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FOR POLITICAL AFFAIRS**

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**BRIEFING TO THE SECURITY COUNCIL
ON THE SITUATION IN THE MIDDLE EAST
25 March 2009**

Mr. President,

1. Two months since unilateral ceasefires were declared in Gaza, we face a worrying situation of impasse and uncertainty. Despite international engagement and support, very little concrete progress has been made on key issues outlined in Security Council resolution 1860 (2009). They include the establishment of a proper ceasefire regime in Gaza, unimpeded access for humanitarian assistance, opening of the crossings, prevention of illicit trafficking in arms and ammunitions, and intra-Palestinian reconciliation.
2. Turning now to the detailed part of the briefing, let me begin with Palestinian political developments. Palestinian Prime Minister Salam Fayyad announced on 7 March his intention to resign at the end of the month, in order to bolster efforts to form a national conciliation government. President Mahmoud Abbas asked the Prime Minister to remain in office until the reconciliation dialogue was brought to a conclusion.
3. Between 10 and 19 March, Palestinian factions as well as independents assembled in Cairo under Egyptian auspices, with the goal of reaching agreement prior to the League of Arab States summit in Doha on 30 March. Egyptian officials report progress on certain aspects of the issues under discussion, namely the PLO, elections, government, security and reconciliation. However, talks adjourned without an agreement and are expected to reconvene on 1 April. We reiterate our support for this process, as called for in resolution 1860 (2009).
4. Egypt hosted an International Conference on the Palestinian Economy and Gaza Reconstruction in Sharm el Sheikh on 2 March. The Secretary-General joined representatives from some 80 countries and multilateral organizations in responding to the Palestinian Authority's Gaza Early Recovery and Reconstruction plan. Donors generously pledged some US\$4.5 billion for humanitarian and economic relief.
5. As he outlined at the conference in Sharm el Sheikh, Prime Minister Fayyad has initiated three large scale interventions for Gaza's recovery process, aimed at rebuilding houses, agricultural development and private sector recovery. The UN supports the Palestinian Authority's relief and recovery efforts and continues to implement projects under the flash appeal, while simultaneously trying to restart projects dormant for many months prior to the military operation due to lack of material allowed in by Israel.
6. Discussions continue on convening the Ad Hoc Liaison Committee in the near future. Key challenges to be addressed include the need for increased budget support for the Palestinian Authority; more clarity on how to channel the funds pledged in Sharm el-Sheikh for Gaza's recovery and the need to address the overall framework for economic growth in the occupied Palestinian territory.

7. However, the intolerable situation at Gaza's crossings remains the key impediment to bringing help – and hope – to the people of Gaza. From 15 February to 21 March a total of 3,633 truckloads, a weekly average of 727, entered Gaza through the various crossing points from Israel along with Rafah. Roughly 85% of all imports consisted of foodstuffs and medical supplies, whereas construction materials, spare parts and other industrial goods remain almost totally banned. While there has been an increase in the amount of goods getting in to Gaza, and the Israeli Cabinet announced on 22 March that foodstuffs from relevant sources would be allowed into Gaza without restriction, the quality and quantity of imports are insufficient compared to needs. For this reason, the United Nations reiterates its call on Israel to abide by its obligations under international humanitarian law and open the crossings for emergency supplies and reconstruction materials, without which there will be no way to rebuild Gaza.

8. The quantity of industrial fuel and cooking gas is also insufficient, as only 70% and 25%, respectively, of the weekly needs entered Gaza. A total ban remains in place on the import of petrol and diesel, except for small quantities delivered to UNRWA.

9. According to the IMF, the continued restriction on the entry of cash and the inability of many, including Palestinian Authority employees, to withdraw salaries from the banks, affects the livelihoods of approximately half a million Gazans. UNRWA and other international partners are unable to distribute cash assistance and settle payments for social hardship cases.

10. We continue to be concerned that, despite Egyptian efforts, no ceasefire regime is in place. In addition, there has been no breakthrough in efforts to secure the release of Corporal Shalit and several hundred Palestinian prisoners despite an intensification of efforts. Following an Israeli announcement on 17 March that agreement had not been reached, the IDF arrested 10 Hamas leaders in the West Bank, including a former deputy Prime Minister of the Palestinian Authority. The Israeli Cabinet announced on 22 March its intention to remove privileges not mandated by legal requirements or treaty obligations from Hamas and Islamic Jihad prisoners.

