

**BRIEFING TO THE SECURITY COUNCIL
ON THE SITUATION IN THE MIDDLE EAST**

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Mr. President, Members of the Council:

Since I last briefed the Council, political and diplomatic initiatives aimed at rejuvenating peacemaking in the Middle East have continued to evolve in a mostly positive fashion.

The Secretary-General, who returns today from his second trip to the region, is actively encouraging these local, regional and international initiatives. However, the forward momentum we are witnessing on the political-diplomatic level is threatened by the deteriorating security situation on the ground, especially the continuing violence experienced by both Israelis and Palestinians.

Leaders on all sides must do their utmost to prevent this latest upsurge of violence from escalating any further.

Political developments

Let me first turn to the major political developments for the period, beginning with the formation of the National Unity Government. After being approved by an 83 to 3 vote in the Legislative Council, the Palestinian National Unity Government was sworn in on 17 March, in accordance with the program agreed at Mecca. The Quartet, reiterating respect for the agreement and Palestinian democracy, has encouraged progress in the direction of its three principles, while indicating its intention to assess the government's commitment not only by its platform and composition but also by its actions.

President Abbas and Prime Minister Olmert met in Jerusalem on 15 April. They discussed immediate humanitarian and security issues, including efforts to build confidence through action on security reform and implementation of the Agreement on Movement and Access. They reportedly also exchanged views on aspects of a future Palestinian state and a timeframe for achieving it, and agreed to meet again soon. We encourage them to build on these discussions, which were agreed to during Secretary of State Rice's March visit to the region, and the Secretary-General has urged continued efforts in this regard.

Following the re-affirmation of the Arab Peace Initiative at the Arab League Summit, a follow-up Ministerial Committee meeting in Cairo on 18 April established working groups to engage international partners and Israel and created greater public awareness of the potential of the Arab Peace Initiative. The Secretary-General welcomed the engagement of the League of Arab States, and stated that he looked

forward to meeting with the Ministerial Committee that has been formed to promote this process. Prime Minister Olmert has welcomed the initiative as a “positive approach”.

At the invitation of the Israeli Knesset Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee, a Syrian-American businessman, Ibrahim Suleiman, visited Israel to brief the Committee on unofficial efforts to draft elements of a peace agreement between Israel and Syria. Both Governments as well as the participants have underlined that this was a private initiative.

I would also like to record that the Palestinian Central Election Commission conducted registration of 61,400 new voters between March 28 and April 2, with technical assistance from the United Nations and under scrutiny of some 2800 domestic observers and party agents who qualified the process as inclusive, fair and transparent.

The situation on the ground

Mr. President,

Despite a number of positive political developments, we are deeply concerned at the overall situation on the ground.

Security and violence

In the reporting period, at least 43 Palestinians have been killed, 22 in intra-Palestinian fighting and 21 by the Israel Defense Forces (IDF), while over 200 Palestinians and at least 13 Israelis have been

injured. According to reports from OCHA, the bulk of fatalities and injuries from 14 March through 17 April were attributed to 83 incidents involving Palestinian factional fighting or family feuding and 69 incidents involving the Israel Defense Forces and Palestinians.

In addition, according to UN figures, between 14 March and 17 April, 54 rockets and mortars were fired from the Gaza Strip into Israel. PM Olmert noted last week that there had been a significant drop in rate of rockets being fired since mid-April, which appeared to be the result of continuing efforts by President Abbas with the various factions. However, last weekend Israel carried out a number of arrest raids into West Bank cities, during which nine Palestinians were killed, and a rocket hit the town of Sderot, underlining the dangers these attacks still pose. On the morning of 24 April, Israel has reported that over 24 rockets and mortars were fired from Gaza. Hamas' military wing has claimed responsibility. The Palestinian Government, however, has called for the ceasefire to be respected, and the Israeli government has exercised restraint.

Israeli officials continue to express concern about alleged smuggling of weapons between Egypt and the Gaza Strip, and a reported increase in the payload and range of the rockets that are fired from Gaza into Israel. The efforts of the Government of Egypt to maintain the ceasefire and halt rocket fire is appreciated in this regard.

