



Numsa Media Monitor

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A daily compilation of local, national and international articles dealing with labour related issues

Numsa

Agreement still eludes car industry

Staff Reporter, Business Report, 25 July 2016

Johannesburg - Three sessions of negotiations between South Africa's vehicle manufacturers and the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (Numsa) have failed to achieve agreement on any of the union's demands.

Stephen Nhlapo, Numsa's chief negotiator, confirmed on Friday that the union had not yet concluded any agreements at the National Bargaining Forum on any issues with the Automobile Manufacturers Employers Organisation (Ameo).

"We are still far apart. There are movements somewhere. The employers have asked to go back to their principals to get a (fresh) mandate and we have agreed to have a last (negotiation) meeting in the coming weeks," he said.

Numsa's demands include a one-year rather than a three-year agreement, a 20 percent wage increase, R5 000-a-month housing allowance and medical aid benefits to be paid on the basis of 80 percent by employers and 20 percent by employees. Nhlapo confirmed that the previous three-year agreement with Ameo had expired at the end of June.

Johann Evertse, the chairman of Ameo, declined to comment last week on the status of the negotiations, stressing that Ameo was not prepared to negotiate through the media.

Nhlapo confirmed Ameo had submitted an offer to Numsa, but declined to provide any details about the offer.

He said it would be unfair to disclose these details now and before Numsa's negotiating team had disclosed to the union's leadership where they were in the negotiations.

Nhlapo said Numsa's negotiations with Ameo also included discussions on the union's demand for a mega bargaining council, comprising the vehicle manufacturers, oil refineries and retail motor industry.

Key role players

He said the key role players around which it wanted to create the mega bargaining council were the National Association of Automobile Manufacturers of South Africa, the National Association of Automotive Component and Allied Manufacturers (Naacam) and the South African Tyre Manufacturers Conference.

Naacam is a member of the Retail Motor Industry Organisation (RMI), which together with the Fuel Retailers Association and National Employers Association of South Africa is involved in separate negotiations with Numsa and the Motor Industry Staff Association at the Motor Industry Bargaining Council.

Numsa declared a dispute in these negotiations last month after the RMI refused to commence negotiations over the union's demands until agreement was reached on core structural issues of concern to the RMI, which were Numsa's demand for a mega bargaining council and a one-year rather than a three-year agreement.

A dispute meeting failure to resolve the deadlock and the parties will enter into mediation next month by the Commission for Conciliation, Mediation and Arbitration.

Nhlapo said on Friday the RMI was "just an association that was not speaking on behalf of Naacam" and the organisation was "resisting an eventuality".

Jakkie Olivier, the chief executive of the RMI, said on Friday there was only a remote possibility that Naacam could leave the RMI and become part of the proposed mega bargaining forum.

Members

Olivier added that based on various criteria and definitions, some automotive component manufacturers were part of Naacam and fell under the umbrella of the RMI while others were members of the Steel and Engineering Industries Federation of Southern Africa and part of the Metal and Engineering Industries Bargaining Council.

He said some of the members of both organisations were suppliers to vehicle original equipment manufacturers.

Changing this arrangement was a legislative issue that would have to be discussed at the National Economic Development and Labour Council. "But it's not a negotiation issue with Numsa (and the RMI) because it's not on the table," he said.

Almost nine weeks of back-to-back strikes in 2013 by various sectors in the motor industry and automotive value chain resulted in the loss of production of 58 000 vehicles worth a total of about R11.6 billion.

<http://www.iol.co.za/business/news/agreement-still-eludes-car-industry-2049050>

South African workers

The great wage debate

Shaun Smillie, The Times, 26 July 2016

A minimum wage of about R5,000 could be just what South Africa needs to boost its economy.

This is according to a new report titled "A National Minimum Wage for South Africa", released yesterday at Wits University.

Researcher Gilad Isaacs, who authored the report, has suggested a minimum wage of R4,500 to R5,500 a month - well above what business owners have proposed.

But other economists worry that that is too high and will cause job losses. Political parties are also concerned about the implementation of a minimum wage.

The ANC has said it intends to introduce a minimum wage this year.

Isaacs' report examined the experiences of other countries and the effect a minimum wage had on inequality and poverty reduction.

He argues that South Africa would benefit from a minimum wage and that the economy would be stimulated by the increased buying power.

Isaacs predicted that if South Africa introduced a national minimum wage of R3500 to R4600 a month, average GDP growth would be 2.8% to 2.9%.

"Shifting income from high earners to higher wages would encourage more spending," he said.

In South Africa minimum wages have been set sector-by-sector and have been negotiated between trade unions and employers.

Isaacs believes that a national minimum wage would be easier to implement and enforce.

In his report, he said that usually a national minimum wage in middle-income countries was set at 48% of the average wage. In South Africa, as of April 2015, this was R4,161.

He suggested between R4000 and R5,500 for South Africa. This range is what labour federation Cosatu is pushing for at the National Economic Development and Labour Council (Nedlac).

Business leaders have called for the wage to be set at R1800.

"In many countries, for example Germany, and in some parts of the US, there is evidence the national minimum wage has improved the buying power of people who have fallen through the cracks in the economy," said Cosatu president Sdumo Dlamini.

