

Aid obstacles are 'matter of life and death' for besieged Syrians, says senior UN adviser

16 February 2017 – Assurances have been given to humanitarians by the Syrian Government that obstacles to aid deliveries will be removed across the war-torn country, a senior United Nations adviser said today.

Speaking to journalists in Geneva, UN Special Adviser Jan Egeland said that the agreement was needed to remove what he called an “administrative quagmire” that has prevented all aid from reaching besieged populations by road so far this year.

Ahead of a round of Intra-Syrian negotiations in the Swiss city next week, Mr. Egeland added that the issue is “a question of life and death” for many.

So far this year, aid agencies and their partners have not reached a single besieged area inside Syria by land. There are 13 of these besieged and hard-to-reach areas in all, where well over 600,000 people are increasingly vulnerable, after six years of war.

Mr. Egeland described the lack of aid deliveries as an “enormous disappointment,” before announcing that the Syrian Government had given assurances that requests to deliver food and medical supplies would be met, rather than being blocked at the last moment.

In recent days “men with guns” had jumped onto more than two in three convoys to unload diarrhoea kits for children and maternity kits for pregnant women, Mr. Egeland said.



UN Senior Advisor, Jan Egeland. UN Photo/Luca Solari (file)

“This must change and can change,” he continued, adding that there had been intensive diplomatic activity by the UN or UN envoys and with the help of members of the task force with the Government of Syria, who say that a new and better system avoiding the “administrative quagmire where we have to have green lights from so many instances that in the end no convoy moves to any besieged area.”

Nowhere is aid needed more than in the so-called ‘Four Towns’ of Foah, Kafraya, Madaya and Zabadani.

“We hope and believe it will change now; it must change now. Because if we are not reaching the ‘Four Towns’ very soon we will see again the scenes that we saw when the whole thing started a year ago: people starving.”

With UN-facilitated talks in Geneva due to begin next week, Mr. Egeland said it would send “a very important signal” if aid convoys that were standing by were allowed through to Al Waer in Homs governorate, another besieged location.

‘Mixed results’ for Humanitarian Taskforce’s first year

Assessing the work carried out by the Humanitarian Taskforce in the year since its establishment by the International Syria Support Group (ISSG) to boost aid access, he said the results had been mixed.

The ISSG established respective taskforces on humanitarian aid delivery and a wider ceasefire. They have been meeting separately since early 2016 on a way forward in the crisis. Russia and the United States are the co-chairs of the taskforces and the ISSG, which also comprises the UN, the Arab League, the European Union and 16 other countries.

While noting that the taskforce had nearly trebled the number of people reached in 2016 compared with the previous year, he said progress has been hampered of late.

“The Humanitarian Taskforce could provide access especially through the initiatives of the co-chairs Russia and the United States when they were active and working together, but also other Member States helped us in real time in a number of convoys that were stopped and in the end were helped through checkpoints because of diplomatic initiatives,” he explained.

As such, “it is a shame that members of the task force were not able to lift a single siege by negotiations in 2016. There is commitment to try to do that in 2017, it could happen through talks in Astana, in Geneva and elsewhere. ‘Lift the sieges’ is our appeal. Sieges belong in the Middle Ages, they do not belong in 2017,” said Mr. Egeland.

Looking ahead, he appealed for the taskforce’s co-chairs to do more, along with Member States who have influence on the Syrian Government and armed opposition, such as Iran, Turkey and the Gulf States.

News from the political front

Meanwhile, according to a UN spokesperson, the Special Envoy for Syria, Staffan de Mistura, met in Moscow today with Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu and Deputy Foreign Minister Gennady Gatilov.

They discussed the ongoing meeting in Astana and how best it can contribute to the preparations for the Geneva round of negotiations scheduled for next week. Meetings were useful and productive. Other issues, such as humanitarian access and UN-Russia cooperation, were also discussed.

The spokesperson confirmed that a five-member UN delegation is in Astana to lend its expertise in discussions on the consolidation of the ceasefire regime and related issues.

UN and regional partners urge DR Congo parties to resume political talks

16 February 2017 – Increasingly concerned about the political impasse in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), the United Nations and regional partner organizations today urged political actors to work out how to implement the 31 December political agreement on a timeframe for elections.

The UN, the African Union (AU), the European Union (EU) and the International Organization of La Francophonie (IOF) today released a joint statement warning that the situation “has the potential to undermine the political goodwill” that led to the signing of the agreement in December.

