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On the occasion of International Day of United Nations Peacekeepers

Near verbatim transcript

Spokesperson Martin Nesirky: Good afternoon everyone and welcome to this briefing. As you are all aware, today is the International Day for Peacekeepers. That is why I'm joined by Hervé Ladsous, the Under-Secretary-General for peacekeeping operations and Tony Banbury, the Assistant Secretary-general of the Department of Field Support.

I will be turning to them shortly. They have some introductory remarks and will be able to take questions for about twenty minutes or so. Just to let you know that earlier today, also marking the International Day of Peacekeepers, the Secretary-General honoured the 112 people who died while serving under the United Nations flag in 2011. And speaking at a wreath-laying ceremony this morning, he said the difference between an ordinary person and a hero is that a hero voluntarily braves danger to save others. The Secretary-General also paid tribute to the 120,000 UN peacekeepers serving around the world. He presided over the Dag Hammarskjöld medal ceremony just a short while ago.

I'll have a few other items at the end of the briefing by Mr. Ladsous and Mr. Banbury and we will be able take some questions at that point. So, thank you very much for joining me on the International Day of Peacekeepers and the floor is yours, thank you.



Opening remarks

USG Hervé Ladsous: Well, thank you very much indeed Mr. Nesirky. I think you have already put this day into perspective. It is a day of remembrance, a day of fidelity to the memory of those brave colleagues of ours who died over, in particular, the last year. As you said 112, and this year since the beginning of this year it has already been 31 colleagues who have died in various circumstances. One should remember that since peacekeeping began in the United Nations in 1948 it has been more than 2,900 blue helmets, blue berets, who paid the ultimate price.

So, sadness but also looking at the situation now and the situation ahead, I think it is very important to note that this year the theme of this day of peacekeepers has been put under the banner of "partnership."

Partnership is indeed what peacekeeping is about. It is something, a relationship, which involves our governing bodies, mainly the Security Council but also the General Assembly. The countries, who contribute either men and women or resources. And of course a partnership with the host country, in most instances, which is terribly important to achieving success in the implementation of our mandates.

It is also partnerships with international, other international and regional organizations. This is something now which has become very important, which is illustrated for instance in Darfur. The fact that the mission is a hybrid mission, one that we co-pilot between the UN and the African Union. It is the case under a different scenario in Somalia where AMISOM, which is as you know, is an African Union mission, is nevertheless very much supported by the United Nations, including materially. And there are other partnerships developing with for instance ECOWAS in Western Africa, with ASEAN, the Association of South East Asian Nations. I could mention IGAD. I could mention the OAS, the Organization of American States.

I think in many instances it is true that working with the regional organization involved brings us, not legitimacy because the Security Council has the legitimacy by the Charter, but it gives it an element of additional legitimacy which is enhanced by the intimate knowledge they have more often than not of the specific situation. This is why we really want to work together and this is certainly one goal that I try



to pursue to do everything to further these partnerships with all these organizations.

Now if you will allow me perhaps a few words about current issues. Of course the most dramatic is Syria, after the absolutely appalling tragedy in Houla. I think this calls attention to the even more imperative need, even more absolute need to bring an end to violence, and that the parties, that is to say both the government and opposition forces in Syria, stop these senseless killings.

I think what happened in Houla was really absolutely horrible. And let us not forget that there are also now some terrorist groups which are operating in Syria with agendas of their own - and that this is an element of added risk for our brave people, whom as you know now are practically at the 300 mark give or take maybe a few individuals.

They are deployed in eight cities all together and will shortly be deployed in 11 cities, and they do patrols. I saw that through my own eyes a week ago when I was in Syria. Under very difficult circumstances, let me say again, but at least where they go they do help mitigate the level of violence. I think their presence certainly dampens the violence. They request, they demand that heavy weapons be pulled back, which is complied with in most circumstances. Of course the violence has not stopped. This is why it is incumbent upon the Syrians now to see where they want to go, whether they should not stop bloodshed all together and work solidly towards the implementation of the 6-point plan.