Dlamini said that business and the unions would have to "converge on an amount".

Economists fear that R4,500 to R5,500 would be too high and cause job losses.

Economist Mike Schussler believes a high minimum wage would drive jobs from the formal sector into the informal sector.

"Take someone who earns R25,000 a month: they are paying their domestic an average salary of R2,000. A minimum wage of R4500 would double her salary and make [her services] unaffordable for them," he said.

Isaacs said in his research that national minimum wages had a marginally negative or neutral effect on employment.

Both Schussler and Dlamini suggested a sector-by-sector approach, with Dlamini saying the minimum wage should be reduced for small businesses.

Economist Dawie Roodt feels that any minimum wage, irrespective of the amount, would cause job losses.

"You need to grow the economy to force companies to employ more people and then they have no choice but to pay higher wages," Roodt said.

Political parties support a minimum wage but differ on how much it should be.

DA labour spokesman Ian Ollis said the party would support a minimum wage "under certain circumstances".

"A national minimum wage does not create jobs, it merely puts money in the pockets of people who earn below the level at which a minimum wage would be set," said Ollis.

He said the party would support a national minimum wage if it were set by "an independent panel of academics" and determined sectorally.

The EFF wants a national minimum wage at R4,500.

<http://www.timeslive.co.za/thetimes/2016/07/26/The-great-wage-debate>

Little appetite for strike, says Amplats boss

Dineo Faku, Business Report, 26 July 2016

Johannesburg - Chris Griffith, the chief executive of Anglo American Platinum (Amplats), believed there was little appetite for industrial action as wage talks, which began earlier this month, entered a critical phase.

Griffith told mining analysts and journalists during a presentation of the company's interim results yesterday that the platinum sector had suffered huge job losses and a strike was therefore unlikely.

"We have previously said we do not think there is a huge appetite for industrial unrest. The five-month strike is still fresh in people's minds," he said.

The Association of Mineworkers and Construction Union has demanded a 47 percent rise in salaries to R12 500 a month for entry level mineworkers.

“We think there is a greater understanding of the environment that prevails, and there will be a responsible attitude taken by all parties including unions,” said Griffith.

South Africa’s mining industry is struggling to survive with about 30 000 mineworkers facing retrenchment.

Amplats, the world’s largest platinum producer posted a 58 percent decline in headline earnings in the half-year to June despite an improved operational performance in the period under review.

Headline earnings declined to R1.04 billion at the end of June from R2.47bn in the same period last year owing to weaker prices and lower gains from inventory levels compared to last year.

The average platinum-group metals basket price sold dropped 24 percent to \$1 632 (R24 400) an ounce from \$1 905 a year earlier.

Despite the lower basket price, the Anglo American subsidiary generated free cash flow from operations of R3.2bn it also cut net debt to R9.9bn at the end of June, from R12.8bn at the end of December and the the board decided not to pay a dividend.

Mining inflation

The company also reigned in costs and maintained its estimates that cash unit costs would be between R19 250 and R19 750 per platinum ounce, which was equal to a 0 percent to 2.5 percent increase this year, significantly below mining inflation.

“Debt levels are still higher, we have got to generate cash and cut debt,” said Griffith.

Refined platinum production decreased by 9 percent owing to a section-54 safety stoppage at the precious metal refinery (PMR) in the first quarter, which stopped production for 12 days and impacted production build-up for a further 37 days. The PMR had since recovered to steady state and made up most of the shortfall in production.

Refined platinum sales volumes increased by 5 percent despite the reduction in refined production in the period.

Amplats has been repositioning portfolio following a review in 2013 that will see at least 70 percent of output from mechanised production.

Griffith told journalists in a conference call earlier that there were 15 000 mineworkers who had lost their jobs since repositioning of the portfolio.

Amplats was selling its Rustenburg operation to Sibanye Gold and it was awaiting Department of Mineral Resources’ approval for the deal to be finalised.

Amplats would exit its other loss-making operations including Union, Bokoni, Pandora and Kroondal operations.

No new investments would be made until next year.

Amplats shares dropped 0.43 percent on the JSE yesterday to close at R387.52.

<http://www.iol.co.za/business/companies/little-appetite-for-strike-says-amplats-boss-2049465>

CWU reaches recognition agreement with ANN7

Tiisetso Manoko, The New Age, 22 July 2016

Communications Workers Union signed for the first time an agreement with Oakbay-owned African News Network 7 (ANN7) to be a recognised union.

Secretary General Aubrey Tshabalala said it has not been a smooth riding to be recognised at the TV channel.

“It has been a long discussion with the management, we had a 19 page discussion, the workers have been the one telling us what to say concerning their situations,” Tshabalala said.

He said they had challenges of workers joining and leaving the union during the discussions with management to be recognised as the union.

Tshabalala said they agreed with the management that they need to be involved in human capital development, which the company has already started under the leadership of Editor-In-Chief Moegsien Williams and team of employee relations experts.

“Going forward there is going to be elections of shop-stewards, they will be dealing with small issues that might arise in the channel, bigger issues would be escalated to the bigger structures,” he said.

The union currently has 31% membership at ANN7, they however aim to recruit more members at The New Age.

“Next week we would be holding a general meeting with our members, during the office hours, even those who are not joined are welcomed,” he said.

