Transcript of press conference by Joint Special Envoy for Syria, Kofi Annan, and Major-General Robert Mood, head of UNSMIS - Geneva

22 June 2012 – Good afternoon Ladies and Gentlemen,

It has been a long time that I haven’t been back in this room but it is good to meet you here this afternoon. And I am happy to be able to join you this afternoon with General Mood whom you all know. I am pleased that he could join us. He is on his way back from New York to Syria.

As you would all remember, about a week ago, General Mood had to take a difficult decision when he decided temporarily to suspend the activities of the UN Mission in Syria due to the escalation of violence. And I must say I supported that decision fully.

UN observers, as we all know, are in Syria to help the Syrian people at this critical hour. In the short time that they have been there, they have engaged not just with the parties, but with communities at all levels of society in the cities and towns where they have been deployed. They are keen to resume their work. Their commitment to the Syrian people has not faltered. But the circumstances must allow them to do their work. And we all know that they are unarmed men and women who are doing courageous work.

This can only happen when the protagonists on the ground take the strategic decision to stop the violence and to cooperate fully with the observers.

I urge all parties to heed the call for a cessation of violence in all its forms, first and foremost for the sake of the Syrian people, the children and women in particular. I think they have suffered for far too long and continue to suffer.

But if our efforts are to succeed, we shall need the united and sustained support of the international community. This is essential.

And that is why over the last few days, I have been in intensive consultations with a number of ministers and officials in capitals around the world about the possibility of convening a meeting of ministers to discuss what further actions could be taken to implement the Security Council resolutions.

It is time for countries of influence to raise the level of pressure on the parties on the ground, and to persuade them that it is in their interest to stop the killing and start talking.

When I briefed the Security Council, last time, actually earlier this month, I said: as we move forward, we should keep our goals firmly in view: to stop the killing, help the suffering population, secure a political transition, and ensure that the crisis does not spread to the neighbours.

The longer we wait, the darker Syria’s future becomes. This process cannot be open-ended. It is urgent that our consultations yield real results soon. Otherwise, I fear we are reaching the day when it will be too late to stop the crisis from spiraling out of control.

The time to act is now.

Thank you ladies and gentlemen. We will take your questions.

Q: I have a question on the observers and the situation right now. What role do you see for them, what can they actually be doing? Do you imagine expanding or diminishing the group? What chances do you see of actually prolonging their mission after the 20th?

JSE: I think it is a relevant question but a question that the Security Council will have to answer and they are reviewing it at the moment. And the General was in New York to brief the Council and to consult. For the moment, they have a mandate and they will be operating on the basis of the mandate the Council has given them. And of course, as I indicated, the General had to suspend [the activities] for very real reasons. And as he has indicated—may be I should pass it on to him actually, let the General deal with what the observers are doing and can do but on the question of whether it is expanded, whether is it increased, it is an issue that the Council is seized with and I am sure we will get an answer before the expiration of the current mandate which is next month. Thank you.

Mood: The observers in Syria, at the moment, they are mainly in their team sites and at headquarters. That does not mean that we are doing nothing. It means that, from their team sites, they have view of surrounding areas, the cities. We are also continuing the engagement by telephone with the different parties and we also have some patrols going to local hospitals and assessing the situation. So the normal
administrative activities are ongoing but patrols and exploring new areas and going into new projects is not on the agenda while the activities are suspended. Obviously given the fact that the mandate is for 90 days and that it doesn’t expire until the 20th of July, my focus is to be able to continue to implement the mandated tasks as soon as the situation allows. And a less risky level of violence makes that possible. I am also very well aware that the decision related to the future of UNSMIS and possible options is not a discussion for me, it is a discussion for the Council. However, what I would share with you [is what] I also shared with the media in New York and that is, since we had to suspend activities based on an assessment of the risk level and the fact that it was extremely difficult to execute mandated tasks, I think that is a statement related to what kind of assessment are urgent related to a continuation of the current circumstances. Whether more observers or arming observers would be relevant related to this situation on the ground, I am far from convinced that would help the situation on the ground. But there is lots of other options that I will also indeed leave to somebody else than myself to have an opinion on.

Q: Mr. Special Envoy, I would like to ask you about your proposal for a group of contact. I would like to ask you what makes you believe that a kind of group can change the situation on the ground and which pressure you hope that this group of contact can put, more than the efforts that have been done since the announcement of your plan of six points?

JSE: The answer I will have to give you—first of all, as I say, we are discussing it and the composition of the group will be such that I hope that apart from Security Council members, the permanent members of the Security Council, it will include governments and countries with influence on one or the other parties, coming together and deciding that they will cooperate and work together, realizing that it is only when the international community comes together and sustains its pressure and effort that we get results. Today, honestly speaking, that is not happening. Although the Security Council passed a resolution unanimously, the General Assembly passed a resolution, members of the same organization are taking initiatives, national initiatives, which are undermining the process. And if we can get them to accept that it is only by working together that we can help improve the situation and also help the Syrians and that if we continue the way we are going and competing with each other, it could lead to destructive competition and everyone will pay a price, most of all, the innocent Syrian people in the region.

