this happen and get the parties back to the peace table without conditions and without delay.

Ladies and gentlemen of the media,

The Syrian war long ago exceeded words to describe the mayhem.  Now the fighting has plumbed new depths.

In the horror that is Syria, the Yarmouk refugee camp is the deepest circle of hell.

After more than two years of a merciless siege, 18,000 Palestine refugees and Syrians are now being held hostage by Da’esh and other extremist militants.

A refugee camp is beginning to resemble a death camp.

The residents of Yarmouk – including 3,500 children -- are being turned into human shields.

They face a double-edged sword – armed elements inside the camp, and government forces outside.

We are now hearing worrying reports of a massive assault on the camp and all civilians in it.  This would be yet one more outrageous war crime for which those responsible must be held accountable.

Most immediately, we need to stabilize the situation in the camp.

I join the Security Council in demanding an end to hostilities, access to provide humanitarian assistance, and safe passage for civilians who wish to escape safely.

I call on all Member States with influence on the Government and all parties on the ground to take all steps necessary to send a clear message:  Civilians must be spared.  Civilians must be protected at all times.

I will continue to press this unequivocal message in my meetings and phone calls with world leaders.

The epic humanitarian catastrophe in Yarmouk represents an epic test of the international community’s resolve.

Surely we can all agree that what is unfolding in Yarmouk is unacceptable.  Surely, we can all act to end the suffering.  Surely, we can all refuse to tolerate the intolerable.

It is time for concerted action to save lives and restore a measure of humanity.

We simply cannot stand by and watch a massacre unfold.

The people of Yarmouk must not be abandoned.

Thank you.

Q: [Inaudible] Could you be more specific about ways of resolving that situation peacefully, because the danger is your words are going to fall on deaf ears?

SG: I know that I have been repeating all what I said during the last four years. I may have to continue to repeat with more emphasis that this cannot continue like this way. The international community must have full moral, political responsibility. Then why it has happened so? There have been clear divisions among the Member States – Member States in the region and within the United Nations, part in the Security Council. And the people of Syria, they are themselves divided. That is the reason why it has been very difficult even to deliver humanitarian assistance.

Now, what I’m asking and appealing to the international community is even though it may be just a small area of Yarmouk refugee camp, we have 18,000 people – of course more than 220,000 people have been killed, 12 million people have been affected, directly and indirectly – therefore, there is no time to lose. I have asked [UN Special Envoy for Syria] Staffan de Mistura now to focus much more to re-launch a political process. I need the full support. There is no military solution. Only a political solution, dialogue, can be an answer to this. And I need the support of all of the international community, particularly the Member States of the United Nations.

Q: Thank you, Secretary-General. You just said that the only solution is dialogue, de-escalation, for the political process can you tell me if the UN willing or the Security Council to have a direct or indirect talks with Da’esh in order to stop the killing in Syria, in Iraq, in Yemen and in the Middle East?

SG: Da’esh or ISIL – they have committed unspeakable crimes against humanity, including beheadings, and the level of brutality is just unspeakable. I cannot just describe it enough, my anger.  They must stop. Whatever grievances they may have, all these should be resolved through dialogue, not through killing people in such a horrific, brutal way. I strongly condemn [this], again – they must give up their arms and discuss all this through peaceful means.  This is not what human beings do, this is unacceptable, unacceptable.

Q: Mr. Secretary General, on Yarmouk, first, who is talking to Da’esh so that you would have the safe passage that you've been calling for, the UN has been trying to do this?  And who do you have in mind when you say there is a massive assault being prepared that you're calling already a war crime?  And on Yemen, there is a naval movement by Iran.  There are Iranian warships in the Bay of Aden.  Are you worried this is going to ignite a larger conflict?  What do you want to say to Iran at this point and other players around Yemen?  Thank you.

SG: First of all, as you may remember, last month, when there was a White House summit on countering violent extremism, I expressed my position that all this extremism and terrorism should be addressed at the root. Then why [have] extremism and terrorism happened and [are] now happening [in] this way?

One easy answer would be that failed leadership, just the continuing crisis in Syria for five years and other areas have provided the perfect breeding ground for all this extremism to take root in our society. We have to address all these issues. In that regard, sometimes it may be necessary to take a firm, physical action through a coalition of forces.  That is what we are now seeing.  But this can be effective and efficient and helpful, but that's not all the answers.  What is more important is how we address all these issues through inclusive and harmonious ways, addressing all the concerns and grievances of the people on the ground.  Then, I think, unfortunately, the international community has let these kind of things fester until such very violence means are now taking place.

Q: Mr. Secretary General, on Syria, can you tell me if you are contacting ISIS one way or another for the safe passage? And who is preparing that assault?

SG: I have been talking to the leaders in the region to influence, in whatever possible way, exercise their influence – I have already been speaking yesterday, day before yesterday, and even today.  I'm trying to find out the leaders, the people, who can exercise their influence over these people. Then I'm not talking directly with them, it's not possible.

Then on Yemen, again, we had very serious discussions during League of Arab States meeting in Sharm el Sheikh. What I'm concerned as the Secretary General is that my Special Adviser, Jamal Benomar, has been tirelessly working to facilitate this political dialogue through national dialogue with the national unity government.  We are able to, he was able to address many, many issues.  But this military takeover by the Houthis has lead the situation [in] this way, but at this time, I still believe that this political negotiation is the answer, and we hope that parties concerned will return to negotiating table as soon as possible.

Q: [inaudible]

SG: I'm asking all the countries in the region [that they] should really overcome, go beyond their national positions and help Yemeni people so that they will be able to enjoy, live in peace and security.

Q: Mr. Secretary General, you say that political dialogue is really what's necessary, that military means is not the way to accomplish the problem with ISIS inside Yarmouk camp, but we've seen with the situation with the Yazidis that military force actually stopped ISIS and saved numerous people in so doing. Why wouldn't you call for some sort of strategic, very focused, military type of exercise that would be conducted by a coalition of Member States or participants since you're talking to these governments to get in there and try to work out some sort of surgical way to at least immediately address the crisis at hand and then deal with things as you say in a peaceful way?

SG: Well, I'm not here to discuss about military strategy, whether it is a surgical or whatever it may be. Sometimes, it may be necessary when it is absolutely necessary – that's why I have been asking the countries, whoever has the capacity and means, influence, to defeat this ISIL, Da’esh and extremism and terrorism. At the same time, we should look at addressing this issue at the root and try to establish an inclusive society and engage in a dialogue with the people. That is the way all the issues should be addressed.  That is why the President of the General Assembly and myself, in close cooperation with the Alliance of Civilizations, are going to hold a high-level thematic debate from September 21 and 22, inviting world leaders as well as religious leaders from the world.  I believe that while we take all possible means to defeat terrorism, extremism – but there is clearly a role for religious leaders and educators of the world to teach their followers, to teach their young people, the correct meaning of tolerance, correct meaning of culture and tradition, and with mutual respect.  This is what I'm expecting.

Thank you very much.  Thank you.