Tshabalala said more needs to be done as they aim to reach 50% plus 1 of the ANN7 employees.

Managing Editor Gary Naidoo said they are satisfied with the agreement and hope they will be able to work with all stakeholders well.

“ANN7 has at all times stated that it is committed to reaching an agreement with CWU. We are glad that we finally signed the agreement,” Naidoo said.

He said with these agreement the company hopes that they will have a good working relationship both with the union and workers.

“We hoping that these will make the ANN7 a news channel of choice for our workers,” he said.

On the closure of Bank accounts

Meanwhile CWU said it is worrying that banks get involved in political affairs.

The agreement means that the union can now represent workers.

“If a bank has to stop doing business with any company or anyone, reasons have to be financial not political,” Tshabalala said.

The Union will also focus on collective bargaining and issues around employment equity. Asked to comment further on equity, Tshabalala said they will soon request the official numbers and comment further.

“We are going to look into issues and engage management based on official statistics and facts, he said.

<http://www.thenewage.co.za/cwu-reaches-recognition-agreement-with-ann7/>

South Africa

ANC launches its own E Cape paper

Luyolo Mkentane, Independent Media, 26 July 2016

Port Elizabeth - What do you do if you constantly receive bad press? You stop complaining and start your own publication.

That’s what the ANC did in the Eastern Cape’s Nelson Mandela Bay.

The Vote ANC newspaper was started as a result of all the bad publicity the ruling party had been getting on its governance of the metro, among other things, ANC regional spokesman Gift Ngqondi said on Monday.

Ngqondi, the paper’s contributing writer, said that for its members, supporters and voters to understand the successes, it was resolved that the newspaper should reflect on the progress made in the past five years.

The paper, which is distributed free of charge, had been well received in the metro’s 60 wards, he said.

A total of 42 000 copies were printed for its first edition this month. Ngqondi said another 42 000 copies of the second edition would be delivered by the end of this week.

He said the ANC had not received positive coverage in the mainstream media.

The ANC-run metro was beset by many governance challenges and was drowning in a mountain of debt and corruption. This was attributed to political infighting within the regional executive committee.

The structure was disbanded by President Jacob Zuma in 2014 and replaced with a regional task team led by co-ordinator Beza Ntshona.

The ANC has also been fighting off concerted efforts by the DA to take over the Eastern Cape’s richest and biggest metro, incorporating Port Elizabeth, Despatch and Uitenhage. Mayor and ANC mayoral candidate Danny Jordaan was parachuted in last year to try to stabilise the municipality.

“We have been receiving bad press on issues of corruption and service delivery protests. We felt that with the achievements that we’ve had which were never recorded in the media space, let’s tell our people the good story in the municipality (about) what we have delivered,” Ngqondi said.

The achievements included housing delivery.

“The ANC has done a lot in the area of housing delivery. There is a new area in Chetty; there are more than 2 000 houses that we’ve just built in that area. There is no narrative that these are the positives of the ANC government in this metro.”

Ngqondi said the newspaper was also aimed at instilling a culture of reading among the metro’s 1.2 million residents.

“We want to inculcate the culture of reading among our people too. We want to continue this project, we feel we need to tell the good story about this municipality; people have always been fed negative stories about this municipality. In their minds, there has never been any service delivery in the metro.”

<http://www.iol.co.za/news/politics/anc-launches-its-own-e-cape-paper-2049546>

International

Bernie Sanders' Speech At The Democratic Convention

NPR, 25 July 2016

Bernie Sanders addressed the Democratic National Convention Monday night, after a day of disunity in the Philadelphia arena. Read his speech here:

Good evening. Thank you. Thank you very much. It is an honor...thank you. Thank you very much. It is an honor to be here tonight. Thank you. Thank you very much. Thank you. Thank you.

It is an honor to be here tonight and to be following in the footsteps of my good friend, Elizabeth Warren. And to be here tonight to thank Michelle Obama for her incredible service to our country. She has made all of us proud.

Let me begin by thanking the hundreds of thousands of Americans who actively participated in our campaign as volunteers. Let me thank the two and a half million Americans who helped fund our campaign with an unprecedented 8 million individual campaign contributions. Anyone know what that average contribution was? That's right - \$27. And let me thank the 13 million Americans who voted for the political revolution, giving us the 1,846 pledged delegates here tonight – 46 percent of the total. And delegates: thank you for being here, and thank you for all the work you have done. I look forward to your votes during the roll call on Tuesday tomorrow night.

And let me offer a special thanks to the people of my own state of Vermont who have sustained me and supported me as a mayor, congressman, senator and presidential candidate. And to my family – my wife, Jane, our four kids and seven grandchildren – thank you very much. for your love and hard work on this campaign.

I understand that many people here in this convention hall and around the country are disappointed about the final results of the nominating process. I think it's fair to say that no one is more disappointed than I am. But to all of our supporters – here and around the country – I hope you take enormous pride in the historical accomplishments we have achieved.

Together, together my friends, we have begun a political revolution to transform America and that revolution – our revolution – continues. Election days come and go. But the struggle of the people to create a government which represents all of us and not just the one percent – a government based on the principles of economic, social, racial and environmental justice – that struggle continues. And I look forward to being part of that struggle with you.