The lack of substantial improvement in the security situation is a matter of great concern, and the obstacles to achieving progress recently

led the new Minister of the Interior to offer his resignation. It is important that the Palestinian Authority acts to counter the smuggling of weapons and rocket fire against Israel, as well as take steps to implement the internal security plan endorsed by the Palestinian cabinet so as to restore law and order. This is not only the overwhelming desire of Palestinians, but also vital for continued international engagement in Gaza.

In this connection, we continue to be deeply concerned about the fate of kidnapped BBC journalist Alan Johnston, and reiterate the Secretary-General's call for his safety and immediate release. We were also greatly alarmed when a vehicle carrying the Director of UNRWA Operations in Gaza and a senior UN security official came under heavy attack on 18 March. These and several other incidents, including attacks against internet cafes, other business establishments and the American school in Gaza, have led the UN to take further mitigating measures to ensure staff security. The situation is being kept under close review.

The release of Israeli corporal Gilad Shalit is also crucial to forward movement. In this regard, it is reported various proposals for prisoner exchanges have been discussed, and Prime Minister Olmert stated publicly on 16 April that he was open to a "reasonable exchange" in order to free Shalit.

The Government of Israel must also play its part to calm the situation, in particular with regard to the Israeli settler community. In

Hebron, attacks on Palestinian children and a mentally disabled Palestinian man, carried out by groups of Israeli settlers, has been widely reported. Likewise, the Government of Israel must ensure that measures for Israeli security are not at the expense of innocent Palestinians – all security measures must be proportionate. Continued operations into Palestinian population centers in the West Bank, almost inevitably with resultant civilian casualties, are a matter of great concern.

Settlements and the Barrier

Despite the provisions of the Road Map which call for a settlement freeze, construction of new housing units is taking place in some 75 of the 121 settlements in the occupied Palestinian territory. Settlement development continues on both sides of the Barrier. There is major ongoing construction in Maale Adumim, Beitar Illit and Modiin Illit.

On 10 April, Israeli Defense Minister Peretz ordered the eviction of settlers who had moved into a building in central Hebron in February, but this order has not yet been implemented. Despite the obligation of the government of Israel according to the Roadmap, none of the additional 101 outposts in the West Bank have been removed.

In addition, Israel continues to construct the Wall in the West Bank ignoring the 9 July 2004 advisory opinion of the International Court of Justice.

Movement and Access

Despite commitments by the Government of Israel to ease movement in the West Bank, a total of 547 physical obstacles to movement were in place as of 3 April 2007 – up from the 529 obstacles cited in our last report.

For Gaza, access through Karni has improved slightly since our last report. The crossing was open every scheduled day but only for 43% of the scheduled opening hours. Approximately 10% of the ultimate target set by the Agreement on Movement and Access of 400 truckloads of exported goods per day was reached. Movement through Rafah improved, as it was open 42% of the time – up from 27% during the last reporting period. The Agreement on Movement and Access targets, to which Israel has committed, must be reached if there is to be an improvement in the socio-economic situation of the Gaza Strip.

United Nations staff members and other humanitarian workers crossing from Gaza into Israel are subjected to increasingly arbitrary treatment by Israeli authorities. Internal searches of United Nations vehicles and property, including laptop computers, are conducted out of sight of UN staff. This practice violates UN security standards, as well as UN privileges and immunities. We continue to work closely with all relevant Israeli authorities to correct the situation but with little progress thus far.

Assistance

President Abbas and the new Palestinian Finance Minister have continued to underline the precarious state of Palestinian finances, including with senior European and US officials. Donor governments are studying various options.

There will likely be a requirement for a renewal of the Temporary International Mechanism beyond its current 3-month mandate. I take this opportunity to remind the Council of the Quartet's call for the international community to support the TIM, which has disbursed some \$330 million to date. We also continue to urge Israel to transfer the customs and VAT funds withheld from the Palestinians.

