

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

14 March 2007

**Mr. B. Lynn Pascoe
Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs**

Mr. President,

It is a pleasure to be with you today. This is, no doubt, the first of many briefings I will give to the Security Council on the situation in the Middle East. I look forward to working closely with the Council, reporting on major developments and on the work of the Secretary-General and his representatives, and facilitating the Council's engagement in the search for a just, lasting and comprehensive peace in accordance with its resolutions.

I hardly need to remind the Members of this Council just how often and how tragically the hopes for peace in the Middle East have been frustrated in the past. We have no choice, however, but to keep working tirelessly toward that end – to overcome the setbacks that inevitably occur along the way and to build, wherever possible, on steps in the right direction. Despite continuing tensions, violence and mistrust, a majority of Israelis and Palestinians still embrace a common dream: of two states, Israel and Palestine, living side by side in peace and security.

The challenges to progress remain formidable today. But following a year in which prospects for peace seemed only to diminish, several developments of the past month – among them the agreement reached in Mecca on a Palestinian National Unity Government, and the renewal of Israeli-Palestinian dialogue – hold out the potential, if not yet the promise, to begin turning that trend around.

Palestinian political developments

Thankfully, the ceasefire agreed in Mecca has already calmed the internal Palestinian front, although isolated clashes underscore the fragility of the situation.

After being commissioned to form the new government by President Abbas, Prime Minister-designate Hannieh has consulted all factions and remained in close and frequent contact with the President himself, to finalize the new government and prepare its programme for presentation to the Palestinian Legislative Council. Under the Basic Law, the new government must be finalized by 21 March, and there are signs that it may be presented imminently.

We must hope that the new government will take positions and actions that demonstrate, as was agreed in Mecca, respect for the signed agreements of the PLO, which renounce terrorism, recognize Israel's right to exist in peace and security, and impose crucial obligations on the PA. The UN Special Coordinator, Alvaro de Soto, has been actively pressing these issues during the crucial period of government formation.

As it affirmed when it met in Berlin on 21 February, the Quartet is taking a "wait and see" approach. It reaffirmed its readiness to support a government committed to Quartet principles, and encouraged progress in this direction. As events unfold, the United Nations will continue its consultations with Quartet and regional partners.

In the meantime, as called for by the Quartet, preliminary discussions are underway on new ideas proposed by the European Commission for facilitating aid financing and coordination to support Palestinian social and economic development, and to strengthen public institutions and governance. This initiative will

benefit from consultation with all stakeholders, bearing in mind the results of national unity discussions and existing aid coordination arrangements.

Efforts to advance political dialogue

Since the last briefing, President Abbas and Prime Minister Olmert met on two occasions – once with US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice on 19 February, and again last Sunday in a bilateral meeting. These meetings have provided a vital channel of dialogue at a sensitive time. We call on the two leaders to continue their dialogue and focus on the substantive final status issues that must be addressed in order to provide a political horizon and to advance the Roadmap. We welcome Secretary Rice's plans to return to the region later this month.

We continue to see welcome signs of increased engagement by Arab countries. Preparatory meetings held in advance of the summit of the League of Arab States on 28 March in Riyadh have centered around efforts to breathe new life into the Arab Peace Initiative. This important initiative is a building block of the Road Map, and represents a strategic choice by Arab countries for peace and co-existence with Israel, based on a comprehensive regional approach. Prime Minister Olmert has recently spoken of the positive elements that Israel sees the initiative.

There were no further moves, however, towards dialogue between Israel and Syria in the past month. EU High Representative for Foreign and Security Policy Javier Solana is in Damascus today, having already visited Lebanon and Saudi Arabia.

Challenges to progress

Mr. President,

Developments on the ground underscore the need for both sides to take concrete actions that demonstrate their adherence to existing agreements and international obligations.

Violence and tension

One source of deep concern is continued tension and violence, which took the lives this past month of 23 Palestinians – eight at the hands of the IDF, 15 from internal fighting – and one Israeli.

Over the same period, Palestinian militants in Gaza fired at least 55 rockets into Israel. We commend Israel's continued restraint in the face of these provocations, which are both unjustified and in breach of the agreed ceasefire. Israeli security forces in Tel Aviv, meanwhile, arrested a man from the northern West Bank who, allegedly, had been preparing to perpetrate a suicide bombing.

These incidents underscore how important it will be for a new Palestinian government to ensure that its security forces work in harmony to prevent the smuggling of weapons, to impose internal law and order and to act firmly against those who perpetrate attacks against Israel. This will be a difficult challenge, and we hope that all players, including in the region, will support such steps and take no actions that would make them more difficult.

In late February, the IDF launched a large military operation, codenamed "Hot Winter", in Nablus. The IDF uncovered a number of sites used for preparing explosives, and arrested a number of suspects. However, the operation placed tens of thousands of Palestinians in the old city of Nablus under curfew for several days, causing major disruption to civilian life and humanitarian operations. IDF operations took place in the reporting period in Jenin, Ramallah and Bethlehem. There have also been incidents of IDF firing injuring fisherman in the coastal waters off the Gaza strip.