Let me be as clear as I can be. This election is not about, and has never been about, Hillary Clinton, or Donald Trump, or Bernie Sanders or any of the other candidates who sought the presidency. This election is not about political gossip. It's not about polls. It's not about campaign strategy. It's not about fundraising. It is not about all the things that the media spends so much time discussing.

This election is about – and must be about – the needs of the American people and the kind of future we create for our children and our grandchildren.

This election is about ending the 40-year decline of our middle class, the reality that 47 million men, women and children today live in poverty. It is about understanding that if we do not transform our economy, our younger generation will likely have a lower standard of living than their parents.

This election is about ending the grotesque level of income and wealth inequality in America today that we currently experience, the worst it has been since 1928. It is not moral, it is not acceptable and it is not sustainable that the top one-tenth of one percent now owns almost as much wealth as the bottom 90 percent, or that the top 1 percent in recent years has earned 85 percent of all new income. That is unacceptable. That must change.

This election is about remembering where we were seven and a half years ago when President Obama came into office after eight years of Republican trickle-down economics.

The Republicans want us to forget that as a result of the greed, recklessness and illegal behavior on Wall Street, our economy was in the worst economic downturn since the Great Depression. That's where we were. That is where we were. Some 800,000 people a month were losing their jobs. 800,000 people. We were running up a record-breaking deficit of \$1.4 trillion and the world's financial system was on the verge of collapse. That's where we were when President Obama came into office.

Well, we have come a long way in the last seven and a half years, and I thank President Obama and Vice President Biden. I thank them for their leadership in pulling us out of that terrible recession.

Yes, we have made progress, but I think we can all agree that much, much more needs to be done.

This election is about which candidate understands the real problems facing this country and has offered real solutions – not just bombast, not just fear-mongering, not just name-calling and divisiveness.

We need leadership in this country which will improve the lives of working families, the children, the elderly, the sick and the poor. We need leadership which brings our people together and makes us stronger – not leadership which insults Latinos and Mexicans, insults Muslims and women, African-Americans and veterans, and seeks to divide us up.

By these measures, any objective observer will conclude that – based on her ideas and her leadership – Hillary Clinton must become the next president of the United States. The choice is not even close.

This election is about a single mother, a single mom I saw in Nevada who, with tears in her eyes, told me that she was scared to death about the future because she and her young daughter were not making it on the \$10.45 an hour she was earning. This election is about that woman and the millions of other workers in this country who are struggling to survive on totally inadequate wages.

Hillary Clinton understands that if someone in America this country works 40 hours a week, that person should not be living in poverty. She understands that we must raise the minimum wage to a living wage. And she is determined to create millions of new jobs by rebuilding our crumbling infrastructure – our roads, bridges, water systems and wastewater plants.

But her opponent – Donald Trump – well, he has a very different point of view. He does not support raising the federal minimum wage of \$7.25 an hour – a starvation wage. While Donald Trump believes in huge tax breaks for billionaires, he believes that states should actually have the right to lower the minimum wage below \$7.25. What an outrage!

Brothers and sisters, this election is about overturning Citizens United, one of the worst Supreme Court decisions in the history of our country. That decision allows the wealthiest people in America, like the billionaire Koch brothers, to spend hundreds of millions of dollars buying elections and, in the process, undermine American democracy.

Hillary Clinton will nominate justices to the Supreme Court who are prepared to overturn Citizens United and end the movement toward oligarchy that we are seeing in this country. Her Supreme Court appointments will also defend a woman's right to choose, workers' rights, the rights of the LGBT community, the needs of minorities and immigrants and the government's ability to protect our the environment.

If you don't believe this election is important, if you think you can sit it out, take a moment to think about the Supreme Court justices that Donald Trump would nominate and what that would mean to civil liberties, equal rights and the future of our country.

This election is about the thousands of young people I have met all over this country, the thousands that I have met who have left college deeply in debt, and tragically the many others who cannot afford to go to college. During the primary campaign, Secretary Clinton and I both focused on this issue but with somewhat different

approaches. Recently, however, we have come together on a proposal that will revolutionize higher education in America. It will guarantee that the children of any family in this country with an annual income of \$125,000 a year or less – 83 percent of our population – will be able to go to a public college or university tuition-free. That proposal also substantially reduces student debt.

This election is about climate change, the greatest environmental crisis facing our planet, and the need to leave this world in a way that is healthy and habitable for our children kids and future generations. Hillary Clinton is listening to the scientists who tell us that – unless we act boldly and transform our energy system in the very near future – there will be more drought, more floods, more acidification of the oceans, more rising sea levels. She understands that when we do that we can create hundreds of thousands of jobs transforming our energy system. good-paying jobs.

Donald Trump? Well, like most Republicans, he chooses to reject science. He believes that climate change is a "hoax," no need to address it. Hillary Clinton understands that a president's job is to worry about future generations, not the short-term profits of the fossil fuel industry.

This campaign is about moving the United States toward universal health care and reducing the number of people who are uninsured or under-insured. Hillary Clinton wants to see that all Americans have the right to choose a public option in their health care exchange. She believes that anyone 55 years or older should be able to opt in to Medicare and she wants to see millions more Americans gain access to primary health care, dental care, mental health counseling and low-cost prescription drugs through a major expansion of community health centers.