Joint Special Envoy Kofi Annan, as you know, was in Syria yesterday and today. We are waiting for a more complete readout on his talks, but I believe he gave a press conference in Damascus an hour ago so we shall all be looking at that, but sorry it's a bit in real time.

But I think the goal is very clear. We have to proceed and to advance now solidly on all the plans that of Mr. Annan because simply there is no alternative, there is no other game. Nobody has come out with any other plan. This is the one that we support, the one that we work for.

Let me finish with perhaps one piece of information which I believe is good news, the fact that the Government of Sudan has decided to withdraw its troops from Abyei. The south, the Republic of South Sudan, had indeed withdrawn already a



couple of weeks ago. Now the fact that Sudan itself is withdrawing its military from the region will help pave the way towards the implementation of the June agreement of last year between Sudan and South Sudan, and to allow for beginning to set up the Abyei administration which is one of the keys to the process in that particular area. So I'll finish with that, but of course I will be ready to take up questions.

Spokesperson Martin Nesirky: Thank you, Mr. Banbury.

ASG Tony Banbury: Thank you Martin. Good afternoon ladies and gentlemen. I'd like to just briefly touch upon three points.

First, this is a day to commemorate the sacrifices made by UN peacekeepers in 2011. The 112 people who died in 2011 in the cause of peacekeeping, 31 this year, and the 2,900 during the history of UN peacekeeping. These are men and women who not only made the ultimate sacrifice but in most cases volunteered to go serve far away from their homes. To serve the world community. They are also friends of people in the United Nations, at Headquarters here. Many, many people here have lost friends and colleagues, so this is really a very somber day for many of us and there are people - police, military and civilians - dying on an all too regular basis in Darfur, in Congo, in Haiti, all in the cause of peace.

As Martin referred to the observation by the Secretary-General this morning, a hero is someone who volunteers to put himself in this kind of dangerous situation. And one of those that we especially remember today is Louis Maxwell, who is a real hero for having so bravely defended the lives of his colleagues in the United Nations in Afghanistan, in October 2009, and was killed saving more than 30 of his colleagues. We do not yet have justice for him and his family but that is something that the United Nations is still committed to.

Secondly, the issue of resources for peacekeeping. Peacekeeping costs, lately, between \$7billion and \$8billion a year. Which is a lot of money but a very small price for the international community to pay for all the good that UN Peacekeeping does around the world: stemming the fighting, reducing conflict, keeping parties on a political track, building capacity of national governments. This very significant amount of resources is money very well spent.



At the same time, the Secretary-General, cognizant of the difficult external financial environment, has given clear guidance to all parts of the United Nations, including Peacekeeping, to do better with less. We are working very hard to achieve that objective, by reducing this year the financial requirements for Peacekeeping by over \$400 million dollars. At the same time, improving the quality of the services we are providing to UN peacekeeping missions, the police, the military, the civilians.

An example of that was the rapid deployment in Libya. While it is a special political mission, it is the same concept where we used a different approach and used our global base in Brindisi to support that rapid deployment with a smaller mission footprint in Tripoli that allowed the mission to really focus on its mandate.

In Syria, we have had already far too many cases of our personnel being shot at, targeted. And we were able to deploy armoured vehicles to the mission in Syria at, I think, a record pace. The armoured vehicles were there before the observers. And the observers now are able to carry out their very challenging responsibilities, patrolling these obviously quite dangerous locations in armoured vehicles. These vehicles are getting shot at on an almost daily basis now. And if we had not been able to deploy those vehicles in that kind of time, they would not have been able to do their job.

So we will not hesitate to invest very significant resources such as airlifting vehicles into Damascus when required. But we will also look at every possibility to ensure that the resources we do expend are done in the most efficient and effective way possible.

We ask people, and peacekeepers volunteer, to go into some of the most dangerous and unsafe environments. We have a great obligation to them to give them the maximum safety and security that we can, so that they can carry out their extremely difficult work.

