

Ms. Angela Kane, Assistant Secretary-General for Political Affairs

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

Friday, 30 June 2006

At approximately 5 o'clock in the morning on Sunday 25 June, eight Palestinian militants left the southern Gaza Strip via a tunnel and infiltrated an Israel Defense Forces (IDF) base near the Kerem Shalom Kibbutz. The militants fired several anti-tank rockets into the IDF base and a gun battle took place. Corporal Gilad Shalit, an IDF soldier also holding French nationality, was taken hostage and is now being held by militants in Gaza. Two IDF soldiers were killed and a further three wounded. Two Palestinian militants were killed in the operation.

Three Palestinian militant groups — the Nasser Salah e-Din Troops of the Popular Resistance Committees; the Izz e-Din al-Qassam Brigades, the Hamas military wing; and the newly formed Islamic Army — issued a statement confirming that they had conducted the operation and were holding the soldier. They subsequently stated that he would not be released and that information on his state of health would not be provided before Israel releases all Palestinian female and under-age detainees.

The Palestinian Authority spokesman called upon those who abducted the Israeli soldier to guarantee his safety. President Abbas called for the release of the soldier. He met with Prime Minister Haniyeh and contacted international counterparts. Prime Minister Olmert ruled out negotiations over any exchange of prisoners. The Israeli cabinet agreed that the Palestinian Authority would bear full responsibility for any harm to Corporal Shalit and approved recommendations to prepare and deploy Israeli forces for urgent military action.

International efforts to secure the peaceful release of the soldier, especially by Egypt and reportedly by France and Jordan, have been continuous. The Secretary-General has been in frequent touch with parties in the region, including Prime Minister Olmert, President Abbas and President Al-Assad of Syria. He is also consulting individually with his Quartet partners.

The Israeli military operation to obtain the release of Corporal Shalit began just after midnight on 28 June. The operations began with the destruction by F-16 aircraft of two bridges in central Gaza. The IDF then struck Gaza's only power station from the air and ground forces moved into the Gaza Strip. Israeli tanks and armoured personnel carriers moved into the airport, located at the south-eastern end of the Strip. Israeli military aircraft broke the sound barrier over Gaza, causing sonic booms. On the same day, four

Israeli Air Force fighter jets overflew Syrian territory, breaking the sound barrier over a presidential villa in Lattakia.

There was a further air strike on the afternoon of Wednesday 28 June on a largely disused training camp in the south of the Gaza Strip. Another Israeli incursion into Gaza took place on the early morning of Thursday 29 June. The Israeli Air Force shelled an open area in the compound of the Islamic University in Gaza and Israeli tanks entered northern Gaza. On the afternoon of 29 June, the Israeli Air Force attacked a car in the Gaza Strip. Its occupants escaped.

On 25 June, an 18-year old Israeli from the West Bank settlement of Itamar was abducted by Palestinian militants as he was hitchhiking. His body was found in Ramallah on the morning of Thursday 29 June. The Palestinian Popular Resistance Committees claimed responsibility for his abduction and killing.

In a military briefing on 29 June, an IDF spokesperson stated that the ongoing operation was aimed at halting rocket attacks on Israel from northern Gaza, in addition to securing the release of the missing soldier. Between 25 and 30 June, Palestinian militants reportedly fired 17 rockets from the Gaza Strip into Israel, including 11 on 29 June alone. There were no reported casualties.

Also on the night of 29 June, Israeli forces undertook a large-scale arrest raid in the West Bank and Jerusalem, detaining 64 Palestinian Authority officials, including eight ministers and 21 Palestinian Legislative Council members, and 23 suspected militants. The Israeli Attorney General has said that those arrested will be charged under anti-terrorism legislation.

Violence continued last night as the IDF reportedly conducted several operations in the Gaza Strip, including a reported 30 air strikes, as well as in the West Bank. The Ministry of the Interior in Gaza was targeted by an aerial strike and sustained major damage. Two militants from the Al-Aqsa Brigades — the Fatah military wing — were reportedly killed earlier today in Nablus by Israeli military forces, and one Palestinian Islamic Jihad militant died following an air strike in Rafah. No other Palestinian deaths have been reported.

The air attack on the power station on Wednesday destroyed six transformers and the switchyard. The power station cannot transmit, so over 40 per cent of Gaza is now without power. Water pipes were also damaged in the attack and approximately 130,000 people have been without water. Most hospitals possess generators and are continuing to function, and there are sufficient food supplies to last two to three weeks. The crossing points between the Gaza Strip and Israel have been closed since the beginning of the IDF operation, however, so supplies of food and medicine will decrease to critical levels unless those crossings are opened shortly.

The private pipeline that brings fuel from Israel into the Gaza Strip has not been functioning for the past five days. Unless the flow of fuel is restored, supplies are

expected to run out this Sunday, 2 July. The humanitarian consequences of a failure of sanitation systems and private generators would be severe, especially given the hot weather. International efforts are under way to restore the flow of fuel into the Gaza Strip.

This is a grave crisis. The slightest turn of events could easily set off another full-scale conflict between Israelis and Palestinians, bringing greater dangers to civilians and having serious regional repercussions. All parties must recognize that, and act with wisdom and care and in full conformity with international humanitarian law. Nothing justifies the holding of hostages. Corporal Gilad Shalit must be released. Nothing justifies indiscriminate rocket attacks. The Palestinian Authority must act to stop them. However, Palestinian civilians should not pay the price of those actions. Israel must cease the destruction of civilian infrastructure, ensure that civilians are protected and allow for humanitarian assistance to get where it needs to go. We are also extremely concerned at the arrest of a large section of the elected Palestinian Government.

All concerned parties must step back from the brink and give dialogue a chance to avert a full-scale confrontation that will only lock Israelis and Palestinians in deeper and deadlier conflict.