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Under-Secretary-General for Peacekeeping Operations
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Near verbatim transcript

Opening Remarks:

Good morning to you all. I wanted to give you some update on where we stand on the deployment of military observers in Syria.

In fact, we have had unarmed military observers on the ground since the 15th of April. As you know, we sent an advanced team which arrived within 30 hours of being authorised by the Security Council. And the Security Council resolution, as you know, resolution 2043 provides for the establishment of UNSMIS for an initial period of 30 days [sic]; and that it is supposed to be comprised of up to 300 unarmed military observers and an appropriate civilian component.

UNSMIS has two mandated tasks, if you remember the resolution. First to monitor the cessation of armed of armed violence in all its forms by the parties; and second, to monitor and support the implementation of the six-point proposal of the Joint Special Envoy.

Major General Mood arrived in Damascus Sunday last to lead the mission. As you know, he is a very experienced, a very senior officer, a very skillful military leader with considerable experience in peacekeeping, including in the region. And as soon as he arrived, he has already publicly demonstrated his aim, which is to reach out to all the Syrians and to show the United Nations as an impartial actor which aims to help the cessation of all forms of violence.

Now, as you would realize, this is certainly no easy task. The level of violence in Syria has been appalling. The number of casualties, the number of civilians who have lost their lives is totally unacceptable. And of course the Security Council and the Secretary-General have condemned this violence in the strongest possible terms.



It is clearly for the parties to demonstrate the desire to cease all forms of armed violence. More bombs, more weapons, more violence could only increase the tension and add to an already very considerable toll of human lives.

So I and we all call on all parties in Syria to ensure that the cessation of violence is indeed observed.

UNSMIS will monitor, it will support this effort. And the reports which we are already receiving from the observers on the ground, these objective reports clearly show that all parties need to take further steps to ensure a full, a sustained cessation of violence in all its forms.

Now let me be very clear, the mission is still in its early days and we are making every effort to get the observers on the ground and operational as quickly as possible. True, the fact is that their numbers are still small at the moment, but already they have had a visible impact, an effective impact on the ground. They can make an important difference on the ground. As the Joint Special Envoy told the Security Council at the briefing last week, observers, of course, see what is going on, but also their presence has the potential to change the political dynamic. They help build calm, and calm helps the political process that Mr Annan is leading and that process in turn, we hope, will bring lasting peace to a democratic Syria.

The observers are coming from around the world to support the implementation of the six-point plan agreed to by the Syrian parties. They are, again, unarmed, they are impartial. They rely for their security and safety upon the Syrian parties. And I call again all parties to respect their impartiality and to facilitate the accomplishment of their mandate and to ensure their safety.

The mission has small teams of observers already staying in five locations: in the capital city Damascus, and also Homs, Hama, Dara'a and Idlib. In each of these places, they reach out to all the parties and they conduct regularly mobile patrols. To date we have 24 observers on the ground and I expect this number to increase rapidly in the next few weeks so that UNSMIS will build up to full operational strength by the end of May.* For that of course we rely on troop contributing countries to supply us with the human personnel who are being deployed on the ground. And of course we need observers to be given visas by the Syrian authorities.

The mandate of the mission is for an initial period of 90 days and it will be of course the subject of assessment and review during that period. It is not an open-ended



exercise. The parties should understand the importance of ensuring that the work of the mission is effective and facilitated.

Finally let me stress the importance of the role of countries and voices with influence, including in the region. We need very much their help to explain the role of the observer mission and to impress upon all the parties concerned the need to cooperate with the observers and to pursue political issues in a peaceful manner. This can help create a safe and permissive environment for the observers among all segments of Syrian society.

There is an urgent need for the cessation of armed violence by all the sides. The welfare of the people of Syria is at the centre of everything we do. The people of Syria have suffered too much and this critical opportunity must not be lost by all sides in order to end the armed violence and move toward a political solution. It is time now to silence the guns and cease all abuses and that is the work we are engaged in.

Spokesperson Eduardo del Buey: Thank you, Monsieur Ladsous. Because of the brevity of time that we have and because of the importance of the issue, we would ask you to limit your questions to Syria.

Question (Talal Al-Haj, Al Arabiya): On Article 8 of (Resolution) 2043, you were asked to initiate with Syria, rapidly, the appropriate air transportation assets for UNSMIS. How far are we with this initiation? I understand Mood only arrived on Sunday but what does "rapidly" mean in your understanding? And secondly, we know you have difficulties in getting troop contributing countries to give you troops but how complicated your life is with the Syrians set on that they don't accept soldiers, sorry, observers, from countries that are Friends of Syria. Are they applying this strictly?

USG Ladsous: On the first question, yes, we are discussing with the Syrian Government the Status of Mission Agreement and the talks are going on and I would expect that we can come to an agreement fairly rapidly. I mean there are meetings everyday in Damascus and we are here in touch with the Syrian Permanent Mission. You know, lawyers have to be satisfied of course, but we do make progress, I can tell you.

