

On International Day, UN chief Guterres calls on all to stand in solidarity with detained staff

25 March 2017 – On the International Day of Solidarity with Detained and Missing Staff, United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres highlighted the challenges that UN staff face and urged everyone to ensure that they have the safety they need to help those most in need around the globe.

“We are still awaiting news of the fate of two members of the Group of Experts on the Democratic Republic of the Congo, a sanctions-monitoring body established by the Security Council,” said Mr. Guterres in a message.

“We are doing everything possible to find and help them.”

Michael Sharp and Zaida Catalan, of the Group of Experts, went missing in the Kasai Central region in the DRC on 12 March along with four Congolese nationals.

Noting that the latest case highlighted the perils that UN staff and partners often face while serving the world’s people, the UN chief said that last year, seven UN staff were abducted by non-state actors and four were kept as hostages.

“Fortunately, all were ultimately released safely,” he said, but added that more than 20 UN civilian personnel remain in detention, of whom, six are being held without the UN having received any explanation for their arrest.

“The Department of Safety and Security and I continue to monitor all of these cases and seek the immediate release of our colleagues,” he added.

Mr. Guterres also noted that only 92 UN Member States are party to the 1994 Convention on the Safety of UN and Associated Personnel, and that only 30 have ratified the 2005 Optional Protocol, which extends protection to UN personnel delivering humanitarian, political or development assistance.

Urging all countries that have not joined these instruments to do so without delay, the UN chief called on everyone to stand in solidarity with all detained staff and to “pledge to work together to ensure that all UN staff have the safety they need to help the world’s most vulnerable.”

The International Day of Solidarity with Detained and Missing Staff Members is marked each year on 25 March, the date of the abduction of Alec Collett, who was taken by armed gunmen in 1985 while working for the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA). His remains were finally found in Lebanon’s Bekaa Valley in 2009.

Happy Birthday to the EU

I wish the EU well on its 60th birthday. The exit of the UK gives the EU a real chance to complete its currency union, and its borders union, two central features of the EU project that the UK under all parties in government was unwilling to accept. Freed of UK scepticism and reluctance, maybe the EU can now press on with building its vision of an integrated continent with a single economic policy, a single budget and more powerful Treasury at federal level, and common citizenship with external policed borders. Or maybe they will discover that the people of the other countries of Europe do not buy into that wider vision either.

It should also be time for the EU to reflect on why the UK left, why many parties on the continent are now pressing for their countries to leave the currency or even the whole Union, and why there are persistent and intense problems including high unemployment, migrations, a lack of agreement on the next steps in the Union, and a lack of proper opposition to EU policies within an EU level democratic framework.

Why, for example, has someone like me been such a critic of the EU? After all, I belong to many of the groups that are meant to be believers in the project. I am a globalist. I believe in an outward going foreign policy, freer trade where possible, democracy and tolerance, and the pursuit of peace. These are meant to be the values of the EU leaderships as well, so why didn't they carry me with them?

The answer is two fold. I watched their actions, and saw that so often they did not follow their own stated aims. I also saw that where they thought they were following their aims, they often chose policies which achieved the opposite of their stated ambition.

The biggest disappointment was their wish to build a large one size fits all bureaucracy seeking to control every aspect of life. This was never compatible with the wider ideals of liberty and democracy. It made creating a single demos even more difficult than it was going to be. With so many different languages and levels of economic development it was never going to be easy to get people to believe in a new European state.

They never followed the aim of building democracy into the EU properly. The Parliament was added, but it does not provide the government nor control the government. Too much power rests in the unelected and often unaccountable Commission. These full time officials can manipulate the member states and play them off against the Parliament. There is no organised opposition to the EU government suggesting an alternative programme or approach, or ready to take over when people have had enough a particular EU government. In practice all the new laws are usually Commission ideas brokered with fluctuating factions of member states and the Parliament. The whole development is a ratchet to greater Union, even where past steps have demonstrably failed or

proved unpopular.

They never followed the aim of promoting prosperity. Their currency scheme was bound to produce wild booms and busts in differing member states economies, as Ireland, Spain, Greece and others found to their cost. It was all entirely predictable – as I wrote often. After all we had seen the damage the European Exchange Rate Mechanism did. The Euro was just the version of that you could not easily get out of.

Their austerity policies which followed the boom bust entry of the Euro into many economies has created resentments and confined a whole generation of southern young people to unemployment.

They never worked out how to decide who could be a European citizen, and how to run orderly borders. Instead of the tolerance they wanted, they have created hostile attitudes to new arrivals in many parts of the continent.

Their birthday party should be a meeting for reappraisal. Do less, and do it better. Or get consent to the grand vision. Above all, try being democratic for a change. I saw from the beginning that the EU would not be to our liking. I read the Treaty of Rome which was never a Treaty for a free trade area as advertised. It was always a country in the making, where ambition far outran practicality.

