

Letter to America

Dear President Trump

I congratulate you on your installation as President. Your vision to create more jobs, revitalise US infrastructure, boost US take home pay and inject more life into US economic leadership is a bold one. We in the UK are also embarked on a similar task as we leave the EU. We too need to build more roads, railways, bridges, energy plants and water supply facilities. We too need to make more things for ourselves and import less to narrow our trade gap. Our two countries can indeed trade with each other more, as ours is a fair trade with a reasonable balance of imports and exports for each party.

Your proposals to produce more realistically priced energy will help restore your manufactures. Cheap energy is a vital part of a flourishing industry. Your plans to cut corporate and individual tax rates will energise entrepreneurs, spawn more investments, and allow people to keep and spend more of their earnings. That in turn creates demand which generates more jobs. The USA in recent years has pioneered much of the digital revolution and has done well in creating more companies and jobs in technology, but has suffered from Chinese, German and Mexican imports of industrial goods which could have been made more extensively in the USA. Tax reform, cheaper energy, a better regulatory climate and a President who supports manufacturing will make a difference.

Both the USA and the UK could benefit from an early free trade agreement between our own two countries. Fair trade which results in a sensible balance between the trading parties can enrich and enhance both sides. If our two countries draw one up and sign it, it will show the world that the USA is not afraid of fair trade, and it will put more weight behind the UK's intention to be an even more successful world trading nation open for business globally.

I was pleased to read you are planning a summit in due course with Mr Putin. The West has made mistakes in recent years with its military interventions in the Middle East. Some carefully planned joint working with Russia which also has a presence and diplomatic interests there might help achieve the important but more limited objective you have set in combatting ISIS. Past policy has suffered from conflicting and ambitious aims which have resulted in all too many civil and religious wars in the region.

The UK and the US can make common cause to strengthen NATO for our mutual defence. As one of the few countries that does hit the minimum 2% GDP target for defence spending, the UK is a natural ally in your campaign to get all NATO members to spend at least the minimum. If I tried only paying a portion of the insurance premium I owe to insure my home the insurance company would cancel the cover. Why are countries that want their allies support any different if there is a minimum? The EU does not allow its members to pay a lower subscription, and none of our EU friends short change the Commission.

I am pleased our Prime Minister will visit on Friday. There is plenty of scope to increase our joint working on intelligence, defence, trade, economic policy and general foreign policy. I wish you every success in tackling the problems in the USA that you have identified.

Yours etc

[At talks in Astana, UN envoy on Syria urges mechanism to oversee ceasefire](#)

23 January 2017 – International talks to extend the ceasefire in Syria started today in the Kazakh capital of Astana, with the United Nations Special Envoy said the ceasefire can be solidified if a mechanism to oversee and implement it is created.

“The chances of success will be greater if the parties here are able to agree on a mechanism to oversee and implement nationwide ceasefire. A mechanism to oversee and implement a nationwide ceasefire,” said Staffan de Mistura. “We didn’t have it in the past, that’s the reason why often we failed.”

He encouraged the guarantors of the ceasefire to create a mechanism to implement the consolidation and de-confliction ceasefire measures, and “to see what else can be done to build confidence.”

Sitting alongside representatives of the Government of Syria and the Syrian opposition, Mr. de Mistura reiterated that the only way to end the conflict and secure a political solution is through negotiation among the Syrians.

The closed-door meeting “convened by Iran, Russia and Turkey, with a representative from the United States attending as an observer” is meant to end tomorrow.

The Special Envoy said that he hoped by strengthening the ceasefire at the Astana meeting “we could see in Geneva genuine intra-Syrian negotiations,” referring to the 8 February negotiations to be held under the auspices of the UN.

“I would hope direct negotiations between empowered and inclusive delegations of the Government and the opposition to take place,” Mr. de Mistura said, which include issues of “governance, constitution, elections” in the context of Security Council resolution 2254 (2015).

He praised the parties for the ceasefire announced by President Vladimir Putin and President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, with support of Iran, in December for saving lives, and encouraged others to join.

All other armed opposition groups not affiliated to terror organisations designated as such by the Security Council, in addition to groups allied with the Government, should also listen to the call to abide by the ceasefire, Mr. de Mistura said.

