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UNDER-SECRETARY-GENERAL FOR POLITICAL AFFAIRS**

**BRIEFING TO THE SECURITY COUNCIL
ON THE SITUATION IN THE MIDDLE EAST
21 April 2011**

Mr. President,

1. I regret to report that the stalemate in Israeli-Palestinian negotiations has persisted in the last month. This is of particular concern, given the institutional achievements of the Palestinian Authority and the evolving regional situation. Bold and decisive steps are needed to resolve this decades-long conflict, with vision, leadership and responsibility from all concerned. It is also important that any outbreaks of violence that could undermine political efforts are prevented, and that the parties refrain from provocative steps on the ground.

2. Quartet Envoys continued to work with the Israelis and Palestinians to maximize prospects for resuming direct negotiations on a two State solution. Regrettably, after follow-up meetings with the parties on 5 April, it was determined that more time is needed for consultations before scheduling the next Quartet meeting. The Quartet remains committed to convening such a meeting as soon as possible. The UN continues to work for a balanced and effective Quartet initiative that can help the parties to engage meaningfully in direct negotiations, and give a clear international signal of the importance of finding a way forward.

3. Both parties should be concerned that the political track is falling behind the significant progress being made by the Palestinian Authority in its state-building agenda. In its report to the Ad Hoc Liaison Committee (AHLC) meeting in Brussels on 13 April, the United Nations made clear its assessment that in the six areas where we are most engaged with the Palestinian Authority, governmental functions are now sufficient for a viable government of a state. The six areas include: governance, rule of law and human rights; livelihoods and productive sectors; education and culture; health; social protection; and infrastructure and water. In parallel, Israeli measures to facilitate movement have also supported economic activity and access to basic services.

4. The World Bank and the IMF also reported strong progress in institution building at the AHLC meeting, and the AHLC Chair concluded that the Palestinian Authority is above the threshold for a functioning state in the key sectors studied. However, we must be aware that these admirable achievements are to date limited to certain areas of the occupied Palestinian territory, and do not apply yet to East Jerusalem, much of Area C and Gaza.

Mr. President,

5. The reporting period saw the highest levels of violence in Gaza and Israel since Operation Cast Lead more than two years ago. Violence was ongoing during the last briefing on

22 March. That same day, four members of a Palestinian family, including three children, were killed by an Israeli strike in Gaza. Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu expressed regret over the unintentional killing of civilians, while stating that Israel was responding to rocket firing at Israeli civilians from populated civilian areas in Gaza. The next day, on 23 March, an Israeli civilian was injured in Be'er Sheva by a Grad rocket fired from Gaza.

6. Efforts to de-escalate violence led to a brief lull. However, on 2 April, an Israeli airstrike killed three leaders of Hamas' military wing who were allegedly involved in plans to kidnap Israeli citizens in the Sinai during Passover. The Hamas military wing used a guided anti-tank missile to hit a school bus on 7 April, injuring two people - one of whom, a teenager, died last week. Between 7 and 10 April, Israel launched heavy military operations in Gaza. Rockets continued to be fired into Israel, a number of them reportedly intercepted by Israel's new anti-missile "Iron Dome" defense system. Following further efforts to de-escalate the violence, a new uneasy calm was restored on 10 April. It has been largely respected since, notwithstanding the firing of two Grad rockets towards Ashdod on 15 April. UNSCO and the Egyptian authorities were actively engaged in de-escalating the violence.

7. Overall, Palestinian militant groups, including Hamas, fired 111 mortar shells and 155 rockets while Israel conducted six incursions and 57 air strikes into Gaza since the last briefing to the Security Council. One Israeli child, referred to in the bus incident, was killed and two civilians were injured by Palestinian rocket fire. Nineteen Palestinian militants and 15 civilians were killed, while 17 militants and 60 civilians were injured, in Israeli military actions.

8. We are alarmed at actions of Hamas to escalate violence, endangering civilians on both sides and risking a deeper confrontation with Israel. We are also deeply concerned at civilian casualties on both sides. The Secretary-General strongly condemns rocket fire from Gaza and calls for it to end. He also reiterates his calls for maximum restraint by Israel. All parties must fully respect international humanitarian law. In the interest of the civilian populations on both sides, we call on the parties to uphold and solidify the prevailing fragile calm.

9. Citing security concerns, Israel closed the Kerem Shalom crossing point to Gaza from 5 to 12 April. This illustrates the detrimental effect of the violence on the humanitarian situation and the importance of implementing Security Council Resolution 1860 in all its aspects. The weekly average of truckloads entering the Strip during this reporting period was 909, compared to 566 in June 2010 before the announcement of the revised Israeli policy, but still far below pre-closure levels.

10. During the reporting period, Israel approved six additional UN school and road projects in Gaza. However, we urge Israel's early approval of two UN housing projects in Rafah and Khan Yunis comprising 1,100 units. We also hope that coordination procedures to facilitate entry of approved material will be further streamlined. Greater liberalization of the import of construction materials into Gaza, including aggregate, iron bar, and cement, is essential for recovery, as is an increase in exports.

11. I emphasise the importance of the Government of Israel making more sustained and far-reaching progress towards ending the closure of Gaza, within the framework of Security Council

12. In the context of media reports of potential flotillas, let me state our belief that the appropriate way to meet needs in Gaza is through legitimate crossings. In this regard, I wish to recall the position of the Quartet, as expressed in its 21 June 2010 statement, that those wishing to deliver goods to Gaza do so through established channels so that their cargo can be inspected and transferred via land crossings into Gaza. The Quartet emphasised that there is no need for unnecessary confrontations and called on all parties to act responsibly in meeting the needs of the people of Gaza. The AHLC also called on all international supporters to make use of the existing land crossings to channel their support to Gaza, and abstain from provocations.