And What is Donald Trump's position on health care? Well, no surprise there. Same old, same old Republican contempt for working families. He wants to abolish the Affordable Care Act, throw 20 million people off of the health insurance they currently have and cut Medicaid for lower-income Americans.

Hillary Clinton also understands that millions of seniors, disabled vets and others are struggling with the outrageously high cost of prescription drugs and the fact that Americans pay the highest prices in the world for the medicine we use. She knows that Medicare must negotiate drug prices with the pharmaceutical industry and that drug companies should not be making billions in profits while one in five Americans are unable to afford the medicine they need. The greed of the drug companies must end.

This election is about the leadership we need to pass comprehensive immigration reform and repair a broken criminal justice system. It's about making sure that young people in this country are in good schools and at good jobs, not rotting in jail cells. Hillary Clinton understands that we have to invest in education and jobs for our young people, not more jails or incarceration.

In these stressful times for our country, this election must be about bringing our people together, not dividing us up. While Donald Trump is busy insulting one group after another, Hillary Clinton understands that our diversity is one of our greatest strengths. Yes. We become stronger when black and white, Latino, Asian-American, Native American – when all of us stand together. Yes. We become stronger when

men and women, young and old, gay and straight, native born and immigrant, fight to create the kind of country we all know we can become.

It is no secret that Hillary Clinton and I disagree on a number of issues. That is what this campaign has been about. That is what democracy is about. But I am happy to tell you that at the Democratic Platform Committee there was a significant coming together between the two campaigns and we produced, by far, the most progressive platform in the history of the Democratic Party. Among many many other strong provisions, the Democratic Party now calls for breaking up the major financial institutions on Wall Street and the passage of a 21st Century Glass-Steagall Act. It also calls for strong opposition to job-killing free trade agreements like the TPP. Trans-Pacific Partnership. We have got to make sure that TPP does not get to the floor of the Congress in the lame duck session.

Our job now is to see that strong Democratic platform implemented by a Democratic-controlled Senate, by a Democratic House and a Hillary Clinton presidency – and I am going to do all that everything I can to make that happen.

I have known Hillary Clinton for 25 years. I remember her, as you do, as a great first lady who broke precedent in terms of the role that a first lady was supposed to play as she helped lead the fight for universal health care. I served with her in the United States Senate and know her as a fierce advocate for the rights of children, for women, and for the disabled.

Hillary Clinton will make an outstanding president and I am proud to stand with her here tonight. Thank you all, very much.

<http://www.npr.org/2016/07/25/487426056/read-bernie-sanders-prepared-remarks-at-the-dnc>

Interview with President Bashar al-Assad

Prensa Latina, on SANA, 21 July 2016

President Bashar al-Assad gave interview to Cuba's official state news agency Prensa Latina in which he said the Turks, Qataris and Saudis lost most of their cards on the battlefields in Syria and that Aleppo battle is their last card, affirming that there is strong harmony between Syria and Latin America, especially Cuba, on the political and historical levels and that hard work is needed in order to invigorate the different sectors of this relation.

The following is the full text of the interview:

Question 1: Mr. President, thanks for giving Prensa Latina this historic opportunity of conveying your point of view to the rest of the world about the reality in Syria, because as you know, there is a lot of misinformation out there about your country, about the foreign aggression that is taking place against this beautiful country.

Mr. President, how would you evaluate the current military situation of the external aggression against Syria, and what are the main challenges of Syrian forces on the ground to fight anti-government groups? If it is possible, we would like to know your opinion about the battles or combats in Aleppo, in Homs.

Aleppo battle is the last card for the Turks, Qataris and Saudis

President Assad: Of course, there was a lot of support to the terrorists from around the world. We have more than one hundred nationalities participating in the aggression against Syria with the support of certain countries like Saudi Arabia and Qatar with their money and Turkey with the logistical support, and of course with the endorsement and supervision of the Western countries, mainly the United States, France, and the UK, and some other allies. But since the Russians decided to intervene in supporting legally the Syrian Army in fighting the terrorists in Syria, mainly al-Nusra and ISIS and some other affiliated groups, the scales have been tipped against those terrorists, and the Syrian Army has made many advances in different areas in Syria. And we are still moving forward, and the Syrian Army is determined to destroy and to defeat those terrorists. You mentioned Homs and Aleppo. Of course, the situation in Homs, since the terrorists left Homs more than a year ago, the situation has been much, much better, more stable. You have some suburbs of the city which were infiltrated by terrorists. Now there is a process of reconciliation in those areas in which either the terrorists give up their armaments and go back to their normal life with amnesty from the government, or they can leave Homs to any other place within Syria, like what happened more than a year ago in the center of the city.

For Aleppo it is a different situation, because the Turks and their allies like the Saudis and Qataris lost most of their cards on the battlefields in Syria, so the last card for them, especially for Erdogan, is Aleppo. That is why he worked hard with the Saudis to send as much as they can of the terrorists – the estimation is more than 5,000 terrorists – to Aleppo.

Question 2: Through the Turkish borders?

