

Statement of the Secretary-General

CONTINUED ESCALATION IN AND AROUND GAZA

I am deeply alarmed by the current escalation of violence in and around Gaza. This is unacceptable.

I have been repeatedly condemning the rocket attacks by Hamas militants against Israel. While recognizing Israel's right to defend itself, I have also condemned the excessive use of force by Israel in Gaza. The suffering caused to civilian populations as a result of the large-scale violence and destruction that have taken place over the past few days has saddened me profoundly.

The frightening nature of what is happening on the ground, in particular its effects on children -- who are more than half of the population -- troubles me greatly. I have continuously stressed the need for strict observance of international humanitarian law.

I am also pained at the death, injury and damage to United Nations personnel and premises as well as to others associated with our programmes.

All this must stop. Both Israel and Hamas must halt their acts of violence and take all necessary measures to avoid civilian casualties. A ceasefire must be declared immediately. They must also curb their inflammatory rhetoric.

Only then can dialogue start.

I think regional and international partners have not done enough. They should do more. They should use all possible means to end the violence and encourage political dialogue, emphasizing peaceful ways of resolving differences.

Arab Foreign Ministers are going to meet soon in emergency session. I urge them to act swiftly and decisively to bring an early end to this impasse. At the same time, other world leaders must also step up efforts to support a longer term resolution of the issue.

During the past few days, I have spoken to the principals of the Quartet, to regional leaders including Prime Minister Olmert, Foreign Minister Livni, President Abbas, President Mubarak, President Assad, Prime Minister Siniora, Prime Minister Erdogan and Secretary-General of the League of Arab States, Amre Moussa, and to a number of other leaders, in order to underscore the need to restore calm in full. I shall continue these efforts personally as well as through my envoys in the field.

I reiterate my call that unhindered access should be ensured for the delivery of humanitarian assistance. The United Nations, through the United Nations Special

Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process [UNSCO], United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East [UNRWA] and other agencies on the ground have been in continuous contact with all relevant authorities and mobilizing themselves to provide much needed assistance and alleviate civilian suffering.

I expect all parties to fully heed my call. In particular, Israel must keep opening all border crossings necessary for the continued provision of humanitarian supplies. Israeli Government leaders have given me a guarantee that such supplies and personnel would be allowed entry into Gaza. This cooperation must continue on a rolling basis in the coming days.

My colleagues, John Holmes, Under-Secretary-General of OCHA [Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs] in New York, and Karen Abu Zayd, Commissioner General of UNRWA and Maxwell Gaylard, Humanitarian Coordinator, UNSCO, through video links, can provide a further update on the humanitarian situation and our work in the area.

Thank you for your support.

New York, 29 December 2008