Protection of civilians must be a crucial priority, he underscored, calling for the protection of civilian infrastructure, including hospitals, schools, water and electricity networks, and areas such as markets.

Syria: UNICEF calls for unimpeded aid access to children in besieged Deir ez-Zor

23 January 2017 – The United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) today called for unimpeded and unconditional access to children in the besieged city of Deir ez-Zor, noting that they have not received regular humanitarian aid for more than two years.

UNICEF calls on all parties to the conflict in Syria to immediately lift all sieges and allow unimpeded and unconditional access to children in Deir ez-Zor and in all the 15 areas under siege across the country, said Geert Cappelaere, UNICEF’s Regional Director, in a statement.

According to UNICEF, children in Deir ez-Zor have come under intense attack in the past week, and indiscriminate shelling has reportedly killed scores of civilians and forced others to remain in their homes. The escalation of violence threatens the lives of 93,000 civilians, including over 40,000 children who have been cut off from regular humanitarian aid for over two years.

In addition, food prices have skyrocketed to levels five to ten times higher than in the capital, Damascus, and chronic water shortages are forcing families to fetch untreated water from the Euphrates River, exposing children to the risk of waterborne diseases.

Nothing justifies the use of siege and the untold suffering that it unleashes on children. The children of Syria have already paid the highest price for a war that is not of their making, Mr. Cappelaere said.

Secretary-General Guterres approves updated UN whistleblower protection policy

23 January 2017 – Approving an updated United Nations whistleblower policy today, Secretary-General António Guterres is seeking to enhance protection for individuals who report possible misconduct or cooperate with duly authorized audits or investigations.

As part of his reform agenda, Mr. Guterres has made it a priority for the UN to have a whistleblower protection policy that meets the highest possible standards, and the updated plan aims to ensure the Organization functions in a more open, transparent and fair manner. UN Staff and management both agreed on the policy, contained in a bulletin that was just issued, which meets best practices.

According to UN Spokesperson Stéphane Dujarric, the major changes include the following elements:

1. The Ethics Office and Office of Internal Oversight Services will now be able to take preventive action where a risk of retaliation has been identified (instead of staff being required to identify a specific retaliatory act before they can request protection);
2. The policy affords protection from retaliation to whistleblowers who report wrongdoing committed not only by staff but also by contractors, non-UN peacekeepers and others;
3. Staff now have the right to seek review of Ethics Office determinations; and
4. Complainants will be notified of disciplinary measures taken against staff members found to have retaliated against them.

Mr. Dujarric noted that the Secretary General has also tasked an internal working group to examine whether the policy on protection against retaliation should be further expanded to also provide more protections for consultants and individual contractors. The UN chief has given the working group a deadline of 30 June 2017 to come back with their recommendations on this.

Until this matter is decided, the Secretary-General has asked that the Ethics Office continue its practice of providing assistance to consultants and individual contractors who seek protection against retaliation. To include this category of individuals within the policy would have resource implications, Mr. Dujarric added.

The Secretary-General is in favour of enhancing the independence of the Ethics Office by having it report directly to the General Assembly, instead of through the current arrangements, which provide for it to report to the Secretary-General, explained the UN spokesperson, noting that the Secretary-General has requested the Ethics Office to urgently examine this

issue and to report its advice. Such a change in reporting line would require the General Assembly's approval, he added.

83 suspects detained in Shanghai for antiques scam

Shanghai police have detained 83 people, who illegally earned 6 million yuan (873,000 U.S. dollars), in connection with the fake auctioning and unlicensed authentication of antiques.

A gang led by a man surnamed Xiao charged antique holders high commissions by faking auctions, with the clients later told their collections were unsold, a police officer with Shanghai Municipal Public Security Bureau said Sunday.

Collaborating with two other companies, the gang was also found to illegally authenticate antiques, issuing fake reports and charging high authentication fees of 15,000-30,000 yuan per piece.

Police started investigating the case in July 2016 when three fake auctions were reported in Putuo District.

Around 100 people had been caught as of mid-December, with 83 to face criminal charges, the police officer said.