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BRIEFING TO THE SECURITY COUNCIL
ON THE SITUATION IN THE MIDDLE EAST,
INCLUDING THE PALESTINIAN QUESTION

22 January 2008

Mr. President,

The crisis in the Gaza Strip and southern Israel has escalated dramatically since last Tuesday, 15 January 2008.

The precursor to this escalation is daily rocket and mortar attacks on Israeli civilian residential areas by several militant groups from Gaza, and regular IDF military attacks on and into Gaza. There are also the tight Israeli restrictions on crossings into Gaza for the stated purpose of bringing about a cessation of rocket fire.

The Israel Defence Forces (IDF) entered the Gaza Strip on Tuesday, 15 January and were engaged by Hamas militants in a heavy battle, which included IDF air and tank operations. Hamas claimed responsibility for sniper and rocket attacks against Israel.

Since then, over 150 rockets and mortar attacks have been launched at Israel by militants, injuring 11 Israelis, and a sniper attack killed an Ecuadorian national on a kibbutz in Israel.

Forty-two Palestinians have been killed and 117 injured by the IDF, which has launched 8 ground incursions, 15 air strikes, and 10 surface-to-surface missiles in the past week. Among the dead are a number of Palestinian civilians, who have been killed in ground battles between the IDF and militants and in Israeli air strikes and targeted killing operations.

There has been a significant de-escalation in violence in the past few days, with a much lower level of rocket fire and IDF incursions. Since first light this morning until 2:00pm local time, one rocket landed on an open field and three mortar shells have been fired; there have been no IDF incursions or operations. The situation however remains extremely fragile.

The Secretary-General has expressed his deep concern over the bloodshed and appealed for an immediate end to the violence. He has stressed the responsibilities on all parties to adhere to their obligations under international humanitarian law and not to endanger civilians.

Indiscriminate rocket and mortar firing towards civilian population centres and crossing points is totally unacceptable. We condemn it unreservedly. Such attacks terrorize Israeli communities near Gaza, particularly in the town of Sderot. They also endanger humanitarian workers at crossing points. They have been a regular occurrence since well before Israel's disengagement, causing civilian casualties and

damage, as well as school closures and high levels of post-traumatic stress disorder. Over 100,000 Israelis live within range of standard Qassam rocket fire.

We are further concerned that IDF Corporal Gilad Shalit is still being held captive in Gaza, and that Hamas continues to deny the ICRC access, in contravention of international humanitarian law. We continue to be concerned by allegations of smuggling of weapons and materiel into Gaza.

We equally call for strict observance of international humanitarian law by Israel and its armed forces. I must state firmly that the Israeli occupation – including with respect to Gaza – carries clear obligations under international law, including the Fourth Geneva Convention.

We are cognisant of Israel's security concerns. We also take note that Israel stresses that in using military force it does not target civilians, and claims that it takes care to avoid civilian casualties. However, Israel is obliged not to take disproportionate measures or to endanger civilians, and must thoroughly investigate incidents leading to civilian casualties and ensure adequate accountability. I would also like to reiterate that the UN's basic principled opposition to extra-judicial killings is compounded by the frequency with which such operations are carried out in densely populated civilian areas. This is why the Secretary-General has repeatedly called on Israel to exercise maximum restraint.

Mr. President,

The Gaza crossings have remained largely closed since the Hamas takeover in June 2007, except for imports to meet minimal humanitarian needs. Compared with the already precarious first half of 2007, imports into Gaza have dropped by 77%, and exports from Gaza by 98%. Most Palestinians cannot exit Gaza; exceptions are made for some students and humanitarian workers, and some – but not all – needy medical cases.

Large UN construction projects which could bring employment and housing to Gazans, including some left homeless by earlier IDF operations, are frozen because building materials are not available. At a time when UN security procedures are evermore critical, UNRWA's requests to import bullet proof windows to protect its Gaza offices have been denied.