The last point is on the issue of sexual exploitation and abuse by peacekeepers. And I hate to put the two concepts in the same phrase, because nothing dishonors peacekeepers than these kinds of acts by individuals. With over 200,000 peacekeepers being rotated in and out of peacekeeping in a year, sadly we do have some of these absolutely unacceptable incidents. But that cannot detract from the extremely valiant, noble and brave work of the men and women under the blue helmet and blue beret around the world, in 17 missions, day-in and day-out.



This year and last year we had fewer instances than the year before, and the year before we had fewer instances than the year before that. So we are on a positive trend. We are increasing the transparency of the work of the United Nations in this area. There is an extremely strong commitment by the leadership of the Organization to the Secretary-General's zero tolerance policy. But it is important to keep in mind that whenever such an unacceptable, reprehensible incident occurs, that is a stain on that individual but not on the brave work of the men and women serving in peacekeeping around the world on a daily basis. Thank you.

Spokesperson Martin Nesirky: Talal, on behalf of the UN Correspondents' Association, I believe.

Question (Talal Al-Haj, Al-Arabiya/UN Correspondence Association): Thank you Mr. Ladsous for briefing us again, the Executive Committee and the members of ANCA welcome you and thank you.

My question is this – they are two points relating to each other. The first one is, what steps can DPKO take to ensure that these egregious and horrendous crimes do not repeat themselves in Syria? Especially that this crime happened in Houla, which is part of the municipality of Homs, which is a major centre and I'm sure you have some observers there. How can this happen under the noses of many others and the noses of the observers and the monitors? What can you do? Besides blaming the two parties? Is it a number game or what? About the investigations, are you carrying your own investigation and what credibility these investigations have since the crime scenes cannot be preserved? In some cases you come back to it, like what happened when two attacks took place near the observers two days later, when all the evidence have been tampered with. What credibility do these investigations have? And are you conducting a very wide investigation at the latest massacre? Thank you.

USG Hervé Ladsous: Thank you. It so happens that I was myself in Homs exactly a week ago. Now, you should imagine that it is a city of over one million people. The team of observers we have in Homs is numbers 28 military officers. It is clear that they cannot patrol the whole city and its neighbourhood, because Houla is about 25 kilometres north-east, north-west, rather from Homs. So what can we do? Actually, what they do is, of course, is regular patrols at various times in the day. And what they do in Homs, by the way they, do in Ibleb and Deir-ez-Zor and other cities



where they are based. But of course when they get reports from something bad happening they take steps to go there as fast as possible. As it happened in Houla, I think, the information came in it was already night and there was some shelling around, so it was actually only in the morning that they were able to be there.

What can we do? I think, it is precisely going wherever there is trouble and try to put a stop to it. Unfortunately, sometimes, yes, the killings have taken place. But they were able, at least, to prevent further violence and to establish the facts.

I'm not talking about a formal investigation at this stage, but stating the fact that part of the victims have been killed by artillery shells. Now that points, ever so clearly, to the responsibility of the government. Only the government has heavy weapons, has tanks, has howitzers. But also there are also victims from individual weapons, victims from knife wounds, and that of course is less clear but probably points the way to the Shabihis, you know, the local militias.

So I don't think, let me say again, we can launch into full scale investigation simply because these military observers do not have forensics experts. But they can report on what they see. And let me say again wherever they go, and often that great risk to themselves, Tony rightly pointed to the fact that they are being shot at regularly, again this morning, deliberately, and that is totally unacceptable. Totally unacceptable. But they go, nevertheless, to these places. And the very presence, the demand that the heavy weapons be pulled out, I think, all that serves the purpose in reducing the violence. But, I think, the full stop of the violence can only be at the initiative of the Syrian parties. They have to understand that this cannot go on.

Spokesperson Martin Nesirky: Just to mention that Navi Pillay, the High Commissioner for Human Rights, has pointed out that there is already a Commission of Inquiry and that that Commission of Inquiry has yet to have access to Syria itself but nonetheless has been providing updates on human rights abuses in general, the number of deaths in general and specific incidents and that is obviously an area that still needs to be explored.

I'm going to Ali next and then to Tim.

Question (Ali Barada, An-Nahar): Thank you. Just a clarification. Do you now, are you blaming the government and the Shabiha of committing this massacre in



Houla and are you excluding the third elements, whoever are the third elements, terrorists or whatever?

