

**MR. MICHAEL C. WILLIAMS  
SPECIAL COORDINATOR FOR THE MIDDLE EAST PEACE PROCESS**

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

20 June 2007

Mr. President,

The Council meets today at a time of crisis in the Middle East. The violent seizure of de facto political authority in Gaza by Hamas, the end of the Palestinian National Unity Government, and the declaration of a state of emergency by President Abbas have created new political realities and worrying conditions in the occupied Palestinian territory. In Lebanon, renewed violence has threatened the nation's stability. Israel has been subject to rocket attacks on both its southern and northern borders. The region as a whole is highly volatile and unstable, overshadowing efforts to make political progress.

The figures of the past month tell a gloomy story:

- 218 Palestinians dead and 910 injured in internal violence.
- 40 Palestinians killed and 159 injured by the IDF
- One Israeli killed, a 13-year old quadriplegic boy, and 10 injured by Palestinian militants.
- At least 166 rockets fired by Palestinian militants from Gaza into Israel, and 77 mortars launched at the Erez crossing.
- 37 Israeli air strikes and multiple ground operations into the Gaza strip.
- 363 Israeli incursions and 287 arrests in the West Bank.

Gaza

Mr. President,

The events in Gaza must necessarily be the central focus of this briefing. Since the February Mecca Agreement, it was plain that the Palestinian National Unity Government faced enormous obstacles. The agreement did not lead to integration of common security and political structures. Nor did it lead to a lifting of Israeli and international measures against the PA government in place following the January 2006 elections.

On 27 May, Egypt brokered a factional truce after bitter fighting. This violence had also drawn in Israel, which had responded with targeted air operations to intense rocket attacks by Hamas militants against its civilian population. President Abbas proposed, and the National Unity Government endorsed, a ceasefire plan, designed to ensure calm with Israel throughout Gaza and the West Bank. The plan did not materialize.

## CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

These matters were swiftly overtaken by the events of last week. Between 9 and 15 June, Hamas' military wing and Executive Force took control of the Gaza Strip in a violent insurrection against the Presidency and the Palestinian Authority security forces. The Hamas operations were well-planned and executed, and Hamas fighters took over key security and strategic sites. Presidential forces were outperformed, as were Fateh militants. During the fighting, there were many grave violations of humanitarian and human rights law. The fighting included summary executions, attacks on hospitals, and the throwing of people off buildings to their deaths. Premises of PA security forces and institutions were burned or looted -- including the Presidential compound. Additionally, three UN vehicles were stolen at gunpoint by Presidential forces. The vehicles have since been returned.

The fighting created some population movements, including hundreds of Fateh militants and ordinary civilians who sought to flee the violence. About 3,500 Palestinians, including some who were denied entry into Egypt, are reported to be awaiting re-entry into Gaza through the Rafah crossing. Another 250 people, some of whom are wounded or injured, are waiting at the Erez terminal for permission to cross through Israel towards the West Bank and they are receiving assistance from the UN, the ICRC and the IDF. The situation at Rafah and Erez crossings still awaits resolution, and raises increasing concerns about protection, particularly of the children involved. We have reports of several seriously ill Palestinians being allowed entry today.

The fighting in Gaza inevitably had repercussions in the West Bank. There were clashes in Nablus and in Ramallah. Elsewhere on the West Bank, Hamas supporters and officials were detained. President Abbas called for a halt to all violent acts, including reprisals against Hamas members.

On 14 June, President Abbas dismissed PM Hannieh, which led to the dissolution of the Government. He declared a State of Emergency for 30 days in accordance with the Palestinian Basic Law, and appointed Salam Fayyad to serve as Prime Minister, Foreign Minister and Finance Minister, leading an emergency government of 11 independents, mainly technocrats. President Abbas said that he planned to consult the Palestinian people at the appropriate time.

Meanwhile, within the Gaza Strip, the situation remains tense. Today marks the 100<sup>th</sup> day of captivity for the BBC journalist Alan Johnston. Hamas militants surrounded the compound of the Doghmush clan on 18 June, where it is believed Mr. Johnston is being held. There have been no reports of progress in the efforts to release Israeli Cpl. Shalit, who in five days time has been captive for one year. We are troubled by reports of harassment of Gaza's small Christian minority. This morning there were reports of at least one rocket attack into Israel.

## CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

### International political reactions

At the height of the crisis, the Secretary-General convened a teleconference of the Quartet Principals on June 15. In addition to sharing its great concern for the welfare and security of all Palestinians, the Quartet expressed understanding and support for President Abbas' necessary and legitimate actions, and noted its continuing support for other legitimate Palestinian institutions. Arab Foreign Ministers meeting in Cairo sent a strong message of support to President Abbas, as did the EU Council.

With the formation of the government, the European Union and the United States announced their intention to renew direct assistance to the Palestinian Authority. These decisions signaled the legitimacy of the new government and the fact that President Abbas' positions are consistent with those of the Quartet. The Secretary-General telephoned President Abbas and Prime Minister Fayyad to convey his full support to the new Government. In a welcome development, in a 17 June meeting, Prime Minister Olmert assured the Secretary-General that Israel was examining options for the resumption of transfers of VAT and customs revenues, and was planning to ease substantially movement restrictions in the West Bank.

### Immediate UN concerns

With the situation in Gaza now stabilizing to some extent, concerns about food and medical shortages are mounting. Re-opening the crossings for commercial and humanitarian imports is the UN's most immediate humanitarian concern.

Our estimates indicate that commercial stocks of basic food items, such as flour and rice, will begin to run out in 3 weeks, unless imports are resumed. UNRWA and WFP, the main humanitarian providers in Gaza have between 7 and 10 days worth of food reserves for distribution. Dairy and other fresh products are already in short supply. Yesterday and today small quantities of immediate food and medical relief were provided by Israel, the UN and the ICRC through the Kerem Shalom crossing, for targeted distribution to recipients and suppliers. A relief shipment is scheduled to arrive from Jordan tomorrow. These are welcome steps. But I must emphasise that overall food and other essential commodity reserves are declining each day. This can only be reversed by a resumption of imports through Karni.

All parties have expressed their desire to ensure that basic supplies continue to reach the people of Gaza. We welcome the fact that Israel resumed fuel shipments for the power plant and petrol stations. Concrete steps by the parties must be taken now to re-open the crossings. We are working to find the arrangements that will enable the parties make this happen, as called for by the Secretary-General and the Quartet.

### Other developments

Mr. President,

## CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

Allow me briefly to refer to other developments. This has been an important month in Israeli politics. On 13 June the Knesset elected Deputy Prime Minister Shimon Peres as Israel's ninth president. He will assume his functions in a month. Former Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak was elected as the chairman of the Labor Party on 12 June and assumed his duties as Israel's Defence Minister on 19 June.

Israeli settlement activity continued, including new construction near the Dead Sea and in the northern West Bank, in violation of the Road Map. Barrier construction continued in occupied territory, notwithstanding the advisory opinion of the International Court of Justice. Obstacles to movement in the West Bank now number 553.

I visited Syria on 14 June and was received by the Vice President, the Foreign Minister and other senior officials. The Syrian Government impressed on me their desire to see the start of negotiations leading to peace with Israel and expressing concern at increasing regional stability. In conversations with both Israeli and Syrian interlocutors, I was assured that there was no interest in breaking the decades of calm which have prevailed across the Israeli-Syrian armistice line.

I also joined the Secretary-General for his recent meeting with Prime Minister Olmert, where he underscored his desire to address the humanitarian situation in Gaza, work with President Abbas, and pursue opportunities for peace in the region with all the Arab states in light of the Arab Peace Initiative.

### Lebanon

Mr. President,

I now turn to the situation in Lebanon where the security situation continues to be unstable and has deteriorated even further during the reporting period. The explosions in and around Beirut have continued. On 13 June, Walid Eido, a Member of Parliament and Saad Hariri's Future Movement, his son, two bodyguards and six other people were murdered in an assassination reminiscent of the terrorist attacks perpetrated in Lebanon throughout 2005. The Secretary-General condemned the attack in the strongest possible terms and called on the Lebanese Government to bring to justice the perpetrators and instigators of that crime. Following the exchange of letters between the Secretary-General and the President of the Security Council and at the request of the Lebanese Government, UNIIIC has started to extend its assistance to the Lebanese authorities in their investigation of this latest crime.

In the North of Lebanon, for five weeks now, the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) continue intense fighting against Fatah el-Islam elements. To date 76 LAF soldiers have died in the fighting while the number of civilian fatalities is estimated to be about 50.