President Assad: Yes, from Turkey to Aleppo, during the last two months, in order to recapture the city of Aleppo, and that didn't work. Actually, our army has been making advancement in Aleppo and the suburbs of Aleppo in order to encircle the terrorists, then, let's say, either to negotiate their going back to their normal life as part of reconciliation, or for the terrorists to leave the city of Aleppo, or to be defeated. There's no other solution.

Question 3: Thank you, thank you very much. Mr. President, which are the priorities of the Syrian Army in the confrontation with the terrorist groups? And we're particularly interested, because in Cuba we had something similar in the past, in the role of the popular defense groups; what is the role that the popular defense groups are playing in the theater of operations?

Syrian army's priority is to fight al-Qaeda-linked organizations of ISIS, al-Nusra, Ahrar al-Cham and Jaish al-Islam

President Assad: The priority of the Syrian Army, first of all, is to fight ISIS and al-Nusra and Ahrar al-Cham and Jaish al-Islam. These four organizations are directly linked to Al Qaeda through the ideology; they have the same ideology, they are Islamic extremist groups who want to kill anyone who doesn't look or doesn't feel or behave like them. But regarding what you called the popular militia groups, actually, at the beginning of the war, the terrorists started an unconventional war against our army, and our army is a traditional army, like any other army in the world, so the

support of those popular defence groups was very important in order to defeat the terrorists in an unconventional way. That was very helpful to the Syrian Army, because those fighters, those national fighters, they fight in their regions, in their cities, in their villages, so they know the area very well, they know the region very well, I mean the pathways, the terrain, let's say, very well. So, they can be very huge assets for the Syrian Army. That is their role.

Question 4: Mr. President, how does the resistance of the Syrian people take place in the economic front to foreign aggression, I mean the economy, and please, what is your opinion on which sectors of the Syrian economy have remained functioning despite the war, economic blockade, looting, and so forth?

President Assad: Actually, the war on Syria is a full-blown war; it is not only supporting terrorists. They support the terrorists, and at the same time they launched a political war against Syria on the international level, and the third front was the economic front, in which they dictate to their terrorists, to their surrogate mercenaries, to start destroying the infrastructure in Syria that helped the economy and the daily needs of the Syrian citizens.

At the same time, they started an embargo directly on the borders of Syria through the terrorists and abroad through the banking systems around the world. In spite of that, the Syrian people were determined to live as much normal life as they can. That prompted many Syrian businessmen or the owners of, let's say, the industry, which is mainly medium and small industry, to move from the conflict areas and unstable areas toward more stable areas, on a smaller scale of business, in order to survive and to keep the economy running and to keep the needs of the Syrian people available. So, in that regard, most of the sectors are still working. For example, the pharmaceutical sector is still working in more than 60% of its capacity, which is very important, helpful, and very supportive to our economy in such circumstances. And I think now we are doing our best in order to re-expand the base of the economy in spite of the situation, especially after the Syrian Army made many advancements in different areas.

Question 5: Mr. President, let's talk a little bit about the international environment, please give me your opinion about the role of the United Nations in the Syrian conflict, the attempts of Washington and its allies to impose their will on the Security Council and in the Geneva peace talks.

So far, there is no UN role in the Syrian conflict; there is only Russian and American dialogue

President Assad: Talking about the role of the United Nations or Security Council could be illusive, because actually the United Nations is now an American arm, where they can use it the way they want, they can impose their double standards on it instead of the Charter. They can use it like any other institution within the American administration. Without some Russian and Chinese stances in certain issues, it would be a full American institution. So, the Russian and Chinese role has made some balance within these institutions, mainly regarding the Syrian issue during the last five years. But if you want to talk about their role through their mediators or their envoys, like recently de Mistura, and before that Kofi Annan, and in between Brahimi, and so on. Let's say that those mediators are not independent; they reflect either the pressure from the Western countries, or sometimes the dialogue between

the main powers, mainly Russia and the United States. So, they're not independent, so you cannot talk about the role of the United Nations; it is a reflection of that balance. That is why so far, there is no United Nations role in the Syrian conflict; there is only Russian and American dialogue, and we know that the Russians are working hard and seriously and genuinely in order to defeat the terrorists, while the Americans always play games in order to use the terrorists, not to defeat them.

Question 6: Mr. President, how do you see at the present time the coexistence among Syrian ethnic and religious groups against this foreign intervention? How do they contribute or not in this regard?

President Assad: The most important thing about this harmony between the different spectrums of the Syrian fabric, is that it is genuine, because that has been built up through the history, through centuries, so for such a conflict, it cannot destroy that social fabric. That is why if you go around and visit different areas under the control of the government, you will see all the colours of the Syrian society living with each other.

Intervention: I saw it in Damascus.

President Assad: Exactly. And I would say, I would add to this, that during the conflict, this harmony has become much better and stronger, and this is not rhetoric; actually, this is reality, for different reasons, because this conflict is a lesson. This diversity that you have, it is either to be a richness to your country, or a problem. There's no something in the middle. So, the people learned that we need to work more on this harmony, because the first rhetoric used by the terrorists and by their allies in the region and in the West regarding the Syrian conflict at the very beginning was sectarian rhetoric. They wanted people to divide in order to have conflict with each other, to stoke the fire within Syria, and it didn't work. And the Syrians learned that lesson, that we had harmony; we had had harmony before the conflict, in the normal times, but we have to work more in order to make it much stronger.

