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

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Mr. President,

1. It is an honour to brief the Security Council for the first time. I look forward to doing so regularly in the course of my tenure as Special Coordinator, in the service of the Secretary-General and the United Nations.
2. After two months in Jerusalem, I am deeply conscious of what is at stake today in the Middle East peace process. I am also impressed by the calibre and scale of the work of the United Nations on the ground in difficult and even dangerous circumstances, and convinced of the importance of the United Nations playing its full political, development, humanitarian, and human rights role.
3. I wish to thank President Abbas and Prime Minister Olmert and their governments, as well as the governments of Egypt and Jordan and the Secretary-General of the League of Arab States, for the warm welcome they have given me. I look forward to paying further introductory visits in the region. I also wish to express my appreciation to my Quartet partners and Quartet Representative

Tony Blair for the support and cooperation they have extended to me.

4. I will brief the Council today on developments since the last report on 30 January, and offer an initial assessment of the situation.

5. I turn first to the bilateral negotiations. Israeli Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni and Palestinian Lead Negotiator Ahmad Qurei are meeting on a continuous basis. President Abbas and Prime Minister Olmert continue their fortnightly meetings. We welcome the determination of the parties to continue these negotiations despite challenges on the ground, and in an atmosphere of confidentiality. The talks need to make tangible progress on all core issues without exception.

6. I was pleased to meet US Lt-Gen William Fraser when he visited the region for the first time to lead US efforts to monitor implementation of Phase 1 Road Map commitments, as agreed at Annapolis. I have offered full UN support to the US-led monitoring process, and look forward to regular Quartet consultation on it.

7. PA Prime Minister Fayyad and his government continue to promote good governance and revive the economy. Steps this month included addressing electricity subsidies, finalization of measures to ensure financial transparency, and efforts to ensure PA ministries and agencies develop coordinated and standardized project

proposals. We remind donors of the urgency that they quickly disburse the generous pledges made last December in Paris. Quartet Representative Tony Blair continues his work on economic development projects and other confidence-building measures.

8. Efforts to improve PA security performance continue. Palestinian security forces carried out operations against militants in several West Bank cities. A Palestinian military court sentenced two individuals to 15 years in prison for killing two Israelis near Hebron in December. Israel stopped pursuing 32 Fatah militants after they surrendered to PA security forces and successfully completed a three-month trial period. The death of a Hamas detainee from what an official autopsy found was a heart attack has led to allegations of mistreatment of detainees by PA security forces, and President Abbas has called for an investigation. Approximately 1,000 PA security officers are being trained in Jordan with support from the US Security Coordinator, with a view to their redeployment in April and May. The EUPOL COPPS mission continues to support the Palestinian civilian police and criminal justice system in the West Bank.

9. However, Mr. President, the security situation for both Israelis and Palestinians remains deeply concerning. One Israeli has been killed and 27 injured by Palestinian militants. Forty-five Palestinians have been killed and 139 injured during Israeli incursions into Gaza and the West Bank. I am particularly alarmed at the number of incidents on both sides where children are being killed or injured.

10. On 4 February a suicide attack in Dimona by two bombers from Hebron, for which Hamas claimed responsibility, killed one Israeli and injured six others. Over 320 rockets and mortars have been fired from Gaza, with the town of Sederot again coming under particular attack. We unreservedly condemn indiscriminate rocket and mortar firing towards civilian population centres and crossing points and suicide attacks against civilians, and call for their immediate cessation. Israeli interlocutors regard the continuation of such attacks as the biggest obstacle to progress in the peace process.
11. IDF Corporal Gilad Shalit is in his 20th month of captivity in Gaza, and Hamas continues to deny the ICRC access to him. We call for access to be provided and for his release.
12. Over 10,000 Palestinian prisoners remain in Israeli prisons. President Abbas has appealed for further Palestinian prisoner releases building on the steps already taken in this regard.
13. Israeli military operations into Gaza and the West Bank have continued throughout the reporting period. There have been several instances in which civilians have been killed or injured – including last Saturday when three civilians were killed by a ground to ground missile fired into Beit Hanoun. Even if not intended, such casualties are deplorable, and should be the subject of transparent investigation and accountability measures. While we are cognisant of Israel's security concerns, Israel is obliged not to take disproportionate measures or to endanger civilians. The UN's principled opposition to extra-judicial killings is compounded by the frequency with which such operations are carried out in densely populated civilian areas.