On the issue of visas, yes it is true that there have been refusals already of visas for several of the people we were normally thinking of appointing as Military Observers. Well, I think our position is that we take the offers we get from the countries and we



apply no restriction from our side because I think it is really for us to appoint these people and if there is no sufficient cooperation on that from the Syrian authorities, of course we report to the Security Council. I already did last week and I stand ready to continue this of course.

Question (Edith Lederer, Associated Press): You said that the objective reports from the observers show that all parties need to take further steps. Have the observers seen more violations from one side or the other side? And I was wondering if you could also comment on the deployment of the civilians who are going to be part of the mission and exactly what they are going to be doing and when they are going to start working?

USG Ladsous: I think that the violations that are observed come from both sides. I would not establish a ratio, I think now is perhaps not the time since, after all, we still have limited number of observers in a limited number of localities. The fact is, I think politically the important fact is, that violations do come from both sides. Now, regarding your second question, yes we are working towards the establishment of the civilian component of UNSMIS. We are redeploying people from both headquarters and other missions in other parts of the world. And the objective is to have the civilian component, it is already operational, but of course it needs to expand in most of its components and we are working very hard on that.

Question (Journalist not identified): How many and what are they going to be doing?

USG Ladsous: I will take this question. They will be supporting the Head of UNSMIS and also supporting the efforts of the Joint Special Envoy, Kofi Annan and his team. By reporting on what they can see of the situation on the ground; politically, establishing contacts with the various components of the political landscape in Syria; talking to the greatest possible number of people. And of course there will be some people who will work on the human rights aspect, on the issue of gender-based violence and all these issues which are a part of the drama that is happening in Syria.

Spokesperson Eduardo del Buey: Ahmed.

Question (Journalist not identified): Thank you, how many civilians are going to be in this mission and have you really seen a withdrawal of the heavy weapons, the heavy weapons from the populations?



USG Ladsous: Right now we are deploying 35 people in the civilian component but there will be more of course as we go, and of course as the needs become apparent to General Mood and his colleagues who are already there. Regarding the heavy weapons, yes, our military observers do see a number of APCs for instance. They see a number of howitzers and other military equipment in most places where they are. It is being claimed that the APCs have been disarmed but that is not verified in all cases.

Spokesperson Eduardo del Buey: Barbara.

Question (Barbara Plett, BBC): [inaudible] details related to an earlier question. Have you got all the commitments you need for the 300 or are you still trying to get more? And secondly, can you give us some idea of how many visas have been rejected and from which countries?

USG Ladsous: The commitments we have are coming in now, very solidly, but we are not yet at the 300 mark. I think we have something like 150 solid commitments which are being already being processed or actually being deployed for the most, the earlier ones. But we need more, more from Member States, that is clear.

Now regarding the refusals, I'm aware of three refusals so far. I don't think it is for me to give the nationalities but we keep the situation under permanent review of course.

Question (Barbara Plett, BBC): Were there reasons given?

USG Ladsous: No, no. There were verbal comments about the Group of Friends of Syria but not specific reasons for those specific refusals.

Spokesperson Eduardo del Buey: Mr. Abbadi then Joe.

Journalist (Abdelkader Abbadi, Dossiers du Tadla; Columbia Paper): Thank you Eduardo. Thank you Under-Secretary-General Ladsous for this briefing. As you indicated and as the Secretary-General said, it often [inaudible] to stop violence, and the monitors as you indicated are limited, it's only 30. It is perhaps easier, relatively speaking, to monitor the movement of troops, and launching of rockets, and movement of tanks and helicopters from the government side, and more difficult to monitor acts of terrorist, acts of extremism and suicide bombers. What equipment does the observer



dispose of to monitor this latest, latter category? Do they for example, have at their disposal satellite facilities? Thank you.

USG Ladsous: What they have basically is their mobility. That is the capability for them to move when they hear, either physically or hear speak of incidents, of explosions, and this of course we have provided them with all the equipment that is needed in terms of armoured cars, of personal protection and communication equipment. So that is what it's about. I can give you for instance one figure: yesterday that there were six military observers patrolling in the Damascus area, there were two in Dara'a, there were two in Hama and so on and so on. And they do patrolling all day and sometimes at night time also, observing what it is that is happening.

Spokesperson Eduardo del Buey: Joe?

Question (journalist not identified): At what point did you begin seeking commitments from potential troop contributing countries, the moment the resolution passed or did you...?

USG Ladsous: The moment the resolution passed we were already ready.

Question (journalist not identified): Why not before? Why not before?

USG Ladsous: Because we had actually made some contacts already and told a number of countries that we would come to them if the resolution was indeed passed. We anticipated.

Question (journalist not identified): You did?

