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UNDER-SECRETARY-GENERAL FOR POLITICAL AFFAIRS

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

25 August 2011

Mr. President,

1. Ending the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and establishing an independent and viable State of Palestine living side by side with Israel in peace and security are long overdue. In a rapidly changing regional context, serious progress towards this goal is urgent. The deadlines that were set a year ago with respect to resolving all permanent status issues and completing the Palestinian state-building agenda are upon us. However, despite continued efforts to assist Israel and the Palestinians in finding a way back to the negotiating table, the political deadlock persists. Differences remain profound between the parties regarding what terms should frame negotiations, and mistrust is deepening.

2. The status quo is unsustainable and damaging to both sides. In a stark reminder of the fragility of the situation, the recent period witnessed a serious escalation of violence marked by terrorist attacks targeting several civilian vehicles and one military vehicle in Southern Israel on 18 August. The coordinated attacks resulted in the death of 8 Israelis, including two soldiers, and obviously six civilians. Egyptian security forces cooperated with the IDF on their side of the border to counter the attacks. However five Egyptian security personnel died in the operation. Citing intelligence attributing the attacks to a Palestinian group based in Gaza, Israel conducted 45 air strikes on Gaza that killed 19 Palestinians, including 3 civilians. 30 Palestinians, including at least 10 militants, were also injured. The IDF also conducted search operations in Hebron in the West Bank, reportedly arresting about 120 Hamas members and injuring 55 Palestinians. Gaza militants indiscriminately fired more than 100 rockets and projectiles into Israel, killing one Israeli civilian and injuring 27. The Secretary-General and the Quartet strongly condemned the terror attacks. They also expressed their concern at the risk of escalation and called for restraint from all sides. The Secretariat provided an initial briefing on these developments on 19 August. On 20 August, Israel conveyed regret over the Egyptian deaths which had heightened tension between the two countries.

3. The Office of the Special Coordinator was actively engaged and supported important efforts to restore the calm out of Gaza that had prevailed since April. Special Coordinator Serry visited Cairo on 21 August to work closely with the Egyptian government in this regard and met with the Minister of Foreign Affairs and the Chief of Intelligence. A fragile calm had been restored earlier this week, but we remain concerned by the risk of escalation. In this context, we reiterate that the cessation of hostilities is a key element of progress towards the implementation of Security Council resolutions 1850 and 1860. The militants' indiscriminate firing of rockets towards civilian areas is

unacceptable, and the Secretary-General has consistently condemned such acts. We reiterate the Secretary-General's call for all sides to act with restraint.

Mr. President,

4. Preserving calm is all the more important to give ongoing diplomatic efforts aimed at resuming meaningful negotiations a chance. The Secretary-General has continued to encourage the parties to overcome their differences, and to support Quartet engagement in this regard.

5. However, with no political breakthrough and with Israeli settlement activity continuing, the Palestinian leadership confirmed its intention to approach the United Nations in September. On 28 July, the PLO Executive Committee announced its support to the leadership's intention to go to the UN General Assembly and the Security Council. On 4 August, the Arab Peace Initiative Committee announced the Arab League's plan to call on UN Member States to recognize a Palestinian state within the 1967 lines with East-Jerusalem as its capital, and to move to submit an application for full UN membership. The Committee confirmed its decision at its meeting on 23 August. The Government of Israel has reiterated its opposition to Palestinian action in the United Nations.

6. We continue to hope that the international community will be able to shape a legitimate and balanced way forward to help the parties resume meaningful negotiations that will realize the two state solution.

7. We have consistently shared our assessment that the Palestinian Authority's state-building agenda has successfully laid the foundations of a Palestinian state, notably in the key areas in which the United Nations works with the Authority. Credible reforms have led to tangible economic and security improvements. These achievements must be consolidated and bolstered by genuine political prospects for Palestinian statehood to be achieved in the course of substantive negotiations. The Palestinian Authority also needs to have the financial means to sustain its state-building and reform agenda. Due to shortfalls in donor funding, the Palestinian Authority is experiencing a serious fiscal crisis and needs US\$ 250 million in additional commitments immediately to meet its obligations. We call on the donors to provide timely and generous support.