Meanwhile, immediate humanitarian issues must still be addressed. UN agencies continue to support populations affected by a sewage spill which killed five persons in the Northern Gaza Strip on 8 April. Longer term measures for rehabilitating the sewage plant must urgently be implemented.

I should also draw to the Council's attention the recent visit of the Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict, Ms. Radhika Coomaraswamy, to Lebanon, the occupied Palestinian territory and Israel. During this visit, the Special Representative obtained first hand information on the situation of children and discussed concerns with senior government officials. She will be reporting, in due course, to the Security Council, the General Assembly and the Human Rights Council.

Lebanon

I turn now to Lebanon, where the Secretary-General has been encouraging dialogue to resolve the political impasse.

Intensive efforts to ease the political stalemate ahead of the Arab League Summit in Riyadh helped to reduce tension, but did not produce any breakthroughs concerning a national unity government or the Special Tribunal for Lebanon. The Secretary-General made Lebanon a priority during his first visit to the region, and more recently, UN Undersecretary-General for Legal Affairs Nicolas Michel visited Lebanon and met with political leaders of all parties to discuss the Statute of the Tribunal in order to advance its ratification in accord with the Lebanese Constitution. The Secretary-General will continue his efforts to encourage the implementation of all relevant Security Council resolutions, and to support Lebanon's independence, sovereignty, stability and security.

Lebanon remains committed to moving ahead with an important programme of political and socio-economic reform irrespective of domestic challenges. At a recent meeting of the Core Group of countries that have offered their support Lebanon, Prime Minister Siniora's government presented a progress report on the implementation of the reform package delivered at the Paris III conference. The report showed allocation of donor pledges by sector and provided an update on on-going bilateral negotiations for fund disbursement. However, thus far only a small percentage of pledges have been disbursed. We

encourage donors to work with the Government of Lebanon in ensuring the speedy implementation of the Paris III framework of assistance.

In south Lebanon, we are pleased to note that as of 10 April, the total strength of UNIFIL stands at 13,000 peacekeepers. The Secretary-General visited UNIFIL on 31 March and noted the vital role they are playing to preserve calm along the Blue Line. This near total calm has held since the last reporting period.

However, Israeli air violations of the Line have continued, with Israel claiming that these air violations are necessary for security measures in the face of continued breaches of the embargo on the transfer of arms, while the Government of Lebanon maintains that these are provocative actions that increase tension along the Blue Line. The United Nations will continue to assert in the strongest terms with both parties that one violation cannot justify another.

Conclusion

Mr. President,

It is clear that the situation in the region is fragile. There are a number of elements in play which, taken together, could generate forward movement - within the occupied Palestinian territory, between the PLO and Israel, and between Israel and the Arab world. The Secretary-General is committed to nurturing these elements, in close collaboration with his Quartet partners. At the same time, we are

increasingly concerned that actions and inactions on the ground remain real obstacles to progress, and have the potential to lead to paralysis or even a rapid deterioration. The renewed violence of the past few days show how precarious the situation is. It is incumbent on the parties and all regional and international players to show restraint and to intensify their efforts to bring about immediate progress on the ground and to promote, as a minimum, the political will for the parties to discuss their future together. We need to move forward towards our shared goal of a just, lasting and comprehensive peace, based on Security Council Resolutions 242, 338, 1397 and 1515.

As you know, the Secretary-General has visited the Middle East twice in the last month, including Iraq, Egypt, Israel, the occupied Palestinian territory, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Lebanon, and most recently, Qatar and Syria. He has reported to you on his priorities and observations, and will continue to do so.

I should like to conclude this briefing by noting to the Council that the United Nations Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process, Alvaro de Soto, has informed the Secretary-General of his decision to depart the United Nations next month after 25 years of service. In his distinguished UN career, Mr. de Soto has advanced the cause of peace in many places, including the Middle East, Western Sahara, Cyprus, Myanmar, and El Salvador, as well as contributing to the development of the UN's conflict resolution work and practice in many areas. I am sure that the Members of this Council share the

Secretary-General's deep appreciation for his outstanding contribution to the United Nations, and wish him well in the future.

Thank you, Mr. President.