11. In the absence of a ceasefire, violence continues. During the reporting period more than 100 rockets and mortars have been fired into Israel from Gaza. These attacks, targeting civilian areas, are irresponsible and must cease. In addition, there have been 12 Israeli airstrikes, killing five Palestinians and injuring 30. We call for an end to all acts of violence, and for respect of international humanitarian law by all parties.

12. Four UN Mine Action teams continue working in Gaza to remove and deactivate unexploded ordinance. One UNRWA and one municipal school have been cleared along with the UNRWA warehouse at Al-Karni crossing. There has been no development regarding return or identification of a new location of the ordinance, including several unexploded bombs, which went missing in February 2009.

13. We are concerned by recent actions of the de facto Hamas authorities in Gaza purporting to assert control over the Palestinian Authority department of external medical treatment. If not reversed without delay, this step could prevent referrals from Gaza of patients needing urgent or complex medical care not available in Gaza.

14. The members of the Board of Inquiry established by the Secretary-General into incidents in Gaza have returned from the region and the Board is now working on its report. As this Council is aware, the Board was tasked to review and investigate a number of specific incidents that occurred in the Gaza Strip between 27 December 2008 and 18 January 2009 in which death or injuries occurred or damage was done at United Nations premises. The Board will submit its report to the Secretary-General when he returns to New York in early April.

15. During the reporting period, a number of allegations emerged from Israel Defence Force soldiers that they engaged in improper conduct towards civilians during Operation "Cast Lead". On 19 March, the IDF Military Advocate General instructed the military police to probe these allegations.

16. SC Serry is in Gaza today and his consultations with business leaders and civil society representatives have underscored the desperate need for a new approach to Gaza based on a ceasefire, open crossings, rejuvenation of the private sector and Palestinian reconciliation. Without this, the many unresolved issues combined with the absence of an active negotiations track and continued suffering could portend a quick return to violence.

Mr. President,

17. A new Israeli government has yet to be formed following the elections for Knesset last month. President Peres commissioned Likud leader Benjamin Netanyahu to try to form a government on 20 February, and Mr. Netanyahu remains engaged in intensive consultations with several parties to this end.

18. We continue to follow with concern negative actions on the ground in the West Bank, where insufficient steps are being taken to lift the weight of occupation and implement commitments. The rejection by the Israeli Ministry of Interior of a planning scheme submitted by residents of the Silwan neighbourhood in East Jerusalem has given rise to concerns that this could pave the way for demolition and the building of a municipal park in a sensitive area of the city populated by more than a thousand Palestinians. During the reporting period, Israeli authorities also served dozens of new demolition and eviction orders which, if implemented, would affect hundreds of Palestinian residents throughout East Jerusalem, as well as against structures located in Area C of the West Bank. We call on the Government of Israel to stop house demolitions in East Jerusalem, and generally to refrain from unilateral actions that may prejudice final status issues.

19. In the affected areas of the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, it is extremely difficult for Palestinians to obtain building permits. Quartet Representative Tony Blair drew attention last week to the fact that without changes to the current system applied to areas of the West Bank under full Israeli military and administrative control, Palestinians will be prevented from improving their standard of living and developing their land.

20. Also in Jerusalem, on 21 March, Israeli security forces disrupted a Palestinian celebration marking East Jerusalem as a capital of Arab culture. Palestinian institutions in East Jerusalem remain closed by Israeli order, and construction of illegal settlements continues in Jerusalem and throughout the West Bank. No action has been taken to remove outposts. Settlement activity, including in the highly sensitive E-1 area, continues to deprive Palestinians of land for development and agriculture and to create facts on the ground that severely prejudice final status issues. The Ministry of Defence also approved construction

plans for a settlement near Hebron. Let me reiterate before this Council that Israel's obligations under the Roadmap are clear: settlement activity, including so-called "natural growth", must be frozen, and outposts must be removed.

21. Elsewhere in the West Bank, the more than 600 obstacles to movement continue to make normal social and economic interactions impossible for the Palestinian residents there. Construction of the barrier continued in occupied Palestinian territory away from the green line, contrary to the advisory opinion of the International Court of Justice.

22. In the context of Palestinian Roadmap obligations, Palestinian security forces remain highly visible in urban centres in the West Bank and prevent militants from conducting activities or displaying illegal weapons, and continue their efforts to ensure law and order. However, no major operations or new deployments have taken place since reconciliation talks began in Cairo, and over 100 Hamas prisoners were released from Palestinian Authority jails as a goodwill gesture in the context of the reconciliation talks.

