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**BRIEFING TO THE SECURITY COUNCIL
ON THE SITUATION IN THE MIDDLE EAST
20 April 2009**

Mr. President,

1. Once again we are at an important juncture as the international community prepares to step up its diplomatic engagement towards the peace process. United States Envoy Senator George Mitchell met with Prime Minister Netanyahu on 16 April and with President Abbas the following day mid-way through a regional tour. We welcome Senator Mitchell's stated commitment to "vigourously pursue the creation of a Palestinian State" as part of a comprehensive regional peace strategy of the Obama Administration which aims to integrate and develop the Arab Peace Initiative.
2. The Quartet remains firmly committed to the goal of a two state solution and in this regard, Quartet envoys met in the United Nations offices in Ramallah on 17 April to discuss plans to advance the peace process and agreed to hold regular meetings in the region. The Secretary-General strongly supports a reinvigorated role for the Quartet. Next week King Abdullah of Jordan will meet President Obama during the first official visit by an Arab leader to discuss the regional peace process. Palestinian President Abbas is expected shortly afterwards and in May Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu plans to visit Washington following completion of an internal Israeli review of national security priorities.
3. The Secretary-General has welcomed the formation of the new Israeli government which was sworn in on 31 March. He stated his expectation that the Middle East peace process will resume, with the aim of achieving an independent and viable Palestinian State living side-by-side in peace with a secure Israel, and a comprehensive Arab-Israeli peace as envisaged in Security Council resolutions.

Mr. President,

4. I turn now to the situation in Gaza and southern Israel. During this reporting period there has been very little progress on the key elements outlined in Security Council resolution 1860 – the commitment of the parties to a durable and sustainable ceasefire; opening the crossings for humanitarian access and materials for recovery; and intra-Palestinian reconciliation. For the international community to sustain its commitment to a resumption of the peace process, these principles are indispensable.
5. While there has been a significant drop in violent incidents this reporting period, the situation remains fragile in the absence of a proper ceasefire

regime. Although there were almost two weeks without violence, nevertheless there were 30 rockets and mortars fired by Palestinian militants at southern Israel and the Israeli military carried out two air strikes in the Gaza Strip.

6. The Israeli army reported on 13 April that a Palestinian vessel laden with explosives exploded in the vicinity of an Israeli naval ship without causing injury. Egyptian efforts to combat smuggling continue and on 15 April the Egyptian police reportedly found 900 kilograms of explosives along its border with Gaza. On 10 April, Egyptian security forces arrested 18 people for allegedly smuggling weapons and cash into Gaza.
7. The Israeli policy of near total closure of the Gaza Strip, in force since the Hamas take-over in June 2007, has continued in the wake of Operation Cast Lead. Over 73% of all imports during the reporting period consisted of foodstuffs and cleaning materials. Basic emergency needs for the population, such as food and blankets, have largely been met. The strict limitation to foodstuffs and other commodities allows agencies to maintain basic relief services such as food distributions, which remain at the same levels as last month. WFP is reaching 365,000 beneficiaries; UNRWA 750,000. While I welcome the Israeli Cabinet decision to allow all kinds of foodstuffs into Gaza without restriction, I note that each individual food shipment still requires coordination with the Israeli authorities. I also note that our assistance to the people of Gaza should not be limited to food, blankets or medical supplies.
8. Broader humanitarian assistance and early recovery is impossible without Israel providing adequate entry of fuel, cash, and materials needed for the repairs of schools, clinics, sanitation networks and shelters.
9. The total ban on the import of petrol and diesel has continued since 2 November 2008, with the exception of small quantities delivered to UNRWA. In addition, in the past month, Israel allowed the transfer of approximately half of Gaza's power plants' industrial fuel needs. As a result of the industrial fuel shortages, most Gazans continue to experience intermittent power cuts. The ban on the import of spare parts necessary to maintain the electricity network and bring it up to full capacity exacerbates this situation. Some 10% of the population remains without any electricity due to lack of necessary materials needed to fix damage sustained to the network during Israel's military offensive. So far only two truckloads of electrical transformers and cables have been allowed entry into Gaza since then.
10. Strict limitations on cash entering Gaza make many humanitarian and relief programmes impossible. On April 7, Israel allowed in a transfer of only 50 million shekels, out of 250 million requested to pay for salaries of 65,000 PA staff. The total monthly cost of PA salaries in Gaza is 120 million shekels.
11. There is still limited material for network repairs. Only one truck of cement and a limited quantity of plastic piping were allowed entry to Gaza the past month. They were used for some small-scale water and sanitation projects. The importance of improving water and sanitation is clear from clinical records at UNRWA primary healthcare clinics in the Khan Younis area.