“The four partner organizations note that six weeks after agreeing on the modalities of a transition period leading to the holding of peaceful and credible elections by December 2017, the parties are yet to conclude discussions on the effective implementation of the agreement,” according to the statement.

The agreement – facilitated by Conférence Episcopale Nationale du Congo (CENCO) mediators, and reached in DRC’s capital, Kinshasa, on 31 December 2016 – would result in new elections being held in the country before the end of the year and for President Joseph Kabila to step down.

In today’s statement, the four partner organizations reaffirm the need for all parties to rally behind the mediation efforts by CENCO, and urge all stakeholders “to redouble, in good faith” their efforts to conclude the ongoing talks.

A lack of implementation plans threaten to shake the “legitimacy of the transitional institutions until elections,” the partners said.

Path to Middle East peace ‘riddled with hazards,’ UN envoy tells Security Council

16 February 2017 – Extremism, bloodshed and displacement continue to plague the Middle East, a senior United Nations envoy told the Security Council today, warning that these phenomena are feeding intolerance, violence, and religious radicalism far beyond the region.

"It is critical that we all understand that we must never allow the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to drift into the abyss of the extremism and radicalism sweeping the region," said Nickolay Mladenov, the UN Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process, briefing the Security Council.

"Palestinians, Israelis and the international community have a duty to act responsibly, avoid escalating tensions, refrain from unilateral actions and work together to uphold peace," he added.

He also drew attention of the Council members to the recently adopted so called "Regularisation Law" which has the potential to retroactively regularise thousands of existing settlement units built on land owned by Palestinian individuals living under occupation, as well as dozens of illegal outposts.

Noting that the "Regularisation Law" is in contravention of international law and that according to the Israeli Attorney General it is also unconstitutional, Mr. Mladenov told the Council that the Supreme Court is expected to rule on its constitutionality soon.

"If the Law stays in place, it will have far-reaching consequences for Israel, while seriously undermining prospects for the two-state solution and for Arab-Israel peace," he cautioned.

RELATED: Israeli legislation on settlements violates international law, says UN chief Guterres

Also in his briefing, the UN envoy expressed concern over daily violence and so-called "lone wolf" attacks against Israeli civilians. In one such recent incident, six Israelis were injured in a shooting and stabbing attack by an 18-year-old Palestinian from Nablus (a city in northern West Bank).

He further told the Security Council members that the volatile situation in Gaza continued to exacerbate humanitarian and development challenges, related in large part to the crippling closures of the Strip and the continuing political divide.

"This winter has borne witness to a serious electricity crisis which in December left Palestinians in Gaza with only two hours of electricity per day," he said, informing them of UN's work to address the electricity challenges in a sustainable manner.

The two-state solution remains the only way to achieve the legitimate national aspirations of both peoples

He also spoke of the situation in the UN Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) and the UN Disengagement Observer Force (UNDOF) areas of operations, noting that the ceasefire between Israel and Syria (under UNDOF area of operations) is holding, albeit in a volatile security environment.