On 17 January, Israel augmented quantities of fuel into Gaza pursuant to a petition before the Israeli High Court. However, on 18 January as rocket fire intensified, Israel imposed a comprehensive closure of the Gaza Strip, halting the import of fuel, food, medical and relief items.

The Gaza power plant, which supplies electricity to Gaza City and the middle camps, shut down on Sunday evening, leaving every area in Gaza except Rafah with daily power cuts of 8 – 12 hours. Approximately 40% of the population did not have regular access to running water. Fifty percent of bakeries were reported closed due to a lack of electricity and shortages of flour and grain. Hospitals were running on generators and two reduced their activities to intensive care units only.

Thirty million litres of raw sewage was pumped into the Mediterranean Sea due to the breakdown of sewage pumping equipment.

Earlier today, Palestinian demonstrators who had tried to force open the Rafah border crossing were dispersed by Egyptian security forces, with injuries reported.

The United Nations has been actively involved, through interventions of the Secretary-General, the UN Special Coordinator Robert Serry, and the UNRWA Commissioner-General Karen Abu-Zayd, in seeking an urgent easing of the blanket closure of Gaza.

Today, Israel reopened two crossings for fuel and the delivery of humanitarian supplies by international organizations. As of yet, it is not clear whether the crossings will stay open. We strongly urge Israel at a minimum to allow for the regular and unimpeded delivery of fuel and basic necessities. Approximately 600,000 litres of industrial fuel will be delivered today, with a target of 2.2 million litres throughout the week for use by hospitals, industrial vehicles, UNRWA operations and the power plant. The plant resumed operations at 11:30 am local time this morning.

However, the humanitarian situation is still extremely fragile. The 2.2 million litres of fuel will only restore the electricity flow to what it was at the beginning of January. This could mean cuts of 8-10 hours every day in the mid-region of Gaza, and every second day everywhere in other parts of the Strip. In addition, benzene is still not being allowed into Gaza causing widespread closure of petrol stations. Unless supplies are allowed in, the stocks of WFP, which relies on benzene will be depleted by Thursday morning.

The entry of commercial humanitarian supplies required to meet the total humanitarian needs of Gaza is still not permitted. In December, only 43.5% of basic commercial food import needs were met. It is imperative that both commercial and international humanitarian assistance be allowed into Gaza.

As the Secretary-General stated last September when the Israeli Cabinet decided to intensify its closure measures, Israel must reconsider and cease its policy of pressuring the civilian population of Gaza for the unacceptable actions of militants. Collective penalties are prohibited under international law.

In this context, I take this opportunity to reiterate the Secretary-General's strong support for the plan of PA President Abbas and PA Prime Minister Fayyad for the PA to man crossings into Gaza, particularly Karni. Early implementation of this initiative should be a priority, for the benefit of the civilian population of Gaza.

The events of the past week have also underlined the ever-present potential for the Annapolis process to be undermined by the deterioration of the situation and on the ground, and in particular the continuing crisis in Gaza. Less than two weeks ago, the parties launched negotiations on core issues, and President Bush visited the region to underline his commitment to assisting them to reach a peace treaty in 2008, and to implement Phase One of the Road Map. The Quartet, the Quartet Representative, and the entire international community are fully engaged in this effort, in what should be a year of hope and opportunity for Israelis and Palestinians. Crisis management and

containment in Gaza would seem to be a minimal requirement if this process is to be given a chance to succeed.

Finally, I wish to reiterate the deep commitment of the United Nations to the welfare of the civilian population affected by this conflict. The work being performed by UN agencies, as well as NGOs, in Gaza is one of the few things that stand between the current crisis conditions and an even more dramatic deterioration of the situation. Special Coordinator Serry and UNRWA Commissioner-General Abu Zayd were in Gaza last week at the height of the violence, and the Special Coordinator also visited the Israeli town of Sederot as it came under increasing rocket attack. The United Nations will continue to do everything we can to ensure that civilians are protected and assisted, whatever the political environment.

Thank you, Mr. President.