We also continue to follow closely the situation in the Old City of Jerusalem following reports of Israeli excavation and construction activity on a ramp leading to the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount, bearing in mind that real or perceived threats to change the *status quo* at sensitive holy sites in Jerusalem has been a trigger of conflict many times in the city's history. A UNESCO delegation recently visited this World Heritage Listed site, and transmitted its report to the Secretary-General yesterday. The report recommends that the Government of Israel should be asked to comply with its obligations regarding heritage conservation in World Heritage sites, such as the Old City of Jerusalem, and to stop immediately the archaeological excavations. The report does note that the works do not threaten the stability of the Western Wall or Al-Aqsa mosque. The recommendations include a call on the Israeli Government to define clearly the final design of the access structure to the Mughrabi Gate, engage in a consultation process with all concerned parties, including the authorities of the Awqaf and Jordan, and to have the process supervised by an international team of experts coordinated by UNESCO.

Settlements and the Barrier

We are also concerned at the continued creation of facts on the ground. Israeli construction of the barrier, parts of which extend deep into the West Bank, is now complete along more than half of its route and continuing, contrary to the advisory opinion of the International Court of Justice. Settlement activity also continues. The Israeli government has yet to freeze this activity or to begin to dismantle the more than 100 settlement outposts in the West Bank, despite its clear obligations to do so under the Roadmap.

Movement and access

The Agreement on Movement and Access is still not being implemented in full.

There has been progress at Karni, where truck crossings increased by 15% during the past month and have more than doubled since November. However, further efforts are needed to meet the AMA targets, and progress remains slow or non-existent on other fronts.

Rafah was open for only 16% of scheduled hours during the reporting period, and the crossing has become increasingly volatile and insecure. As the EU Border Assistance Mission has repeatedly warned, limited and unscheduled openings at Rafah make it extremely difficult to control the crossing. When some 5000 Palestinians tried to exit Gaza through Rafah during an unscheduled opening on 8 March, the human crush left one person dead and seven injured. The unsatisfactory situation at Rafah raises the risks of violence, creates greater incentives for smuggling through illegal entry points, and causes disillusionment among Gaza residents.

Despite commitments made at the December 2006 meeting between Prime Minister Olmert and President Abbas, there has been no meaningful reduction in the number of obstacles to movement in the West Bank, which currently stand at 529. The lack of action to improve movement and access in accordance with existing commitments undermines efforts to revive the Palestinian economy.

UN access

UN workers are also facing increasing restrictions on their movement, thus jeopardizing humanitarian operations in Gaza even as needs on the ground continue to grow. This situation has recently been drawn to the attention of the Government of Israel at a senior level. We hope this will lead to a lifting of such restrictions, for despite concerted efforts to engage with Israeli authorities to improve access for UN workers in the oPt, there has been no progress in addressing a number of important concerns. For example, an agreement, negotiated in recent weeks by UNSCO with Israeli authorities, which would allow a reasonable number of UN international staff to cross Erez securely and without a vehicle search, has not yet been implemented.

Lebanon

Turning our attention to Lebanon, we see that there were several important developments since the last briefing to the Council.

Opposition demonstrations that began in Beirut in December have continued to occur in a calm and orderly manner without major incidents during the reporting period. Regional efforts to broker a solution to the political impasse are becoming more intense in the lead up to the Arab League Summit, resulting in a general atmosphere of cautious optimism. Speaker of Parliament Berri and leader of the Future Movement Saad Hariri, have met three times in recent days to bridge the gap between the government and the opposition.

In contrast, there has been a worrying increase in the number of security threats and bomb scares reported in Lebanon over the past four weeks. Lebanese security services discovered several explosive devices in Beirut and populated areas outside the capital and throughout the country. While a number of these explosives were not primed to detonate, on one occasion, detonators linked to chemical substances were discovered.

With regard to the situation in southern Lebanon, the past month was relatively calm along the Blue Line. Regrettably, Israeli air violations of the Blue Line continued to occur. On 21 February, Israeli planes violated Lebanese airspace drawing response anti-aircraft fire from the Lebanese army in southern Lebanon. In addition, UNIFIL is conducting an investigation into a Blue Line violation incident that took place on 3 March when a Lebanese youth was forced by IDF soldiers to cross the Blue Line and the technical fence into the Israeli side. The findings of the investigation will be communicated to both sides.

The Secretary-General's Special Adviser on the Situation in the Middle East, Michael Williams, traveled in late February to Israel and Lebanon in order to prepare for the Secretary-General's next quarterly report on the implementation of SCR 1701 [2006]. The report will be submitted to you on 16 March.

Conclusion

Mr. President,

I have noted today a number of positive developments that contrast with a year of diminished hopes and expectations in 2006. Much will depend now on how recent agreements are implemented on the ground. An international community, engaged in the period ahead with both firmness and flexibility, can help to ensure that encouraging steps forward turn into longer strides for peace.

For his part, the Secretary-General has made it abundantly clear that he will be deeply and personally engaged in the continuing search for the effective implementation of the resolutions of the Security Council, and a just, lasting and comprehensive solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict. He has shown this commitment already through his efforts to reenergize the role of the Quartet, and he will soon be making his first trip to the region as Secretary-General.

In addition to attending the Arab League Summit in Riyadh on 28 March, the Secretary-General is considering visiting a number of countries in the region which will be announced in due course.

Thank you, Mr. President.