23. There have been some gradual improvements regarding cooperation between Israel and the Palestinian security forces, including the recent return of hundreds of rifles confiscated in 2002 as well as an easing of the closure regime in and around Nablus. Nevertheless, the IDF continues to raid West Bank towns and villages on a daily basis, citing security concerns. According to UN statistics, IDF operations in the West Bank have more than doubled in frequency since the end of the Gaza crisis with nearly 200 during the reporting period.

24. During the reporting period, two Israeli policemen were killed by Palestinians in an attack in the Jordan valley and two other policemen were injured in another attack in West Jerusalem. On 21 March Israeli police reported that a large bomb was found and defused in the car park of a shopping mall in Haifa. Two Palestinians were killed by the Israeli security forces, and 82 were injured. Most injuries occurred during protests against the Barrier and against settlement expansion. During the reporting period OCHA recorded 26 incidents involving Israeli settlers targeting Palestinians, which resulted in additional 7 injuries. Twenty-eight people were reportedly wounded in Israel on 24 March during clashes between police and demonstrators marching in the vicinity of the town of Umm alFahm.

Mr. President,

25. The Secretary-General looks forward to attending the summit of the League of Arab States on 30 March, and offers his encouragement for Arab unity in support of Palestinian unity under President Abbas and the central importance of the Arab Peace Initiative. In this respect, we take note that Saudi Arabia hosted a meeting with Syria, Egypt and Kuwait in Riyadh on 11 March aimed at strengthening ties within the Arab world, and participants agreed to support the Palestinian reconciliation process underway. The Secretary-General continues to support the holding of an international conference in Moscow in the near future.

26. During the reporting period, senior US officials visited Damascus and Syrian President Assad has indicated his country's readiness to renew indirect negotiations with a new Israeli government. On the ground, settlement activity in the occupied Syrian Golan continued although the situation was otherwise quiet. We continue to stress the importance and potential of Israeli-Syrian negotiations and hope that it will be possible in the year ahead to further this track alongside a reinvigorated Israeli-Palestinian track.

Mr. President,

27. Turning to Lebanon, and mindful that the Special Coordinator for Lebanon briefed the Council on 10 March on the implementation of Security Council resolution 1701 (2006), allow me touch on a few issues.

28. On 23 March 2009, the relative calm that had prevailed in Lebanon for several weeks was interrupted when Kamal Medhat, Deputy PLO representative in Lebanon and high-ranking Fatah member, was killed by a road-side bomb outside the entrance to Saida's Mieh Mieh camp. In the explosion three of Medhat's bodyguards were also killed and two other persons were severely injured. Palestinian as well as Lebanese political leaders have reached out to Palestinian faction leaders in the camps, in an attempt to mitigate potential tensions on the ground. The Secretary-General has condemned this terrorist attack. He expressed his hope that the perpetrators of this crime will be brought to justice promptly, and noted that such actions must not be allowed to endanger the climate of calm that currently prevails in Lebanon.

29. Campaigning for the June 7 elections has started leading to increased political rhetoric among the country's numerous political groups. Parties have yet to announce their electoral lists but consultations on candidates are underway. Candidates have until 7 April to register.

30. A fifth session of the National Dialogue bringing together Lebanon's 14 main political leaders took place on 2 March under the aegis of President Sleiman. Participants agreed to develop proposals for a national defence strategy. It was also agreed at the dialogue that all parties will work to ensure the elections are conducted in a calm and peaceful atmosphere. A further session of the dialogue is planned for 28 April.

31. A ceremony took place on 9 March to mark the start of reconstruction in the Nahr El Bared camp. Securing adequate funding to complete the work remains an issue of major importance.

32. On 16 March, the Lebanese embassy in Syria was inaugurated. The Lebanese Ambassador to Syria will take up his post in mid-April. On 24 March, Lebanese President Sleiman accepted the credentials of the newly-appointed Syrian Ambassador to Lebanon. These appointments come at a timely juncture and are welcome developments which fulfil one of the key provisions of Security Council resolution 1680 (2006).

33. The overall situation during the past month in UNIFIL's area of operations has been generally quiet. Progress on the project of visibly marking the Blue Line continued to be made this month with four additional points having been agreed for marking. Israeli air violations continued on an almost daily basis during the reporting period.

Mr. President

34. It is important that the Quartet and the international community act with unity of purpose to help stabilise Gaza and reinvigorate the peace process. We need to have both Israeli and Palestinian governments that are clearly committed to the two-State solution. We need a continuation of negotiations, the implementation of commitments on the ground, and a strategy for de-escalating tensions and addressing the urgent humanitarian needs in Gaza.

Thank you, Mr. President.