So, I can say without any exaggeration that the situation regarding this part is good. In spite of that, I would say the areas under the control of the terrorists – and as you know those terrorists are mainly extremist groups affiliated to Al Qaeda – in which they worked very hard in order to indoctrinate the young generation with their dark ideology, and they succeeded in some areas, this dark ideology with the killing and beheading and all these horrible practices. With the time, it is going to be more difficult to deal with this new generation of young people who have been indoctrinated with Al Qaeda and Wahabi doctrine and ideology. So this is the only danger that we are going to face regarding our society, harmony, and coexistence that you just mentioned.

Question 7: Mr. President, I would like to go again to the international arena. What is in your opinion the role of the U.S.-led international coalition in relation to the groups that operate in northern Syria, in particular regarding the Kurds group. I mean the bombing of the American airplanes and the coalition in the northern part of the country. What do you think about that?

President Assad: You know, traditionally, the American administrations, when they had relations with any group or community in any country, it is not for the sake of the country, it is not for the interest of the people; it is for the agenda of the United

States. So, that is what we have to ask ourselves: why would the Americans support any group in Syria? Not for Syria. They must have their agenda, and the American agenda has always been divisive in any country. They don't work to unite the people; they work to make division between the different kinds of people. Sometimes they choose a sectarian group, sometimes they choose an ethnic group in order to support them against other ethnicities or to push them in a way that takes them far from the rest of the society. This is their agenda. So, it is very clear that this American support is not related to ISIS, it is not related to al-Nusra, it is not related to fighting terrorism, because since the beginning of the American intervention, ISIS was expanding, not shrinking. It has only started to shrink when the Russian support to the Syrian Army took place last September.

Question 8: Mr. President, what is your opinion about the recent coup d'état in Turkey, and its impact on the current situation in that country, and on the international level, and on the Syrian conflict also?

Coup in Turkey is a reflection of instability and disturbances within the country

President Assad: Such a coup d'état, we have to look at it as a reflection of instability and disturbances within Turkey, mainly on the social level. It could be political, it could be whatever, but at the end, the society is the main issue when you have instability. Regardless of who is going to govern Turkey, who is going to be the president, who is going to be the leader of Turkey; this is an internal issue. We don't interfere, we don't make the mistake to say that Erdogan should go or should stay. This is a Turkish issue, and the Turkish people have to decide.

Erdogan used the coup to implement his Muslim Brotherhood agenda

But what is more important than the coup d'état itself, we have to look at the procedures and the steps that are being taken by Erdogan and his coterie recently during the last few days, when they started attacking the judges; they removed more than 2,700 judges from their positions, more than 1,500 professors in the universities, more than 15,000 employees in the education sector. What do the universities and the judges and that civil society have to do with the coup d'état? So, that reflects the bad intentions of Erdogan and his misconduct and his real intentions toward what happened, because the investigation hasn't been finalized yet. How did they take the decision to remove all those? So, he used the coup d'état in order to implement his own extremist agenda, Muslim Brotherhood agenda, within Turkey, and that is dangerous for Turkey and for the neighboring countries, including Syria.

Question 9: Mr. President, how do you evaluate the Syrian government's relations with the opposition inside Syria? What is the difference between these opposition organizations and those based outside Syria?

"Oppositions" outside Syria are traitors...the real opposition is the one based inside and works for the Syrian people

President Assad: We have good relations with the opposition within Syria based on the national principles. Of course, they have their own political agenda and they have their own beliefs, and we have our own agenda and our beliefs, and the way we can make the dialogue either directly or through the ballot boxes; it could be a different way of dialogue, which is the situation in every country. But we cannot compare

them with the other oppositions outside Syria, because the word “opposition” means to resort to peaceful means, not to support terrorists, and not to be formed outside your country, and to have grassroots, to have real grassroots made of Syrian people. You cannot have your grassroots be the foreign ministry in the UK, France or the intelligence in Qatar and Saudi Arabia and the United States. This is not opposition, this is called, in that case, you are called a traitor. So, they call them oppositions, we call them traitors. The real opposition is the one that works for the Syrian people and is based in Syria and its agenda derived its vision from the Syrian people and the Syrian interests.

Question 10: Mr. President, how do you evaluate the insistence of the U.S. and its allies that you leave power in addition to the campaign to distort the image of your government? I mean, in the foreign environment. How do you see that insistence from them that you leave power?

President Assad: Regarding their wish for me to leave power, they have been talking about this for the last five years, and we never responded even with a statement. We never cared about them. Actually, this is a Syrian issue; only the Syrian people can say who should come and go, who should stay in his position, who should leave, and the West knows our position very well regarding this. So, we don't care and don't have to waste our time with their rhetoric. I am here because of the support of the Syrian people. Without that, I wouldn't be here. That is very simple.

It is part of the American politics to demonize presidents

About how they defame, or try to demonize certain presidents, this is the American way, at least since the second World War, since they substituted British colonization in this region, and maybe in the world, the American administrations and the American politicians haven't said a single honest word regarding anything. They always lie. And as time goes by, they are becoming more inveterate liars, so this is part of their politics. So, to demonize me is like how they tried to demonize President Putin during the last two years and they did the same with the leader Castro during the last five and six decades. This is their way. So, we have to know that this is the American way. We don't have to worry about it. The most important thing is to have good reputation among your own people. That is what we have to worry about.