USG Hervé Ladsous: I am certainly saying that because people – civilians, children – were dramatically killed by heavy weapons, I am saying that for this undoubtedly the Government of Syria is responsible. For the militias – the Shabihas – that is a strong rumour, but I cannot say that we have absolute proof. The suspicion is definitely there. As to the third elements, I have seen no reason to believe that they were involved in this particular situation, but it may come to light. We may learn more.

Spokesperson Martin Nesirky: Ok, Tim and then Edie

Question (Tim Witcher, AFP): You said that the troops, the mission in Syria are being shot every day. Do you know who by? And do you have details of what happened today.

And also, just to clarify, on Sudan are you saying that they withdrew today. Do you have any information that the Sudanese troops withdrew from Abyei?

USG Hervé Ladsous: The information yesterday was that they were going to be pulling out possibly today. But I haven't had time to see a single report since this morning. I will call the Force Commander later in the day.

Your first question had to do with the attacks against the ... well you see when bullets are fired into an armoured car, there are no signatures on the bullets. Certainly it is a fact that there have been attacks presumably from both sides. But you cannot establish with absolute certainty which side is responsible. But I do believe that over the series of incidents, both sides have had some responsibility. And my message in Damascus last week was, both to the Government and to the opposition and also to some sheikhs – tribal chiefs – I met. I said "please, please spread the word, the safety of these unarmed observers depends on you. They are there to do a task but they are not there to get shot at."

Question (Edith Lederer, Associated Press): Two questions. The first, the number of victims from Houla, to your understanding is it still 108 or has the number gone up? And looking in terms of where we are with the six-point peace plan, many people would look at what happened in Houla and say that this isn't



working. I know you started out saying that it's the only game in town, there is no plan B. But what actually can the UN do and the observers do? As since you rightly said there are relatively few of them compared to the vast areas of Syria.

USG Hervé Ladsous: On the first point, yes for the time being the mission – UNSMIS - reported 108 people killed. I did see a report for a local opposition committee claiming 116, plus I think something like 300 people injured. But I think we do not know more at this stage.

Now the six-point plan. I think, you know in-so-much-as, let me say again, where our observers are there is a reduction in violence. There is normally no more use of heavy weapons. In that sense one can say that the very presence of our blue helmets saves human lives – people simply have not been killed, maimed or injured because the government forces were not able to use howitzers or mortars because our people were on the ground.

This being said we need to achieve progress on all points of the plan, and certainly, this is a point I made last week. Kofi Annan also made this point. The issue of access to detainees, the issue of allowing peaceful demonstrations, the issue of the access to journalists, which by the way seems to be increasing somewhat. We need to achieve progress on all these. And of course, we need to achieve progress on what is at the core of the six-point plan, which is why it has all been put together in the first place, that is, the peace process, the political process. But it is an ongoing task. I would say a thankless task. But let me say again, there is no other plan. No plan B.

Spokesperson Martin Nesirky: Pam then Matthew.

Question (Pam Falk, CBS): Thank you very much. There have been a lot of calls for an increased, more robust peacekeeping plan. Is there any number of peacekeepers, any plan to increase the numbers?

USG Hervé Ladsous: I'm not sure that numbers are the issue. Of course it may be that the Security Council may come up with ideas. Some delegations have mentioned that possibility, but it has not been discussed in substance.

Follow up question (Pam Falk, CBS): Would you recommend an increase? The Syrian Free Army obviously has called for more.



USG Hervé Ladsous: It would be a judgment, you know, between what actually more people could allow doing but also the increased security risks, you know. So I would be cautious at this stage.

Spokesperson Martin Nesirky: Matthew, then Joe.

Question (Matthew Lee, Inner City Press): So, Mr. Banbury, just to be sure you're asked a question. I wanted to ask you, there is a Senior Advisory Group on peacekeeping that, I believe, advises both DPKO and DFS on compensation, has on it an alleged war criminal - in Ban Ki-moon's own report - the Sri Lankan General Shavendra Silva. This has been given rise to a lot of controversy of whether UN peacekeeping is in fact silently accepting as an advisor an individual accused of killing more civilians than are at issue in Houla. So I wanted ... Mr. Ladsous already once didn't answer, I wanted to ask you as DFS. Do you think this helps the Organization's credibility? What can be done about it?