Q: Didier Burkhalter made a proposition to have a peace conference in Switzerland. What do you think about it? Did you accept?

JSE: I think we are talking about the same conference. I did meet with Mr. Burkhalter and discussed the possibility of a meeting here in Geneva on the 30th if we can get everything sorted out. So we are talking about the same meeting.

Q: I would like to know a little bit more details about the proposed meeting to take place on the ministerial level. Do we know the time and the venue of this meeting, are they decided yet? And will the contact group work on the same basis of the six-point proposal or will they be working on a revised plan or base?

JSE: The group will discuss what further measures and actions can be taken to ensure implementation of the plan, and they may come with other measures that I do not know. But all of this is under discussion and we are preparing for a meeting. Once it is determined and we have made firm decisions, we will announce it publicly and put out a programme for the meeting. If we decide to go ahead, that will be sometime next week, when you will get all of the details.

Q: A question for General Mood. What are you going to say to your team when you get back to Damascus?

Mood: I'm bringing back to Damascus the compliments of New York, the compliments of Geneva, on a job very well done. Regardless of the circumstances, regardless of the progress or not, the brave observers on the ground in Syria, they have deployed a mission at record speed. From day one they have been operating across Syria, they have been taking risks because they are on the ground as a physical expression of the international commitment to the Syrian people and the aspirations of the Syrian people. So the most important aspect I am bringing back to Damascus is to commend them on the job that they have been doing up until now and the job that they are doing. In addition to that, I will bring back to Damascus that we have a job to do. Our aim is to continue with our mandated tasks if the situation on the ground permits. That job is not done until this mandate is over. And if there is another decision in the meantime, and that is not for me to make - and it's for the Security Council to make. So there are two messages: one, be proud, you are doing a great job, you deserve the admiration of everyone from the outside; and two, there is still a job to be done until the end of this mandate.

JSE: And I hope you can share your admiration with this team also, you, ladies and gentleman of the press.

Q: Mr Annan, would you be willing to invite Iran for example to this in your personal capacity, if this would be a good idea? And General Mood, do you feel like a sitting duck in the gun gallery, or whatever the
Ambassador of the US said?

**JSE:** Generals don’t play that role but he will answer! Let me say that, as I said, we are discussing the composition and other aspects of the meeting but I have made it quite clear that I believe Iran should be part of the solution.

**Mood:** You know, to be unarmed in a situation with ongoing violence is not always comfortable but on the other hand, it is our main source of strength -- to have approximately 300 unarmed observers from 50 different Member States on the ground without weapons. That is our main strength. That makes situations to be characterized by a lot of nerve when that is your forced protection. But however it is much more effective than if each of us had a pistol or if each of us had a rifle -- then we would be perceived as much more legitimate targets. So it is not always comfortable but you have to view it as a source of strength.

**Q:** Mr. Annan, I believe you want to see action now and I am wondering if you could specify some actions that you would like to see agreed at this upcoming conference in terms of what the countries of influence could do: maybe no-fly zones, arms embargos and such like. And if there are not specific actions then is there a time when you would consider that the time is not right for your mediation and you might step back and let it get to a stage where it is right for mediation?

**JSE:** Let me say that when it comes to mediation my mandate comes from the Council. The Security Council can always take another decision. The Security Council can always decide to do something else. And in fact when I briefed the Security Council last time I indicated to them that this process cannot go on indefinitely, it cannot be open-ended and that we either have to find ways of getting the plan implemented, if we think it is still worthwhile pursuing it, and if the plan is not worthwhile, what other options are we going to look at and begin to take a look at them. I don’t think the meeting that comes here, if we were to have that meeting, will take the kind of decisions you are referring to, that will be for the Council to take. There may be recommendations emanating from the group that the Council would want to act on but they as a group will not take that kind of decisions. I hope they will decide to use their collective influence on the parties to push them in the right direction as well as perhaps coming up with ideas that the Council can work on.

**Q:** I had a similar question and it had to do with what you have said in the past on a number of occasions that the process can’t be open-ended. And I’m wondering with all the atrocities that keep occurring – when do you know that the crisis has spiraled out of control? When is enough enough?

**JSE:** That’s a good question and that is a decision that the Council and individual Member States will have to make. In fact you have heard about the debate even of when is a situation a civil war -- we are having a debate on that. Or when is a situation likely to spiral out of control. And I think when we look at, when we listen even to what the General has said, at the beginning they were able to continue monitoring in Syria. Escalation got to a state where they decided it was too dangerous for us to do our work. Will it drop back? Will it continue to escalate? And if it does continue to escalate, there will come a moment when not only the UN but everybody will see very clearly that the situation is not sustainable, is not controllable, and is beyond control of everyone. And we don’t want to get there. This is why we are trying to press and push to see if we can get the parties to take steps to end the violence before we get to that stage. I don’t think we are there yet but we may not be far from there. And my own wish is to appeal to the fighters to really put down their guns for the sake of the Syrian people. It is sometimes difficult to understand that people who are nationalists, who love their country or claim to love their country, can inflict so much misery on the population and the country that they claim to love.