8. In a development that is a source of serious concern, the Government of Israel has announced a series of new settlement expansion in the West Bank. In total, some 5,200 units are planned in occupied East Jerusalem. 277 units were also approved in the West Bank settlement of Ariel – the largest number approved outside East Jerusalem in a single settlement by the current Government. The Secretary-General reiterated that settlement activity in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, is contrary to international law. On 16 August, the Quartet expressed great concern at these announcements, and reiterated its statement of 12 March 2010 which condemned a similar announcement by the Government of Israel. The Quartet also reaffirmed that unilateral action by either party cannot prejudice the outcome of negotiations and will not be recognized by the international community. In a more positive development, on 2 August, the Israeli

Supreme Court ordered the evacuation of the illegal settlement outpost of Migron, and we look forward to its implementation.

9. The intention of the Government of Israel to relocate some 2,300 Bedouins living in Area C is also worrying. The land where this Bedouin community lives has been allocated for the construction and expansion of the Ma'ale Adummim bloc of settlements in East Jerusalem. On 22 August, the Israeli High Court of Justice rejected an appeal to reroute a section of the barrier around the West Bank village of Walajeh, thus enabling construction on a route that risks encircling the village and cutting it off from free access both from East Jerusalem and from the rest of the West Bank.

10. Additional tensions continue to arise from settler violence, IDF incursions, and ongoing restrictions on movement and access. On 1 August, the IDF shot and killed two Palestinians during a search and arrest operation in the Qalandiya refugee camp. Five Israeli soldiers were injured in this operation. While violent attacks by settlers on Palestinians decreased during the reporting period, several such incidents resulted in one Palestinian child injured and property damage, while one settler was also injured. On 2 August, the IDF issued restraining orders against 12 settlers from a village south of Nablus who were suspected of so-called "price tag" activities against Palestinians. The Secretary-General has consistently called for perpetrators of such incidents to be brought to justice.

11. As Muslims celebrate the month of Ramadan, restrictions remain on access for prayers at the Al Aqsa Mosque. The Israeli authorities initially eased access to East Jerusalem for West Bank Palestinians allowing about 117,000 Palestinians to enter the city on the second Friday of Ramadan, but it tightened restrictions again last week. On 17 August, the Israeli authorities extended the closure of Orient House and the Chamber of Commerce in East Jerusalem pursuant to their ongoing ban on Palestinian government institutions in the city. These actions are contrary to Israel's obligations under the Road Map. As the Quartet reiterated on 16 August, Jerusalem is a core issue that must be resolved through negotiations.

Mr. President,

12. Improving living conditions of the population of the Gaza Strip remains a priority for the United Nations. Imports into Gaza have increased by 12 percent since our last briefing. This is a step in the right direction. However, restrictions remain in place, limiting improvements in people's livelihoods, which have deteriorated over three years of closure. To address Gaza's humanitarian needs and rebuild the foundations of its economy, a comprehensive easing of the closure is needed, along with a substantial improvement in the security situation.

13. We reiterate that humanitarian activity is a mainstay of assistance for over a million Gazans, and it is key that humanitarian organizations can exercise their functions unhindered and independently. UNSCO has helped defuse tensions around the closing of a medical NGO in Gaza over its refusal to allow an in-house auditing by the *de-facto*

Ministry of Interior. We welcome the reopening of this NGO on 14 August. However, we are concerned over new orders by the Gaza *de-facto* authorities that would require staff of civil society groups to register with them to travel outside the Gaza Strip in their official function. The 17 August decision of the *de-facto* Ministry of Education to prevent eight students from Gaza from travelling to the United States on scholarships is also of concern and goes contrary to the efforts of the international community to help restore normalcy in Gaza. In another disturbing event, on 28 July, armed men attacked and vandalized a United Nations facility used for summer camps for children.

14. Israeli Staff Sergeant Gilad Shalit remains in Hamas captivity since 25 June 2006. I call on his captors to allow humanitarian access to him and release him without further delay. Indirect talks were reportedly held between Israel and the Gaza *de-facto* authorities under Egyptian auspices towards conclusion of a prisoner exchange deal, and we hope an agreement can soon be reached.

15. Fatah and Hamas representatives continue to meet on the implementation of the reconciliation accord agreed in Cairo in May. We continue to support reconciliation efforts within the framework of the commitments of the Palestine Liberation Organization, the positions of the Quartet and the Arab Peace Initiative.

16. The reconciliation accord envisages that elections will be held following formation of a technocratic government of unity. On 22 August, President Abbas issued a decree postponing local elections without setting a new date, stating that conditions should first be in place for the election commission to work in all of the territory. The elections had been set for 22 October.