14. IDF operations are also continuing in the West Bank, citing security concerns. These actions undermine the PA's own security efforts. Improved IDF cooperation with the PA security forces in the West Bank is crucial.

15. In this context, OCHA reports that there are 580 obstacles to Palestinian movement in the West Bank – a level that has stayed steady for many months and even increased, despite PA security efforts and Israeli pledges to remove obstacles. Closure levels must be reduced significantly if the Palestinian economy is to revive, and if donor assistance is to produce long-term results.

Mr. President,

16. Phase One of the Road Map, to which the parties recommitted at Annapolis, requires the Government of Israel to freeze all settlement activity, including “natural growth”, and to remove all outposts erected since March 2001. However, construction continues in settlements throughout the West Bank, including in East Jerusalem; new housing tenders continue to be issued by the Israeli government; and no outposts have been removed. Continued settlement activity is illegal anywhere in the occupied Palestinian territory, and is an obstacle to peace. I should also inform the Council that settlement expansion was cited by several Palestinian and Arab interlocutors as among the biggest factors undermining confidence in the Annapolis process and prospects for a viable Palestinian State.

17. In the same vein, and despite the Road Map obligation to re-open Palestinian institutions in East Jerusalem, an order was recently issued by the Israeli government continuing their closure for a further six months. Israel should demonstrate with concrete and urgent steps its commitment to Phase One of the Road Map, as called for by Quartet Principals when they last met in Paris.

18. Construction work on the barrier continues within occupied Palestinian territory, in deviation from the Green Line and contrary to the International Court of Justice advisory opinion.

Mr. President,

19. I turn to the situation in Gaza, which is unacceptable and also unsustainable in humanitarian, human rights, security and political terms. The Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs will brief on the severe humanitarian situation in more detail. Several factors have created a dangerous cocktail for Israel, Egypt, and the Palestinians, causing deep suffering and damaging prospects for a two-state solution.

20. Hamas' takeover last June violently removed the PA from Gaza, including from the crossings. A degree of order has been established, but the rule of law is absent. Major changes are taking place outside a legal framework. Many independent institutions have been closed, or replaced and re-staffed so that they are controlled by Hamas but disconnected from their headquarters in Ramallah. The civilian justice system has ceased to function, as

have important instruments of good governance and social regulation in Gaza. Allegations of human rights abuses in Gaza continue to be made by various Palestinian and international NGOs operating in the Strip.

21. Despite statements of intent, Hamas has not acted with sufficient determination to bring about an end to rocket attacks by militant groups. Hamas itself also carries out periodic rocket firing and regular mortar fire, to say nothing of the recent suicide bombing. Reports of smuggling continue to be of concern, as are reports of outside militant groups now gaining a foothold in Gaza. We continue to call on Hamas to live up to the responsibilities it has taken on itself, and to choose the olive branch over the gun.

22. However, Israeli measures amounting to collective punishment are not acceptable. We call on Israel to meet its obligations toward the civilian population of Gaza under international law.

23. The breach at Rafah at the end of January caused understandable relief in Gaza, as civilians sought basic commodities and a respite from the pressure cooker conditions under which they are forced to live. Egypt moved to re-establish order along the border earlier this month. But the situation remains extremely fragile. Unless addressed, it will remain a danger to the safety, security and well-being of the Palestinian population, to the security of Egypt and of Israel, and to sustainability of the political process itself.