These records show that water and sanitation-related infectious diseases are increasingly prevalent in 2009 compared to 2008.

12. The lack of access to Gaza is deeply frustrating. At the 2 March donor conference hosted by the Government of Egypt at Sharm el-Sheikh, the international community pledged some \$ 4.5 billion for the reconstruction of Gaza. The Palestinian reconciliation process that we all hoped would provide a framework for reconstruction has not, however, moved forward. The United Nations has and will continue to support early recovery and reconstruction efforts in Gaza. To this end we are working to ensure our readiness to support programming once conditions allow for it. In order to further these efforts, the Special Coordinator and his Deputy are intensifying their visits to Gaza. However, without the materials for recovery and reconstruction the process cannot begin, and that requires a substantial easing by Israel of its policy of closure of the Gaza Strip, including steps to return to the framework of 2005 Agreement on Movement and Access.

Mr. President,

13. Following Prime Minister Fayyad's earlier resignation and the end of his government's mandate, President Abbas asked him on 31 March to remain in office until a new government is formed. Palestinian reconciliation talks adjourned for the third time on 2 April. While some progress was reportedly made in the talks, there has been no agreement on the composition or political platform of a transitional government. Talks are scheduled to resume later this month. We continue to support Egyptian efforts aimed at uniting the Palestinian factions under one government under the leadership of President Abbas on the basis of PLO principles.
14. The divide between Gaza and the West Bank continues to grow at the expense of the population of Gaza, as can be seen with health referrals outside of Gaza. As a result of the Hamas take-over of the Referral Abroad Department on 22 March, only patients with referrals approved prior to the takeover, and a small number of patients whose referrals are facilitated by the Peres Peace Center and Physicians for Human Rights were allowed to access specialized medical treatment. The UN is actively engaged with the Palestinian Authority and Hamas in Gaza to facilitate a resolution of this issue.
15. Five United Nations Mine Action Teams continue to work in Gaza, conducting risk-assessments and training in unexploded ordinance safety. There have been no developments regarding the location of the unexploded bombs which went missing in February 2009. A number of issues continue to await approval from the Israeli authorities including agreement on a means by which specialized equipment can be imported into Israel.
16. Israeli Corporal Gilad Shalit remains in captivity despite Egyptian mediation efforts to secure his release in exchange for a number of the 11,000 Palestinian prisoners in Israeli jails.

Mr. President,

17. Let me now turn to the efforts of the Palestinian Authority regarding institution-building and security reform. The international community continues to support these efforts, and plans are being discussed to convene the Ad Hoc Liaison Committee in the next several weeks. During this reporting period, the Palestinian Authority has begun revising and upgrading its budget process in preparation for the 2010 budget and 2011-2013 Palestinian Reform and Development Plan.
18. Nevertheless, challenges remain including the absence of timely and predictable budget support. Despite the large sums of money pledged last month in Sharm el-Sheikh, the Palestinian Authority still has great difficulty paying monthly salaries severely impacting its long-term planning process and undermining the reform agenda.
19. On Palestinian security issues in the West Bank, the reporting period has witnessed an increase in activity by Palestinian Authority forces. They targeted criminal gangs, making a number of arrests and recovering a quantity of weapons and stolen cash, and also shut down a reported explosives manufacturing lab in a mosque in Qalqilia.
20. During the reporting period, ten Palestinians were killed in the West Bank and 95 were injured as a result of clashes with the IDF and settlers. These incidents included seven violent instances in which Israeli settlers targeted Palestinians and their property, down from 26 such incidents in the previous period.
21. On 2 April a 13 year old Israeli was killed in an attack in a settlement in which another Israeli child was injured. On 8 April, clashes erupted between approximately 200 Israeli settlers, some armed, and the residents of the Palestinian village of Safa where the killer had reportedly sought refuge. The Israeli army intervened and 15 Palestinians were injured, including 11 by live ammunition from Israeli troops and settlers. Six other Israelis were reported injured during the period.
22. Elsewhere in the West Bank and East Jerusalem, Israeli settlement activity continues. Major construction work is underway in the three settlement blocs surrounding East Jerusalem to the north, east and south. In addition to construction of housing units, road infrastructure is ongoing, creating further obstacles to a viable, contiguous Palestinian state. On 31 March, Israeli settlers from the Efrat settlement began their own construction of a road. As we have said repeatedly, settlement activity runs contrary to the basis of the two-state solution and must be frozen.
23. The number of obstacles to movement in the West Bank remains constant at more than 600, which continues to prevent normal social and economic life. Also in the West Bank, the barrier continues to be constructed within occupied Palestinian territory in deviation from the Green Line and contrary to the advisory opinion of the International Court of Justice. The Government of

Israel has taken no action to evacuate settlement outposts during this reporting period in accordance with its Roadmap obligations.