The humanitarian conditions in the neighboring Beddawi camp remain difficult. However, UNRWA, supported by UN agencies and relief organizations, reports that food and non-food items as well as medical supplies are sufficient to meet current needs. I am

## CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

pleased to report that the international community has responded promptly and fully to the recently launched UNRWA Flash Appeal for 12.7 million dollars, which will help sustain humanitarian stocks. In addition, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has approved a 12 million dollars grant for cash assistance to both displaced families from Nahr el Bared and host families from the Beddawi camp. Overcrowding, together with public health issues, are now the main challenges.

Following the adoption by the Security Council of resolution 1757 (2007) regarding the Special Tribunal for Lebanon and given that as of 10 June, the United Nations was not notified in writing by the Government of Lebanon that the legal requirements for entry into force had been complied with, the provisions of the document annexed to the resolution has entered into force. The Secretary-General has begun to undertake the steps and measures necessary to establish the Special Tribunal in a timely manner, in coordination with the Government of Lebanon whenever appropriate.

On 17 June, two Katyusha rockets fired from southern Lebanon landed in Kiryat Shmona in northern Israel, causing minor damage but claiming no casualties. LAF and UNIFIL troops quickly deployed to the area but found no suspects at the site. UNIFIL was in immediate contact with senior interlocutors in both the LAF and the IDF to contain the situation. The attack, Mr. President is a most serious violation of SCR 1701.

The Secretary-General strongly deplored the attack which he characterized as an attempt to destabilize Lebanon, and urged all involved parties to exercise restraint. The offices of Prime Minister Siniora and Speaker Berri issued separate statements condemning the attack and expressed support for UNIFIL and the LAF.

UNIFIL-led talks concerning the marking of the Blue Line continued over the reporting period within the tripartite mechanism. At the same time, there were an increased number of Israeli violations of Lebanese airspace.

### Conclusion

Mr. President,

The brutal violence in Gaza and the attacks on the legitimate institutions of President Abbas and the PA government, are totally unacceptable and should be condemned. These developments have generated deep sadness and shock among the vast majority of Palestinians. The Secretary-General regrets the failure of the National Unity Government, and condemns the violence that brought about its demise.

Despite what has happened, Gaza and the West Bank remain one Palestinian territory, legally administered by one Palestinian Authority headed by President Abbas, who has appointed an emergency Government led by Prime Minister Fayyad.

It is now vital that political and financial support from Israel and the international community is immediately delivered to President Abbas and the Palestinian government,

## **CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY**

starting with the release of all withheld Palestinian VAT and customs receipts. What is also needed is action on previous Israeli commitments including the evacuation of settlement outposts, removal of roadblocks and checkpoints and release of prisoners. Equally, Fateh and the PA should act on previous commitments, not only to end violence, but to thoroughly reform its institutions.

In Gaza, it is clear that the United Nations has a key role to play in addressing a myriad of challenges, none more pressing than re-opening the crossings. I call on all not to allow this vital humanitarian issue to be overshadowed by political considerations. The people of Gaza cannot be left isolated, and all parties have indicated their desire to ensure that this issue is addressed. Concrete solutions are now needed.

In addition to these immediate issues, two larger political challenges remain. First, how to restore the unity of the Palestinian Authority and people, and prevent the de facto divide between Gaza and the West Bank. And second, how to advance the political process between Israel and the Palestinians and more towards a comprehensive settlement to the Arab-Israeli conflict. It is the responsibility of all – the parties, the regional states and the international community, including the Quartet, to provide the kind of leadership required to steer through this difficult period towards a more hopeful future. The Secretary-General is hoping that the Quartet will meet soon.

I wish to conclude this briefing by paying tribute to the entire United Nations team on the ground in the occupied Palestinian territory. Two UN staff, Abdel-Fatah Abu-Ghali, 39, and Ahmad Al-Laham, 25, were killed on 13 June, and others were injured serving the people of Gaza. While operations had to be curtailed, they never ceased entirely. Even at the time of heaviest fighting, the UN remained. I wish to salute in particular the dedication of the Director of UNRWA in Gaza, and the Chief Security Adviser a.i. as well as the international security officers and national staff who remained through the height of the fighting. The United Nations will remain fully engaged in meeting its mandated responsibilities in the occupied Palestinian territory, and in efforts to advance the cause of a just, lasting and comprehensive peace.