Mr. President,

13. We deplore the abduction and murder of Vittorio Arrigoni, an Italian citizen and activist, in Gaza on 15 April, allegedly by a Salafist group. A number of suspects have reportedly clashed with and been arrested by the de-facto authorities in Gaza.

14. I regret to report no progress in efforts to secure the release of Israeli Staff Sergeant Gilad Shalit, who has been in Hamas captivity since 25 June 2006. We continue to call for his release and for immediate humanitarian access to him. We also continue to follow closely the situation of several thousand Palestinians in Israeli prisons, whose human rights must be respected. We continue to underscore the importance of releases of prisoners to the Palestinian Authority.

15. We also remain concerned that the Palestinian Authority is not able to extend its state-building work to Gaza due to the ongoing Palestinian political divide. This only underscores the need for progress towards Palestinian unity within the framework of the Palestinian Authority and the commitments of the Palestine Liberation Organization. In this regard, I note that consultations on the Palestinian reconciliation continue, although they have not led to the formation of a unity government as President Abbas and Prime Minister Fayyad had hoped.

16. In the meantime, preparations for municipal elections on 9 July continue in the West Bank. Hamas has yet to authorize electoral work in Gaza. The Palestinian Central Election Commission opened voter lists for exhibition and challenges between 9 and 14 April in the West Bank, including for the about 40,000 newly registered voters.

Mr. President,

17. We are very concerned at ongoing Israeli settlement activity and demolition of Palestinian structures in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem. On 4 April, the Government of Israel retroactively authorized construction work and plans for further expansion of four West Bank settlements. We remain very concerned at plans for more than 2,200 settlement units in East Jerusalem, although we note that their further consideration has been postponed until May. More permanent measures to curtail and halt settlement expansion are needed. Settlement activity is contrary to international law and Israel's commitments under the Roadmap and detrimentally affects Palestinian readiness to return to direct negotiations. We call on Israel to respect international humanitarian law in this regard.

Mr. President,

18. Palestinian security forces continued to work to maintain law and order in the West Bank. Investigation is ongoing into the 4 April murder of the actor and director, Mr. Juliano Mer-Khamis, who will be remembered as a symbol of coexistence and peace.

19. Following the Itamar murder on 11 March, two suspects from the neighbouring Palestinian village of Awarta were recently arrested for allegedly perpetrating the killing, and a number of others were arrested as alleged accomplices. During the investigations, the 6,500 inhabitants of Awarta were placed under several curfews. Over 400 men and 80 women were reportedly interrogated, and many homes were searched.

20. Since last month's briefing to this Council, Israeli security forces conducted 321 search operations in the West Bank, during which 38 Palestinians were injured and 228 arrested. Ten Palestinians were injured by Israeli settlers during the reporting period. Demonstrations continued against the barrier, which deviates from the Green Line in contravention to the advisory opinion of the International Court of Justice, resulting in 19 Palestinian injuries and a number of arrests.

21. We welcome the IDF decision of 6 April to systematically investigate all Palestinian casualties in the West Bank caused by IDF fire amongst individuals not engaged in hostilities. We look forward to the effective implementation of this important measure of accountability.

Mr. President,

22. Turning now to the situation in Lebanon, almost three months after his nomination as Prime Minister-designate by President Sleiman, consultations by Najib Mikati have not yet led to the formation of a new Government. Mr. Mikati and the President have decided to give additional time to the process, to ensure that the composition of the next government would be as desired by all Lebanese and in accordance with the Constitution.

23. Against this background, there have been some security incidents in Lebanon. On 27 March, a small bomb exploded in a Church in the eastern city of Zahleh, causing damage but no casualties. No party claimed responsibility over the attack, which came four days after seven Estonian nationals were kidnapped while cycling on a road near Zahleh, in an area close to the border with Syria. Despite several arrests, the motives of the kidnappers and the fate of the cyclists are not known.

24. In Nahr el Bared camp, the first delivery of homes in the reconstructed camp took place on 19 April. This is a significant milestone, giving hope to the community displaced since the destruction of their camp in 2007. I call upon donors to also contribute towards the full reconstruction of Nahr el Bared.

25. The overall situation in the UNIFIL area of operations has remained generally quiet and stable. Israeli air violations continued almost on a daily basis.

Mr. President,

26. The international community is rightly concerned at the protracted stalemate in the peace process. We stress the importance of supporting and empowering the leadership of President Abbas and Prime Minister Fayyad, and of bringing the parties back to the table. Despite the Palestinian Authority's accomplishments, the institutional achievements of the state-building agenda are approaching their limits within the political and physical space currently available. Far-reaching rather than incremental steps should be taken by Israel to lead to progress on the ground, by rolling back measures of occupation to match the Palestinian Authority's achievements.

27. At the same time, the resumption of Israeli-Palestinian peace negotiations on all final status issues is urgent. We believe the international community must play its part in helping the parties move forward, and we will continue to engage Quartet partners, hoping that the conditions will be met for the holding of a Principals' meeting as soon as possible.

28. The United Nations will continue to work for a comprehensive resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict on the basis of the UN Security Council Resolutions, the Madrid principles including land for peace, the Roadmap, and the agreements previously reached between the parties.