Question 11: Mr. President, what is your opinion on Syria's relation with Latin America, particularly the historical links with Cuba?

President Assad: In spite of the long distance between Syria and Latin America, we are always surprised how much the people in Latin America, not only the politicians, know about this region. I think this has many reasons, but one of them is the historical similarities and commonalities between our region, between Syria and Latin America. Latin America was under direct occupation for long time ago but after that it was under the occupation of the American companies, and the American coup d'états and the American intervention.

Intervention: Yes, a lot of them.

Latin America People understand that the war in Syria is about independence...there is strong harmony between Syria and Latin America, especially Cuba

President Assad: So, they know what is the meaning of being independent or not to be independent. They understand that the war in Syria is about independence. But the most important thing is the role of Cuba. Cuba was the spearhead of the independence movement within Latin America and Fidel Castro was the iconic figure in that regard. So, on the political level and the knowledge level, there is a strong harmony between Syria and Latin America, especially Cuba. But I do not think we work enough to improve the other part of the relation; to be on the same level mainly on the educational and the economic level. That was my ambition before the crisis and that is why I visited Latin America, Cuba, Venezuela, Argentine and Brazil, in order to invigorate this relation. Then, we had this conflict started and it was a big obstacle to do anything in that regard, but I think that we have not to restrain the relation on the historical and the political levels. That is not enough. You have so many other sectors, people should know more about each other. The long distance could be an obstacle, but it shouldn't because we have strong relations with the rest of the world, east and west. So, it is not an obstacle in these days. So, I think if we overcome this crisis and this war, we should work harder in order to invigorate the different sectors of this relation with Latin America and especially with Cuba.

Question 12: Mr. President, do you have an expectation for... I mean would you tell me your opinion about the electoral process in the United States mainly for the president? Now, we have two candidates; the Republican one is Mr. Donald Trump and the Democratic one is Mrs. Hillary Clinton; and we know her very well, but what is your opinion about this process, about the result of this process and how it could impact the conflict here, in the war in Syria?

No US president in the near future will come to make dramatic change in the politics of the United States

President Assad: We resumed our relation with the United States in 1974. Now, it has been 42 years since then and we witnessed many American presidents in different situations and the lesson that we have learned is that no one should bet on any American president, that is the most important thing. So, it is not about the name. They have institutions, they have their own agenda and every president should come to implement that agenda in his own way, but at the end he has to implement that agenda.

All of them have militaristic agendas, and the only difference is the way. One of them sends his army like Bush and the other one sends mercenaries and proxies like Obama, but all of them have to implement this agenda. So, I do not believe that the president is allowed completely to fulfil his own political convictions in the United States, he has to obey the institutions and the lobbies, and the lobbies have not changed and the institutions' agenda has not changed. So, no president in the near future will come to make a serious and dramatic change regarding the politics of the United States.

Question 13: Mr. President, one final question: what message would you send using this interview with Prensa Latina to the governments and people of Latin America, the Caribbean, and also why not the American people, about the importance of supporting Syria against terrorism?

Message to Latin America: We have to keep our independence as the US will not stop trying to topple every independent government

President Assad: Latin America is a very good and important example to the world about how the people and their governments regain their independence. They are the backyard of the United States as the United States sees, but this backyard was used by the United States to play its own games, to implement its own agenda and the people in Latin America sacrificed a lot in order to regain their independence and everybody knows that.

After regaining their independence, those countries moved from being developing countries, or sometimes under-developed countries, to be developed countries. So, independence is a very important thing and it is very dear for every Latin American citizen. We think they have to keep this independence because the United States will not stop trying to topple every independent government, every government that reflects the vast majority of the people in every country in Latin America.

And again, Cuba knows this, knows what I am talking about more than any other one in the world; you suffered more than anyone from the American attempts and you succeeded in withstanding all these attempts during the last sixty years or more just because the government reflected the Cuban people.

So, holding strongly to this independence, I think, is the crucial thing, the most important thing for the future of Latin America. Regarding Syria, we can say that Syria is paying the price of its independence because we never worked against the United States; we never worked against France or the UK. We always try to have good relations with the West.

But their problem is that they do not accept any independent country and I think this is same for Cuba. You never tried to do any harm to the American people but they do not accept you as an independent country. The same is true for other countries in Latin America and that's why you always have coup d'états mainly between the sixties and the seventies.

So, I think preserving the independence of a certain country is not only an isolated case; if I want to be independent, I have to support the independence in the rest of the world. So, the independence anywhere in the world, including Latin America, will support my independence. If I am alone, I will be weak. Supporting Syria will be mainly in the international arena. There are many international organizations, mainly the United Nation, in spite of its impotence, but at the end, their support could play a vital role in supporting Syria and, of course, the Security Council; it depends on who is going to be the temporary member in the Security Council, and any other organization supporting Syria will be very important.

Question 14: Mr. President, I know that you are a very busy person, that is why I appreciate very much your time that you have dedicated to Prensa Latina interview in this moment. I hope this would not be the last interview that we have with you.

President Assad: You are welcome anytime.

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