

Transcript of the press encounter with Head of UNSMIS Major General Robert Mood

Damascus, 18 May 2012

Opening remarks

Let me start by offering a few initial remarks on where we are now with the Mission and also related to the situation we are seeing on the ground.

The Mission itself is on its way to achieving a successful surged deployment, and this is thanks to an advance level of cooperation from the Syrian Government, as well as unrelenting support from the United Nations Headquarters and troop contributing countries. I am going to authorize the move from the first phase of the Mission -- involving pre-deployment arrangements, involving planning -- to the phase of operating a Mission with partial deployment. I anticipate that we will achieve the final phase of full operational capacity in record time.

We were very pleased to see and witness an immediate calming effect brought about by our arrival. This has been challenged by asymmetric incidents, sometimes intense, but in some locations. The violence is continuing during the time needed to achieve full deployment and operational capacity of the United Nations Supervision Mission in Syria.

But no volume, no volume of observers can achieve a progressive drop and a permanent end to the violence if the commitment to give dialogue a chance is not genuine by from all internal and external actors.

I am more convinced than ever that no amount of violence can resolve this crisis durably. The Mission plans to help to bring on talks between parties on the ground on urgently needed stability. We cannot be expected to do this before the ongoing violence is reduced to be stopped. We are very serious, very serious and very committed to the Syrian people, innocent women children and, helping to regain the hope, to return back to normality. But we must be given a real chance to do that from the fighting parties and their supporters.

I am pleased [to have] specific figures to share with you -- that we are now very close to 260 military observers on the ground, we are 60 approximately Member States. This is not a powerful tool in military terms because we are unarmed but it is a very powerful tool in the terms that it is the international community coming together on the ground because the Syrian people deserve a reduction of violence, deserve stability and deserve to have their aspirations served by a political process not by more violence. Thank you.

Question: I would like to ask you that Mr. Ban Ki-moon announced that Al Qaeda is involved in some explosion in Syria. From your work on the ground, what is your comment on that?

General Mood: We are seeing some very worrying incidents -- as you know I was on the site in Damascus on the 10th, which was a very graphic, very graphic example of the kind

of violence that does no good whatsoever. It only harms people on their way to work and innocent youngsters on their way to school. This is the kind of violence that is obviously impossible at this stage to decide where it came from, by whom. But there is a worrying incident, a worrying trend related to this incident. I cannot confirm that we have groups in the country related to those you have mentioned. But I am concerned about an incident where explosive improvised devices are targeting innocent civilians, innocent people, because it is not going to help the situation. I have seen the reports that you refer to, if they are correct it is a worrying development.

Question: Some of the Syrian people say that with the UN observers, the violence has increased. What do you think?

General Mood: I think it is necessary to be very clear on the fact that when the Mission arrived, and for that matter on the 12th at 6 o'clock in the morning when the cease-fire started, the violence was significantly reduced. We are seeing in the areas where we are deployed that we have both a calming effect on the ground and we are seeing that we have a good dialogue and the dialogue is expanding both with the authorities and the opposition elements. I think it is too early to say that it is a trend that we can be conclusive about. But I share the worries of everyone who is concerned that we are seeing more violence in the last days than we did in the previous days. When that is said, we now have 260 observers on the ground. I have more reports coming in so the factual reporting from the ground is increasing.

Question: I want to ask about, there have been many statements from many countries that credit and even (inaudible) your Mission. What do you say about that? I want to ask about Khan Cheikhoun: we want an explanation from you about what happened there.

General Mood: The skepticism about the Mission is not surprising at all. It is very logical. To have 300 observers in a situation like the one we have in Syria, I think to take the position of being skeptic or criticizing or predicting that this is going to be difficult, is a fairly easy position to take. The position necessary to take is the other one. This represents the international community. This is as of now the only game in town. If it is anything that the Syrian people do not deserve, it is another alternative that would lead to more violence. So I have yet to be convinced and I am far from being convinced by anybody that they have a good alternative. So my message to everyone is still that the Syrian people deserve to move ahead along the political track and they need a reduction in violence and they deserve a reduction in violence. This takes a lot of moral courage because many families have been affected by killings, all over the spectrum, and the moral courage then to decide that, I myself, my organization, my group, we will step back from using violence, we will give peace a chance, and we will help the Syrians to move along the political track -- that is a difficult decision to make. I will share with you one of the individuals I admire most in this context. I met him a few years back in the cold Arctic, in the northern part of Norway: Nelson Mandela. After having spent 16 years behind bars, and after having been targeted, having been a human being in conditions where the desired for revenge, the use of violence, the desire to arouse his supporters to start a big fight because he had been treated like that for many years, would be the logical thing to do for almost any human being. But the moral courage that he demonstrated when he decided that I will close that period of my life and I will help my country to move forward based on non-violence, and I will even reach out, I will even reach out to my most ferocious enemies, create a dialogue, because this is what my

people deserve. This is the kind of moral courage that needs to be demonstrated from many stakeholders to bring the Syrian crisis in a positive direction as well.

In Khan Cheikhoun, we had an incident with four UN vehicles that came into the village. There was an explosion in front of or close to the first vehicle. Two of the vehicles were not able to drive. Six observers spent the night in the village and the day after, they found good coordination and cooperation both from local authorities and from the opposition inside the village. We sent a patrol and picked up both the two vehicles and the observers. This is also a situation in which it is very easy to speculate. The fact we know is that I spoke with my observers by telephone in the evening, during the night, and in the morning. They told us: we feel safe, we want to stay overnight, we want to be picked up in the morning because as light was falling and there were still explosions and fighting in the area, they felt it more unsafe to try to organize a departure from the village. This is what we know. We also know that we have bullet holes in one of the vehicles, and we know that the explosion damaged the first vehicle. That kind of violence is a kind of violence that we need no more because that is not only challenging, targeting the UNMOs on the ground, it is targeting the efforts of the international community. So I would ask anyone that, out of whatever motives, would conduct something like that, to rethink, because we, the international community, we are there on the ground to facilitate a reduction in violence and terrible incidents for the Syrian people. We are only 300 observers, so we are not trying to solve all the problems of Syria. The other stakeholders need to be genuine in their commitment and demonstrate that by action.

Question: With the Arab observers, the Syrian people had some bad experience, what is your message to the Syrian people now? Do you promise them that finally it will be better than what happened with the Arab observers?

General Mood: I can be very direct. My message to the Syrian is that we, the international community, are there on the ground with the Syrian people. We will do our best; we will do more than our best, to try to create a situation that's more clear on the ground, where there is a reduction of violence and the movement along the political track. Any stakeholder inside Syria or outside Syria needs to decide to do this with us. And for the Syrian people, I promise them we are in the game, we are dedicated firmly to move along this track and create an open dialogue. The aspirations of the Syrian people for a reduction in violence and the political track are something we share – that's our role. But we need all stakeholders, inside and outside Syria, to decide with the moral courage of people like Nelson Mandela for example, to refrain from violence. If everyone can unite on that track, on that moral courage, we will see possible developments in the days and weeks ahead.

Question: And do you promise them that your final report will be considered outside Syria? Your final report? The Arabs' final report was not considered as (inaudible).

General Mood: At this stage, the Mission is not thinking about the final report; we are thinking about helping the Syrian people. At the stage when we will be talking about the final report, it is not going to be a closed one. Thank you.