**Q:** My question is to General Mood. I was wondering so what is the latest in the negotiations to get the 1,000 or more people caught in the cross-fire in neighborhoods of Homs. And also have you had any reports of religious cleansing of minorities?

**Mood:** This is one of the aspects of the current situation that is very worrying seen from the ground. The upsurge of violence and the unacceptable use of heavy fire and shelling on civilian populated areas throughout Syria have significantly increased the number of civilian casualties. And despite multiple efforts by UNSMIS and now the ICRC, civilians continue to be trapped in the line of fire. And this is unacceptable by any standards. So there is a need to call on all parties when they are pursuing their objectives by military means to distinguish very clearly between civilians and combatants. It is not always easy. And all parties must abide by the obligation to keep civilians out of harm’s way. And obviously it is the Government that has the primary responsibility to civilian populations to protect them from all forms of violence. The latest attempts by the SARC and the ICRC to have a breakthrough related to evacuating the civilians - children, women, elderly - out of Homs have regrettably not yet succeeded.

**JSE:** Just to add one thing -- I also approached the Government directly to help release the citizens who are trapped in Homs region. So the efforts continue.

**Q:** A couple of weeks ago, after the second humanitarian conference, John Ging told us that an agreement
had been signed between UN agencies and the Syrian Government, and that the content of this agreement, the points had been expressed by the Syrian Government. It should have been implemented very quickly so would you be able to tell us what is happening in the field and maybe General Mood would be able to tell us what is happening about the implementation of the agreement signed at that time. Also if you think it was a way for the Syrian Government to gain time?

JSE: I think the humanitarian situation continues to deteriorate as you can imagine given the situation on the ground. I think the current figure that the humanitarian agencies are using is up to 1.5 million people may be at risk or need help. At the same time, I will have to indicate that the response – on the refugee side we have about 92,000 refugees in the region coming from Syria, although this does not include the entire number of people who have left the country, because not all of them registered. These are the ones registered by the High Commissioner for Refugees. We also do need resources, I think we need about 180 million [dollars], the appeal was for 180 million, and we have received about 42.7 million. Hopefully, the response will also increase but I think we will also need to step up our own activities given what is happening on the ground.

Mood: Let me, if I may, come at it from a different angle. What we’re seeing when we go into neighborhoods – in Homs, in Dara’a, in Hama in particular – is a level of destruction that begs rebuilding and reconstruction beyond the classical interpretation of humanitarian aid. In this context, I am also particularly concerned about the continued military occupation of hospitals, health facilities and schools, also preventing access to medical attention for those in need. Which means the need for the humanitarian response plan to be effective and the scale of rebuilding and reconstruction that is before us once there is a cessation of violence is enormous. It’s urgent, and there are civilians trapped in the combat zones. I think you also asked whether my assessment is that whether somebody is buying time. If I’m frank I would say that I think there are a lot of stakeholders trying to buy time related to the crisis in Syria and coming from me I’m now relating it to the ground, inside, because I have yet to hear from anyone a clear strategic operational wish or vision of how they want to go forward, whether in one direction or in the other. So I think many see themselves served with more time.

Q: Mr. Annan, until now the Government of Syria has not been able to fulfill their commitment so what makes you believe that it will?

JSE: We have been in some of these situations for a long time. And there are moments when we are surprised, when agreements are implemented immediately. There are moments when it drags on for a long time. And there are moments when the collective and sustained pressure of the international community speaking with one voice, acting as one, can make a real difference. Yes, the plan has not been implemented. It is over three months old now and it hasn’t been implemented and we should maintain the pressure. I think we need to have hope and pressure, working together to get it. What is the alternative? I hear lots of comments about “the plan is not being implemented,” “the plan has not been accepted.” We cannot just step back and do nothing. And this is why I am saying, if we have alternatives let’s go with it and I’ve said this to the Council and to others. But I have seen situations where plans have not been implemented for a while and then suddenly there are shifts, shifts take place on the ground in strategic alliances and you can see progress. And I hope we can see some of the positive shifts in positions of Government, their willingness to pressure, or to take certain actions to give us movement.

Q: Just to follow up, so based on what you just said, you are advocating sticking with your six-point plan as formulated as present or are there ways that you would specifically propose changing it if you get this conference next week? And also, in retrospect, is there anything different that you would have proposed knowing what you know now?

JSE: No, I am not proposing anything— that’s the mandate we have. I think everybody keeps saying: “the Annan plan is a Security Council mandate.” It is a Security Council resolution. And the Council has given us the mandate to go ahead and implement. So I am working on the basis of a Security Council resolution and I, as an Envoy, I am their agent. It is possible that after the meeting, if the meeting takes places, that there may be additional things that may be recommended that will require further action by the Council to modify, to add or take additional measures. And we will then take our lead from that. Thank you.