And Mr. Ladsous, if you can answer on Haiti. It wasn't something I think on the introduction of the alleged introduction of cholera into Haiti by peacekeepers. I understand it's a day of death of peacekeepers and I have a lot of respect for that. But there's been nothing said, recently, by the UN in terms of accountability for what the *New York Times* calls as the factual introduction of cholera into Haiti. What reforms have been done and what recompense will be given to the victims? Thank you.

Spokesperson Martin Nesirky: Just let me interject at this point. I think I've addressed both questions at some length in the past, particularly the first question you asked to Mr. Banbury.

Follow up (Matthew Lee, Inner City Press): They are peacekeeping, I'd like to ask them the question.

And maybe Mr. Ladsous has something to add here.

USG Hervé Ladsous: Well, Mister, I would say that I will start answering your questions when you stop insulting me and spreading malicious and insulting insinuations.



Follow up (Matthew Lee, Inner City Press): What? I'm sorry, I'm asking you a question. You're having a press conference and I'm asking you two questions about DPKO.

Spokesperson Martin Nesirky: Matthew, you heard the answer.

Follow-up (Matthew Lee, Inner City Press): I know. That's a horrendous answer ...

Question (Joe Lauria, Wall Street Journal): Back to Syria. You said, Mr. Ladsous, you said that the observers make the demand that heavy weaponry be withdrawn and it's mostly complied with in most circumstances. Is that the case when the observers leave that they come back in to where they were? Because it's a serious, serious problem. And secondly, about the incidents, the shootings. Have any of the shootings taken place where the observers were outside the APC's, have there been any injuries? What would your recommendation to the Council be if an observer, I hope it won't happen obviously, gets himself killed or more are killed, would you recommend any reform?

USG Hervé Ladsous: On the first issue, yes, there is always the possibility that heavy weapons might be redeployed after our people have departed. You would know that in Syria most barracks were building in 1950s and '60s at a time when the cities were much smaller than they are now. So now in 2012, more often than not, most barracks which used to be on the outskirts are now smack in the middle of the city. And that, of course, is a fact and reality, and our people have to deal with it. So they have to be very mobile, you know, and return, you know, regularly to places where they have actually achieved something. But it is a very difficult task.

Shootings, as far as I'm aware, occurred when the people were inside the armoured cars. And I have to thank very much Tony and his people because indeed they did a remarkable job, you know, deploying all the protection equipment and especially the cars with the help of countries of various organizations. That was effective.

Your final comment or question is, I think, hypothetical. Of course we will always have contingency plans but we are not at this stage beyond following very, very closely the events on the ground and ready to consider matters at any stage should anything untoward happen.



Question: [inaudible]

USG Hervé Ladsous: I think we are in a context where it is also a psychological warfare to a large extent, you know, trying to frighten, that's also the reality.

ASG Tony Banbury: If could just clarify. It is not an APC. They are not in armoured personal carriers. They are in armoured Land Cruisers, armoured passenger vehicles, armoured 4x4 vehicles. They do not have armoured personal carriers.

Spokesperson Martin Nesirky: I am coming ... Next question ... Matthew, Matthew. Listen I think it is very clear to everybody here; there is a certain decorum to press conferences. If a question is put, an answer is given, and then you keep quiet. You cannot speak over other people, Matthew ... Kristen. Thank you very much, and then the last question will be to Evelyn. Thank you very much.

Question (Kristen Salome, Al Jazzier): You said that there is strong evidence to suggest that the Sabina were behind the massacre in Hula. Most Syrian experts would say that a Sabina doesn't do anything without the consent of the government. So are you saying that the government should then be held accountable for those massacres? Do you have an opinion on that?

And one other question. There is a lot of frustration on the ground, that the monitors not being able to do more to protect the civilians on the ground in a situation like this. Do you think that there is a misunderstanding about the mission of the peacekeepers, the mandate and what they are actually allowed and able to do?