USG Ladsous: Yes.

Question (journalist not identified): But still you need 150, you have only 150 commitments [inaudible]

USG Ladsous: That is correct. I convened the troop contributing countries last Friday for a second force mobilization conference. More expressions of interest or actual commitments came on that very day. We got more yesterday. It is an ongoing effort.



Question (Journalist not identified): Is training necessary? Because there is a specific [overlap, inaudible].

USG Ladsous: There is of course training. That is in fact one element that has an impact on the speed of the deployment because we need to give them appropriate, yes, you can say training, information about the situation, the specificities.

Question (Journalist not identified): How long does the training last?

USG Ladsous: Sorry?

Question (Journalist not identified): How long does the training last?

USG Ladsous: Several days.

Question (Journalist not identified): Sir, do these countries look for certain qualities, as far as observers' security are concerned. Do they ask you to provide security and how confident are you, when the situation on the ground is very fragile, and how do you make sure that these observers are safe?

USG Ladsous: It is obviously a risky situation. I think that no one can hide from that fact. So we do provide them with the best security equipment that we can and of course we provide them with guidance. But I have to say that there have been several incidents of various concern, in particular with some opposition members. But we try and take things as they come. It is a matter of requiring considerable judgment on their part to handle with specific situations.

Question (Journalist not identified): Could you tell, sir, how many Security Council countries have contributed troops? And maybe afterward you could give us a list of the countries that have contributed troops? Then on the same subject, the observers, are they coming from existing UN missions, are they military people or are they coming from this UN police reserve that you draw on for police missions?

USG Ladsous: I can tell you that for the time being the people who are already deployed come from 20 countries, both military observers and civilian staff. For the rest, it is being processed but we will give consolidated figures at a later stage. Your second point was about?



Question (Journalist not identified): Where they are coming from?

USG Ladsous: We are of course looking at fresh personnel, so to speak, meaning new military observers being provided by Member States. But of course we do redeploy people, military observers from existing missions, both in the region – we redeploy some people from UNDOF, from UNIFIL - but also from other parts of the world. And that is equally true for the civilian component.

Spokesperson Eduardo del Buey: Two more questions on Syria. You and then Matthew.

Question (Journalist not identified): I was just wondering if you could provide an update on efforts to reach an agreement on air assets... [inaudible]

USG Ladsous: This is still being considered and discussed. The Syrians have not accepted our request that we might send air assets, meaning mainly helicopters, UN machines to Syria. So I can only say that the matter is still under review. But it is a very important element of course.

Question (Matthew Lee, Inner City Press): You should set up a time, I think, to take questions on Sudan and Haiti. But here is on Syria, on air assets. I know you proposed in the C34 committee the use by the UN of surveillance drones. Now I wanted to know if that is something that you would consider in this instance and if not, why not? given the need to monitor a ceasefire. Also, there is a talk about freedom of movement. Can you say what the restrictions have been to date and also how they would compare for example with restrictions that DPKO accepts in MINURSO?

USG Ladsous: I don't think the situation compares. We do have, we did have some initial, few by the way, a few restrictions on freedom of movement for people which were presented to us as motivated by security considerations. But I would say that, over the last week or so, the freedom has been ensured and they can go to the places they want to visit.

As far as drones, I think the issue is not here and now. We are conducting a study on the issue because there are numbers of aspects, technical, financial and others. And of course one very strong parameter of any deployment of unmanned aerial vehicles would be to secure the consent of the government concerned. So we are not there yet.



Spokesperson Eduardo del Buey: Last question, Evelyn.

Question (Evelyn Leopold, Huffington Post): [inaudible]

USG Ladsous: On your first question, yes I am confident because the pledges are coming in, you know, by the day. So I think we will do it. Regarding the movement of people ... yes I think they do move around a lot. Their mobility is actually the one thing you know that can ensure that they do their job, to observe and to report.

Question (journalist not identified): [inaudible]

USG Ladsous: They are more often than not followed by Syrian army or police elements, that is true. But it does not prevent them at all from engaging with the local citizens, some of whom may be opposition, and are actually. But I think this is the process.

And let me say again, it is very important that, I think, to acknowledge that the very presence of military observers in a particular locality usually has the effect of making it so that there is no use of heavy weapons. There are no bombardments. Usually they stop. That was noted from the very first day when they deployed in Homs. Heavy weapons simply became silent. It doesn't mean that there is no fighting, or small arms. There are skirmishes, there are scuffles. There are by the way also what appear to be terrorist attacks in various places, although the observers have not been witnesses to any of those terrorist attacks so far. But I think their presence has a dampening effect, clearly, on the general atmosphere.

Spokesperson Eduardo del Buey: Thank you very much, thank you Mr Ladsous

Question (Barbara Plett, BBC): [inaudible]

USG Ladsous: There was a bombing apparently. But we do not know more at this stage.

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