24. Only yesterday, several thousand people protested at the conditions they face, and the IDF increased its military presence in areas surrounding the Strip.

Mr. President,

25. In light of these developments, the United Nations has actively made the case with all parties and our Quartet partners that a different and move positive strategy for Gaza is required.
26. To this end, Quartet envoys are agreed that we should now work towards resumption of normal economic life for the people of Gaza, pursue arrangements that ensure the security of Israel, Egypt and the Palestinians, and support the legitimate Palestinian Authority. Rocket fire and suicide attacks should cease, as should all acts of violence so that an atmosphere of calm is created. The humanitarian needs of the civilian population must be met, including an uninterrupted provision of essential goods and services, including fuel and power supplies. Stalled UN and other projects in Gaza should resume, and the movement of UN and humanitarian personnel needs to be facilitated. Conditions need to be established to allow the reopening of crossings as envisaged in the Agreement on Movement and Access.
27. It is now of crucial importance that Israel, Egypt and the Palestinian Authority develop a positive strategy for Gaza designed to achieve these goals. Quartet members, individually and collectively, are ready to provide support for such efforts, including the EU Border Assistance Mission at Rafah as appropriate. Egypt's efforts along the border and diplomatically to find durable solutions to this crisis are to be commended. The Quartet has also stated publicly its strong

support for the proposal of the PA to resume operations at the crossings.

28. Turning to the regional aspect, the governments of Egypt and Jordan and the Secretary-General of the Arab League have underlined the importance of the continued commitment of Arab countries to the Arab Peace Initiative. However, they stressed their growing concern regarding the direction of the peace process as well as developments in Gaza, and at the implications for the region should the peace process not succeed.

29. During the reporting period, the situation in the occupied Syrian Golan has remained largely quiet, other than an incident on 11 February in which two Syrian youths resident in the Golan were shot by an Israeli soldier and subsequently treated in hospital.

30. I should add that I am not briefing on Lebanon this month in view of the forthcoming report of the Secretary-General on the implementation of Security Council resolution 1701.

Mr. President,

31. Allow me to conclude with some brief personal impressions.

32. From what I have seen in several field visits, including to the West Bank, Gaza, and southern Israel, ordinary people understandably have little confidence that the political process is delivering.

33. In the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, the imposing presence of the barrier, the expanding settlements, the unremoved outposts, the system of closure and constant military incursions have grave implications for the human rights, economic life and social fabric of the entire population. In Gaza, the deprivations of basic human dignity are even more acute, and the sense of abandonment and frustration is palpable.

34. In southern Israel, communities who believed Israel's disengagement from Gaza would bring security face daily rocket attacks, while Israelis generally continue to believe that they must primarily rely on Israeli security measures for their safety. In the region, there is a growing sense of disquiet about the state of the political process.

35. I applaud the sense of responsibility and indeed political courage Prime Minister Olmert and President Abbas have shown in re-embarking on the political process despite public skepticism and many anxieties. The Annapolis process needs to proceed and it needs support. The international community should do everything it can to ensure that the parties move ahead in the bilateral negotiations towards an agreement on all core issues without exception.

36. But the Annapolis process can only be sustained by real changes on the ground. First, a major intensification of effort in the West Bank is required, including more substantial and urgent Israeli actions and continued and intensified efforts by the Palestinian Authority, in accordance with Phase One of the Road Map.

37. Second, we believe a different and more positive strategy for Gaza is a humanitarian, security and strategic imperative, for Israel, Egypt and the PA, and we welcome the united engagement of the Quartet on this issue.

38. We will continue to remind all parties of the framework of international law, and to work closely with Quartet partners, regional countries, and this Council, towards implementation of the Road Map. The goal must be an end to the occupation that began in 1967 and the coexistence in peace and security of the State of Israel and the State of Palestine, and a comprehensive regional peace, in fulfilment of resolutions 242, 338, 1397 and 1515, and the Arab Peace Initiative.

Thank you, Mr. President.