24. East Jerusalem remains an issue of serious concern. Palestinian institutions there remain closed by Israeli order and contrary to Israel's Roadmap obligations. During this reporting period, Israeli authorities demolished two Palestinian structures, in addition to the so-called 'deterrent' demolition of the family home of a Palestinian who carried out a terrorist attack against Israelis on 2 July 2008. During that demolition, a Palestinian man was shot and killed as he drove his car into Israeli security forces. Three Israeli border police were injured.

Mr. President,

25. Turning to regional affairs, the Secretary-General attended the League of Arab States summit on 30 March in Doha which brought together 17 Arab leaders. The summit re-committed the members of the Arab League to the Arab Peace Initiative while calling for Israeli steps towards the initiative.
26. United Nations Special Coordinator for the Peace Process Robert Serry met with the new Jordanian Foreign Minister Naser Joudeh on 8 April and on 15 April with Syrian Foreign Minister Walid Mouallem to discuss efforts to move the peace process forward.
27. The situation in the occupied Syrian Golan was quiet during the reporting period although Israeli settlement activity continues. One Syrian was detained by Israeli security forces for crossing the Alpha Line in the disengagement area on 14 April and returned back to Syria the same day.
28. In Egypt, it was announced that a cell of 49 persons led by an alleged member of Hezbollah had been arrested in November 2008. The Egyptian government expressed its grave concern at external interference on sovereign Egyptian territory. Search for other members of this cell is reportedly continuing.
29. The overall situation in Lebanon remained stable during the reporting period, despite a number of disconcerting security incidents. The assassination of the Deputy PLO representative in Lebanon Kamal Medhat on 23 March, which was reported in last month's briefing, was the first targeted killing in Lebanon since September 2008. On 27 March, a shooting incident took place in Baalbek between gunmen suspected of drug trafficking and the Lebanese Armed Forces, resulting in the death of an alleged drug baron. Subsequently, on 13 April, in what seems to be a related incident, armed gunmen ambushed an LAF patrol in a nearby area, leaving four soldiers dead and one critically injured. The LAF is continuing its search for the perpetrators. Syria has deployed troops along the border between the two countries in order to prevent fugitives from escaping across the frontier.
30. The five-week period for candidates to register for the June parliamentary elections ended on 7 April. 702 candidates have been registered, though according to the electoral law, they can withdraw from the race until 21 April.

Discussion of candidate lists continues within each of the two major alliances contesting the election.

31. The construction of an additional 232 temporary shelters in the area adjacent to Nahr al-Bared camp was completed in March, bringing the total amount of temporary shelters built by UNRWA to more than 800, housing some 650 families. Relations between the local community and the LAF have improved in recent weeks following an easing of access in areas adjacent to the old camp.
32. Following the establishment of diplomatic ties between Lebanon and Syria on 15 October 2008 and the approval by President Sleiman of the first Syrian ambassador to Lebanon, the Lebanese Ambassador to Syria arrived in Damascus today.
33. The overall situation during the past month in UNIFIL's area of operations has remained generally quiet. UNIFIL and LAF continue to carry out intensive joint operational activities with a particular focus on possible rocket launching positions. Israeli air violations continued on an almost daily basis during the reporting period.

Mr. President,

34. I cannot overemphasize the importance of addressing the situation in Gaza and of implementing the provisions of Security Council Resolution 1860 (2009). Moreover, for the sake of the people of the region there must be peace and not simply further process. We therefore encourage the early resumption of Israeli-Palestinian negotiations on all core issues without exception as agreed by the parties, and as called for in Security Council resolution 1850 (2008).
35. The international community remains fundamentally committed and engaged to achieve the goal of the two-state solution – the only solution aimed at guaranteeing both the security of the state of Israel and the creation of an independent and viable Palestinian state. The framework for peace remains unchanged: the establishment of two states living side by side in peace and security, on the basis of the principle of land for peace and a just and comprehensive regional peace consistent with resolutions 242 and 338.
36. With regard to the Gaza Board of Inquiry, on April 8, the Secretary-General received the members of the Board of Inquiry. The members of the Board of Inquiry, led by Mr. Ian Martin, shared their conclusions and recommendations with the Secretary-General, and informed him that they were still in the process of finalizing their report. No further comments will be made on this issue until the report is received.

Thank you, Mr. President.