USG Hervé Ladsous: Well I said that there were strong suspicions that the Shabiha were involved in this tragedy in Houla. And indeed, there have been similarly very strong rumours that in other places, in other instances of extreme violence, they were involved. But you see, when you look at the situation from the ground, you see a number of military, security forces who are in uniform. But you see also a substantial number of people who are dressed in civilian clothes yet are heavily armed with machine guns and all that. So, the question, I didn't go to those



people to ask them what they were or whether they were Shabiha or anything. The fact is that some elements are definitely present on the scenes of violence.

As to the mandate, I think there is no misunderstanding. Things are very clear and we have been unceasingly explaining what it is all about. I did my part to the government, to the opposition whom I met several times when I was in Syria a week ago. I think the messages are very clear. And my message to them is: the cessation of violence is your responsibility. We are helping, but at the end of the day it has to be your decision to protect your civilians, your population, your children from suffering on such an immense and terrible scale. That is what it is about.

Spokesperson Martin Nesirky: Last question, Evelyn.

Question (Evelyn Leopold, The Huffington Post): [inaudible] How much is the government responsible for the militia? Is it like Darfur with the Janjaweed? ... [inaudible]

USG Hervé Ladsous: Well on the first point, I believe no one can explain the details of the internal workings of the State of Syria. But there are, like we say in French, there are strong *présomptions*. It is not presumptions, I think, it is *faux amis* between French and English. How do you say it, something stronger than allegations, suspicions, yes suspicions would be a more correct word.

Now about the transparency, I think Tony very clearly stated it. We are in the process of making this as transparent as possible. I think we have made progress over the recent months. But let me say, again, after Tony, that the commitment to zero tolerance and I would say one 100 per cent or perhaps 120 per cent attention. We are not going to let these acts go without reaction, without procedures and action at the end of the day, because it is simply unacceptable that the failings of a few should contaminate the splendid work of the immense majority.

Spokesperson Martin Nesirky: Thank you very much.

Question (Melissa Kent, CBC/Radio-Canada): [inaudible]

USG Hervé Ladsous: En français allons-y...



Question (Melissa Kent, CBC/Radio-Canada): Je voulais juste vous demander tout ce que vous venez de dire si vous pouviez le dire en Français. Sur la sécurité des *peacekeepers* sur le terrain, vous avez beaucoup parlé de ça. C'est quoi la réalité sur le terrain ?

USG Hervé Ladsous: La réalité sur le terrain c'est que nos Casques bleus se font agresser, se font attaquer, sont l'objet de tirs. Par exemple hier soir, encore ce matin, de tirs à l'arme individuelle. Heureusement, car nous ne transigeons pas sur la sécurité de nos personnels, ils sont tous dans des véhicules blindés. Mais vous comprendrez bien que ce n'est évidemment pas acceptable. Donc c'est un message que j'ai passé avec d'autres de la manière la plus affirmée la semaine dernière en Syrie, à la fois au gouvernement et à l'opposition.

Question (Melissa Kent, CBC/Radio-Canada): Sur le massacre à Houla qu'est-ce que vous avez entendu ? Il y a des rapport que les Shabiha étaient impliqués. Est-ce que vous pouvez nous dire ce que vous entendez de vos observateurs sur le terrain, de leurs enquêtes ?

USG Hervé Ladsous: Écoutez, il ne s'agit pas d'enquêtes au sens formel. Nous n'avons pas dans la mission de spécialistes de médecine légale, des choses comme ça. Mais ce qui est certain c'est qu'il y a un certain nombre de faits qui ont pu être établis. Et notamment le fait qu'un certain nombre des 108 morts, y compris je le rappelle 40 enfants en bas âge, un certain nombre de ces victimes l'ont été de fragments, d'obus et d'éléments d'artillerie lourde. Or que je sache, seul le gouvernement syrien a l'usage de blindés, de canons, de mortiers. Voilà, c'est cela que nous savons.

Spokesperson Martin Nesirky: Thank you very much.