Mr. President,

17. I would like to turn to the situation in Lebanon, where a number of security incidents of concern occurred.

18. On 26 July a UNIFIL convoy was targeted outside the city of Saida, injuring five peacekeepers. This was the second such attack within two months, which the Secretary-General strongly condemned. A short exchange of fire between the Lebanese Armed Forces and Israel Defense Forces near the Wazzani River took place on 1 August. The Council was briefed on these incidents two days ago. Despite these events, the situation in the UNIFIL area of operations remained generally quiet and stable. Israeli violations of the Lebanese airspace continued on an almost daily basis and in high numbers.

19. In addition, two explosions took place in Beirut in circumstances that remain unclear, on 29 July and 11 August. The later killed two persons who were reportedly handling an explosive device and injured two others. On 13 August, there was a shooting directed at the property of Member of Parliament Suleiman Franjeh.

20. On 5 and 6 August, heavy clashes between armed factions erupted in the Ain el Hilweh Palestinian refugee camp following an assassination attempt against the military

commander of Fatah in Lebanon. A ceasefire was agreed upon after hours of fighting that left a number of people injured. One of UNRWA's schools was hit by an RPG causing material damage to two classrooms.

21. Against this background, during his visit to Lebanon from 16 to 19 August, President Abbas reaffirmed his position that the Palestinian refugees in Lebanon "have no need for weapons, inside or outside the camps, because they are protected by Lebanese law." The President also inaugurated a new Palestinian embassy in Beirut, marking the upgrading of the PLO's diplomatic representation in Lebanon, and sought Lebanon's support for the recognition of a Palestinian State at the United Nations in September.

22. On 3 and 4 August the Lebanese Parliament held its first session since the formation of Prime Minister Mikati's Government on 7 July. At this session, amongst other items, the Parliament adopted a law that defines the maritime zones under Lebanon's sovereignty.

Mr. President,

23. The work of the Special Tribunal for Lebanon has continued and remains a major issue in Lebanon. On 9 August, the Lebanese authorities notified the STL that they were unable to arrest and transfer those accused in the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafic Hariri. On 18 August the President of the Special Tribunal ordered the public advertisement of the indictment. The United Nations supports the important work of the Special Tribunal and expects full cooperation from the Government of Lebanon.

Mr. President,

24. Allow me to turn briefly to events in Syria. I know that ASG Fernandez-Taranco briefed the Council on 1 and 10 August. High Commissioner Pillay, USG Amos and I briefed the Council on 18 August, and I presented a short update two days ago. The Secretary-General has repeatedly urged President Assad to immediately end violence against the Syrian people, and to engage in meaningful reform. Yet while he pledged to do so, President Assad has not upheld that commitment. As the Secretary-General said earlier this week, it is troubling that he has not kept his word. The Syrian security forces have continued to use excessive and lethal force against the popular protests, including in the provinces of Homs, Hama, Deraa, Idlib and Deir Ez Zor as well as in and around Damascus. Many civilians have been killed and injured, and large scale arbitrary arrests have continued. The official Syrian media report that security and military personnel have also lost their lives over the past days.

25. In an interview on 21 August, President Assad remained silent on the violence committed against civilians, continuing to blame the violence on armed attacks against Army, police and security posts. He also outlined a timetable for the political reforms announced earlier, including parliamentary elections in February 2012 and a revision of the constitution. However, the failure to rein in security forces undermined the credibility of such announcements, and the international community has remained quite skeptical.

26. The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights has issued a deeply disturbing report on the widespread and systematic violations of human rights since March, concluding that the scale and nature of the abuse committed may amount to crimes against humanity. We welcome the decision of the Human Rights Council on Tuesday to establish an international commission of inquiry and hope that the Syrian authorities will extend their full cooperation to the commission.

27. As planned, we sent a UN team to look at the overall humanitarian situation and get a better understanding of the humanitarian needs of the population most affected by the violence in Syria. The team was able to visit several sites across the country, including rural Damascus, Homs, Tartous, Talkalakh, Baniyas, Latakia, Idlib, Hama and Aleppo. It just completed its visit today, and OCHA will provide a debriefing as needed in the next few days.

Mr. President,

28. Many world leaders, including from the region and of course the Secretary-General, have urged President Assad to halt immediately military operations that are killing his own people. He must heed the international community's appeal and we call upon him to do this without any further delay.

Thank you, Mr. President.