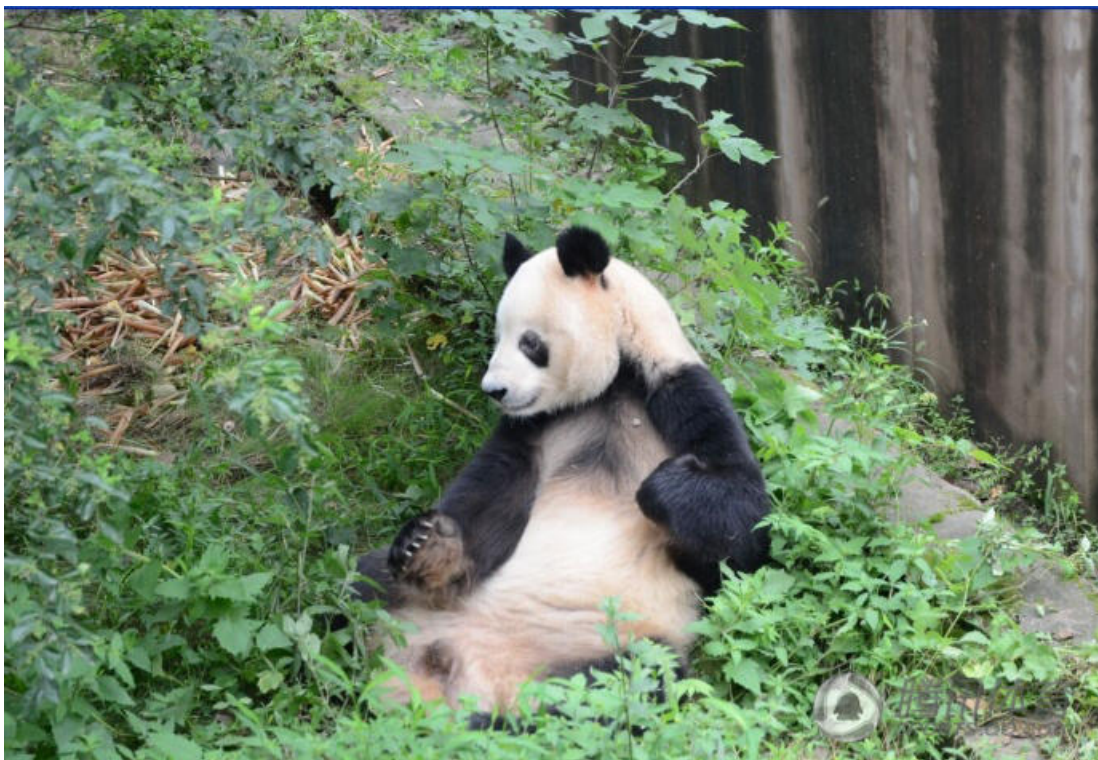
Concluding his briefing, the UN envoy recalled that the Middle East Quartet

Report and Security Council resolutions clearly outlined what is required to advance a sustainable and just peace in the region.

“The two-state solution remains the only way to achieve the legitimate national aspirations of both peoples,” he said, noting that Israel can take the necessary step to stop settlement expansion and construction in order to preserve this prospect, while the Palestinian leadership can demonstrate their commitment to tackling the challenges of violence and incitement on their side.

“This will create an environment that will facilitate bilateral final status negotiations that the international community can support,” he added.

[Olympic panda Cobi dies at age 25](#)



File photo of Cobi, a giant panda named after the mascot of the 1992 Barcelona Olympic Games. [Photo: qq.com]

Cobi, a giant panda named after the mascot of the 1992 Barcelona Olympic Games, died this month at the age of 25 at a zoo in Chengdu, capital of southwest China's Sichuan Province.

Cobi passed away on Feb. 2, despite two days' of emergency treatment after he suddenly fell into a coma on Jan. 31, the Chengdu Zoo announced Thursday.

The age of the male giant panda is equivalent to about 75 human years. He was healthy before his sudden illness though he had some symptoms of aging such

as loss of appetite.

Cobi was named by Juan Antonio Samaranch, former president of the International Olympic Committee. He was born on July 26, 1992 Beijing time, coinciding with the opening day of the 25th Olympic Games in Spain.

He fathered nine cubs, most of whom have further descendants.

The average lifespan of wild pandas is 15 years, but those in captivity usually live longer due to better nutrition and living conditions.

A survey found China with an estimated 1,864 wild pandas and 375 in captivity in 2013.

South Sudan: UN depllores lack of information on 20,000 people displaced in Upper Nile

16 February 2017 – The top United Nations peacekeeping official in South Sudan has described the lack of information about the situation of some 20,000 internally displaced people on the west bank of the Nile in the country's north, as a "real problem."

"We want to find out what has happened to those people, and provide them with assistance if they need it," said David Shearer, the Secretary-General's Special Representative and head of the UN Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS), who was making his first field trip to the town of Malakal after taking up his position as Mission chief four weeks ago.

According to a press statement issued today by the office of the Mission's spokesperson, UNMISS believes that the 20,000 people have fled towards Kodok from Wau Shilluk, a town eight miles north of the UN base in Malakal on the west bank of the River Nile.

Fighting between the Government Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) forces and opposition forces has expanded geographically across the west bank over the past week, and shows no signs of abating, forcing more people to flee their homes.

On Thursday, UN peacekeepers attempted to carry out a foot patrol to Wau Shilluk, but were prevented from doing so by SPLA soldiers located at Wau Shilluk, a situation Mr. Shearer described as "very frustrating."

Meanwhile, the statement noted that UNMISS has described government relocations by air of internally displaced people through Juba into Malakal

as unsustainable if they are not also supported with humanitarian assistance on arrival.

The Shilluk population of Malakal has abandoned the town and 33,000 people are currently taking refuge in the camp administered by UNMISS.