

Monday, 25 March 2013

Half of U.N. staff to leave Syria



The United Nations said Monday it is moving about half of its 100 international staff in Syria out of the country after mortar shells were reported near the hotel housing its members. The Damascus office of U.N.-Arab League envoy Lakhdar Brahimi will be closed as part of the new measures, diplomats told the Agence France Presse news agency ahead of an official U.N. announcement. Brahimi's staff will be moved to Cairo or Lebanon.

U.N. spokesman Martin Nesirky, who blamed worsening security conditions for the evacuation decision said all of the 800 Syrian staff remaining have been told to work from home until security improves.

"Yesterday and today a number of mortar shells fell in close proximity to and on the grounds of the hotel in Damascus housing U.N. staff," Nesirky said. The mortars damaged the building and some cars, including one U.N. vehicle, he added. Other suicide bombs and attacks have also struck close to U.N. buildings as Damascus becomes a key battleground in the war between government forces and opposition rebels, diplomats told AFP.

Nesirky said about 50 of the approximately 100 U.N. international staff in Damascus would be affected by the "temporary relocation". A handful will also be moved to other Syrian cities, such as Homs. The international staff come from Brahimi's mission, the Office of the Coordinator for Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), the U.N. Children's Fund (UNICEF), the World Food Program and the U.N. Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) for Palestinian refugees and other U.N. agencies. The United Nations has a huge humanitarian operation in Syria aiming to feed and help more than two million Syrians caught in the two-year-old conflict which the U.N. says has left more than 70,000 dead. Most of the distribution work is now carried out by Syrian staff and through the Syrian Red Crescent. Nesirky stressed, however, that Brahimi's political efforts to end the two-year-old conflict would go on. Brahimi is based in Cairo. "These measures are being undertaken solely for security reasons. The United Nations remains active and committed to helping the Syrians sides in their search for a political solution," Nesirky said. The safety measures come as the U.N. also reviews the future of the U.N. Disengagement Force (UNDOF) monitoring a ceasefire in the Golan Heights between Syria and Israel. Israeli troops on the strategic plateau fired an anti-tank missile at a Syrian army post on Sunday after coming under fire. Nesirky called it "a worrying firing incident." The U.N. has halted nearly all patrols by UNDOF and the U.N. Security Council will discuss the mission on Tuesday.

A number of U.N. peacekeepers were abducted earlier in March by Syrian opposition fighters in the Golan Heights ceasefire zone between Israel and Syria. They were released four days later.

The act prompted U.N. Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon to demand that the Syrian government and rebels respect peacekeepers' "freedom of movement and security."