

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

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

Thursday, 9 November 2006

Yesterday morning, Wednesday 8 November, at approximately 5.30 a.m., Israeli forces fired 12 to 15 shells into north-west Beit Hanoun in the northern Gaza Strip. Shelling continued for 30 minutes and a house was destroyed. At least 18 Palestinians were killed, including eight children and seven women. A further 55 people were injured.

This incident followed a weeklong military operation undertaken by the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) in northern Gaza. The operation, code-named Autumn Clouds, began in the early hours of Wednesday 1 November, when the IDF entered Beit Hanoun in tanks and armoured vehicles. Israeli forces remained for a week and conducted arrests, door-to-door searches and military operations. During this period, the IDF controlled all movement in and out of Beit Hanoun and imposed a strict curfew on its inhabitants. According to the IDF, the operation was intended, "to prevent and disrupt the launching of rockets at Israel and to damage the terror infrastructure in the Beit Hanoun area". The IDF withdrew from Beit Hanoun on Tuesday 7 November.

According to the World Health Organization, 82 Palestinians were killed during the operations in Gaza between 1 and 8 November. Of those killed, 21 were children, 12 were women and 49 were men. A further 260 Palestinians were injured. According to the IDF, 57 of those killed in Gaza this week were "armed terrorists". The IDF also recovered a large number of weapons. One Israeli soldier was killed and at least one other was injured during the military operations in Gaza.

Palestinian militants continued to fire rockets into Israel during the week. According to the Government of Israel, 52 rockets and mortars were fired towards Israel between 31 October and 6 November, of which 35 detonated in Israel, notably in the cities of Sderot and Ashkelon. At least four Israeli civilians were injured by these rockets. At least three rockets landed today, but no one was hurt.

The humanitarian situation in Beit Hanoun deteriorated over the course of the week. Most areas of the town were without electricity and water, and there has been extensive infrastructure damage. At least 18 homes, a mosque and non-governmental organization offices were demolished, and a further 150 homes and nine commercial properties were damaged. The hospital continued to function, but primary health care services ceased to operate, as health staff were unable to leave their homes.

United Nations agencies and the International Committee of the Red Cross were able to provide food, water, powdered milk, fuel and hygiene kits on three occasions during the week, when the IDF lifted the curfew briefly to allow humanitarian access. On 3 November, two volunteer paramedics of the Palestinian Red Crescent Society died following IDF fire received in Beit Lahiya while performing their emergency medical duties. The individuals concerned and their means of transport were clearly marked with a distinctive emblem conferring the protection of the Geneva Conventions.

Since the launching of the IDF operation on 1 November, the United Nations has been in contact with the Israeli Government at the highest levels to express concern about the situation in Gaza. The Prime Minister of Israel gave assurances to the Secretary-General over the weekend that no operation would be launched that was not essential to stop the firing of rockets by militants. On Tuesday, the IDF announced that the Beit Hanoun incursion was concluding. Yesterday, however, the Israeli artillery continued attacks.

The United Nations was in contact with members of the Israeli Government again yesterday to reiterate the call for restraint and the urgent need to protect civilians.

The Secretary-General publicly expressed his shock to learn about yesterday's incident and extended his condolences to the families of the victims. His Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process, Alvaro de Soto, also issued a statement the same day. Prime Minister Olmert and Defense Minister Peres yesterday expressed their regret over the deaths of Palestinian civilians. Prime Minister Olmert also announced the suspension of IDF artillery fire pending an investigation of the circumstances of this latest incident.

Yesterday, Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas and Prime Minister Ismael Haniyeh postponed their talks on the establishment of a new Palestinian Government "until further notice". The talks had been intense during the past week, and the Prime Minister and the President had agreed in principle on Monday to a formula for the composition and programme of a new Government.

In the meantime, in Damascus, Khaled Mashaal, the exiled leader of Hamas, called for renewed attacks on Israel. He urged other militant groups to join the struggle.

The incident that occurred in Beit Hanoun on Wednesday is shocking. Men, women and children who posed no threat were killed as they slept in their home. While this incident is unusual in scale, it is, however, not the first time that an Israeli military operation in the occupied Palestinian territory has resulted in a high number of civilian casualties.

The Secretary-General has repeatedly expressed his deep concern about the rising death toll caused by the Israeli military operation in northern Gaza, given that such operations inevitably cause civilian casualties. The Secretary-General has reminded both sides of their obligations under international humanitarian law regarding the protection of civilians in armed conflict and reiterated his call to the Israeli Government to cease its military operations in Gaza without delay.

The Secretary-General took note of the reported announcement by the Israeli Government of a full investigation into this latest incident and looks forward to its early results. We see the investigation as an opportunity for Israel to reflect not only on the obvious military and operational implications, but also on the policy of military pressure as a whole, which is quite clearly not producing the desired goal of stopping rocket attacks. The Palestinians need, more than ever, a respite from the siege to which they are subjected so that they can see on the horizon a credible, negotiated way out.

The United Nations has repeatedly condemned Palestinian rocket fire. We do so again today, as we note that a large number of rockets have been fired by Palestinian militants into Israel during the past week. It is of critical importance that responsible Palestinian forces should join in action to make sure that militant attacks are stopped. This is one of the reasons why the United Nations and its partners in the Quartet continue to encourage the efforts of President Abbas to bring about a national unity Government. Such a new Government is the best way for the Palestinians to tackle the problem of law and order.

We hope that both Israelis and Palestinians will, in the wake of yesterday's tragedy in Beit Hanoun, pause and reflect on the fact that the conflict between them will not be resolved by force and that ways must be found to bring about negotiations. We therefore reiterate our call for a return to dialogue as the only way out of this spiral of violence.