[Hoping to build with ‘incremental, constructive steps’ – UN envoy for Syria](#)

25 March 2017 – Speaking to the media in Geneva yesterday, United Nations Special Envoy for Syria said that he is not expecting miracles, breakthroughs or breakdowns but is hoping to build on the previous rounds of talks on the war-ravaged country with some incremental, constructive steps.

“All invitees and delegations who were present here [...] are feeling that it was worth it to come and all came. None of them has threatened to leave [...] which is a sign of maturity and of responsibility particularly in difficult moments like this one,” said UN Special Envoy Staffan de Mistura at a media stakeout at the UN Office at Geneva (UNOG), yesterday.

Underscoring the importance attached to the fifth round of the talks, Mr. de Mistura added that he has been particularly attentive, trying to engage with and having support from all the regional players, interlocutors and stakeholders.

He further mentioned that the discussions that took place earlier in Riyadh

(capital of Saudi Arabia), Moscow (Russia) and Ankara (Turkey) conveyed a strong feeling of the need to build on the fourth round of the Geneva talks, which took place from 23 February to 3 March.

“Hence, our expectation and the stronger suggestion to the guarantors of the Astana process that they do retake the situation in hand and that hopefully there will be new Astana meeting as soon as possible in order to control the situation which at the moment is worrisome,” added the UN Special Envoy.

He also informed the media that the meeting yesterday focused into substance and that the agenda had been established and strongly supported by the Security Council.

Mr. De Mistura further noted that given the importance of the current round of intra-Syrian talks and in view of the tensions within the country, he would be travelling to Syria to meet with members of the Arab League as well as bilateral meetings on the situation.

“Meanwhile the talks will continue under the chairmanship of Ambassador Ramzy [Ezzeldin Ramzy, the Deputy Special Envoy for Syria,] but I felt it was important to engage as many regional players as possible and they all happen to be in one room,” said the UN Special Envoy.

[UN envoy calls for urgent measures to protect ceasefire in Syria](#)

25 March 2017 – Voicing deep concern over recent escalation of fighting in Syria, the United Nations Special Envoy for the country has urged Iran, Russia and Turkey to undertake urgent efforts to uphold the ceasefire which has been in effect since late December last year.

“Growing violations in recent days are undermining the ceasefire regime addressed through the Astana meetings, with significant negative consequences for the safety of Syrian civilians, humanitarian access and the momentum of the political process,” said UN Special Envoy Staffan de Mistura.

According to a note to correspondents issued today, Mr. de Mistura sent letters to the Foreign Ministers of Russia, Turkey and Iran – as the three guarantor-States of the ceasefire – to undertake urgent efforts to uphold it.

These appeals were also brought to the attention of Russia and the United States as the Co-Chairs of the International Syria Support Group (ISSG), the note added.

The ceasefire came into effect on 30 December last year, but recent fighting in capital Damascus, Hama and elsewhere in Syria have put it under strain.

Also in the note, Mr. de Mistura noted that joint efforts of Iran, Russia and Turkey to guarantee the ceasefire are indispensable for improving the conditions on the ground and contributing to an environment conducive for a productive political progress.

[Xi calls for officials to boldly push reform](#)

President Xi Jinping urged major officials on Friday to play a leading and responsible role in pushing forward the deepening of reform to ensure that the people will benefit.

Xi, also general secretary of the Communist Party of China Central Committee and chairman of the Central Military Commission, made the remarks while presiding over the 33rd meeting of the Central Leading Group for Deepening Overall Reform.

Major officials at all levels should map out and push forward reform, be realistic and persistent, aim in the right direction, be courageous in taking responsibility and do a solid job in a hands-on manner, Xi said.

During the meeting, some officials, including leaders of special groups of overall reform deepening and chief officials of provincial Party authorities, reported on their work in deepening reform.

Vice-Premier Ma Kai reported about research on the reform of State-owned enterprises, while State Councilor Meng Jianzhu reported on the implementation of judicial system reform and Han Zheng, Party secretary of Shanghai, reported on the reform of the Shanghai Pilot Free Trade Zone.

Some ministers and provincial Party secretaries also reported on reforms in areas including environmental protection, agriculture, medical care, poverty reduction and the deepening of supply-side structural reform in scientific innovation.

Those in attendance reviewed and passed the plan for overall deepening of reform and further opening-up of the China (Shanghai) Pilot Free Trade Zone and the plan for deepening reform in the science and technology award system. They also reviewed reports on such issues as improving education in poverty-stricken regions and the registration of people without hukou, or household registration.

During the meeting, leading officials were urged to keep in mind the overall situation while pushing forward reform.

They are now required to take a leading and responsible role in reforms that

are closely related to the people.

Major officials were encouraged at the meeting to be bold in pilot projects while deepening reform. Those who fail to fulfill their reform duties will face punishment.

Leading officials are also required to take specific measures to push forward reform, focus on key issues and implement reform tasks in a flexible manner. Chief officials are urged to pay more attention to reform tasks that could enhance the people's sense of gain.

Meeting participants noted that in past years, the CPC Central Committee has put forward a number of reform measures to improve the people's livelihood, which have been welcomed by the people. They urged implementation of such measures to benefit the people.