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

22 October 2008

Mr. President,

1. Thank you for the opportunity to brief once again on the situation in the Middle East. Let me turn first to the political process between Israelis and Palestinians. Bilateral contacts between Israel and the Palestinians continued, with meetings held between Israeli negotiator and Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni and lead Palestinian negotiator Ahmad Qurei on 23 September, between President Abbas and President Peres on 26 September in New York, and between advisers.
2. In Israel, the process of political transition is ongoing. On 21 September, President Peres commissioned newly elected Kadima Party leader Livni to form a new government. As of this report, coalition negotiations are continuing, with the deadline extended by President Peres to 3 November.
3. On 26 September, the Secretary-General convened a meeting of the Quartet Principals at United Nations Headquarters. The Quartet called upon the parties to make every effort to conclude an agreement before the end of 2008, and underlined its commitment to the irreversibility of the process leading to the creation of a Palestinian state living in peace and security alongside Israel. Quartet Principals welcomed the parties' suggestion to brief the Quartet on the negotiations and expressed interest in coordinating such a meeting for a mutually accepted time, hopefully in the coming weeks. The Quartet also agreed that spring 2009 could be an appropriate time for an international meeting in Moscow.
4. The Quartet commended Egypt for its efforts to help reunite the West Bank and Gaza within the framework of the legitimate Palestinian Authority. Quartet members and Arab League Representatives held a constructive discussion over an *iftar* hosted by the Secretary-General on 26 September on how to work together in the crucial period ahead in support of the Israeli-Palestinian process, Palestinian reunification and regional peace. The meeting also reaffirmed the central importance of the Arab Peace Initiative.
5. In that context, the Secretariat continues to work closely with Arab countries. Last week, Special Coordinator Serry visited Amman for an audience with King Abdullah II of Jordan and meetings with other senior officials.

Mr. President,

6. On 22 September, the Ad-Hoc Liaison Committee comprising the parties and key donors, as well as Quartet Representative Blair, met in the margins of the General Assembly. The AHLC commended the efforts of the government of Prime Minister Fayyad to implement its reform and development agenda, and encouraged the continuation of ongoing security and institution-building efforts. It urged further steps, including the easing of movement and access restrictions. Donors have contributed over \$1.3 billion in budgetary aid during 2008 towards Palestinian Authority recurring costs and development initiatives.

7. The security efforts of the Palestinian Authority, in accordance with the Roadmap, focus on deepening progress in the Jenin governorate, which Special Coordinator Serry visited today. Efforts are being extended to Hebron, where Palestinian security forces recently discovered a tunnel allegedly used by militants. We also note positively that considerable progress has been made by the PA in defining a strategy for the development of the judicial sector, and that the number of judges and prosecutors has doubled during the past year.

Mr. President,

8. Despite these efforts, the situation on the ground is not improving in the way that is required.

9. Israeli-Palestinian violence this past month claimed the lives of seven Palestinians, two of them children, while injuring 116 Palestinians and 34 Israelis. Among the incidents were the killing of a 61-year-old Palestinian woman and a 15-year-old child when the IDF fired at stone-throwers in the West Bank; clashes in Ni'lin village on the first day of the annual olive harvest; an incident in Ni'lin on 23 September in which Israeli border police reportedly fired tear gas at a civilian delegation including a European Commission official and local Palestinian officials and NGO members; and physical assaults by settlers against Palestinian farmers and the burning down of an olive grove on 15 October. This year's olive harvest is in its early days, and concerns exist for the safety of Palestinian farmers as they harvest crops in the vicinity of settlements and outposts, as well as about their ability to access land isolated between the Barrier and the Green Line. Israeli Defence Minister Barak has denounced those attacking olive pickers and stated that the IDF is making a major effort to protect farmers, but that it is impossible to guard all locations. We reiterate the call of the Quartet for the enforcement of the rule of law given continued settler violence against Palestinian civilians.

10. On 23 September, 19 Israelis, among them eight IDF soldiers, were injured when a Palestinian man from East Jerusalem drove a car into a group of pedestrians. The driver was shot dead by an IDF officer at the scene. Tensions were heightened by communal clashes in the city of Acre in Israel on and in the days following the Jewish holiday of Yom Kippur.

11. While the Government of Israel has taken some positive steps aimed at easing certain internal movement for Palestinians in the West Bank, there are according to

OCHA currently 630 obstacles to Palestinian movement throughout the West Bank. Barrier construction has also continued in occupied Palestinian territory, contrary to the ICJ Advisory Opinion.

12. The UN continues to engage the Israeli authorities on access restrictions imposed on UN staff in both Gaza and the West Bank, and the facilitation of the import of materials still required for the resumption of stalled UN projects in Gaza. The Resident and Humanitarian Coordinator is seeking solutions to the UN's operational problems in a manner consistent with Israel's security concerns, and is looking to work even more closely with the Israeli Government and in particular with those who are able to provide solutions.

13. There has been no progress in the reporting period on Israel's key Road Map and Annapolis commitments: that is, a genuine settlement freeze, removal of outposts, and opening of Palestinian institutions in East Jerusalem. Settlement construction continues across the West Bank, including in East Jerusalem. The UN's position on their illegality is well-known. The Quartet's clear statement expressing concern about increasing settlement activity and calling on Israel to meet its obligations must be heeded.

14. We continue to follow closely all developments pertaining to the Old City of Jerusalem. The month of Ramadan passed with smoother coordination than in previous years, but a majority of Palestinian Muslims were not able to pray at Al-Aqsa Mosque due to permit and access restrictions. Under increased Israeli security presence in the Old City, a synagogue was opened by settlers in the Muslim Quarter on 12 October. The Secretary-General continues to call for an end to unilateral action in Jerusalem and reminds all parties that the status of the city remains an issue for permanent status negotiations.

Mr. President,

15. The calm brokered by Egypt is by and large holding between Gaza and southern Israel, although incidents have taken place, including the firing of a rocket into the Negev yesterday, and the subsequent closure of border crossings between Israel and the Gaza Strip. Erez crossing was reopened, but commercial crossings remain closed today. Unfortunately, there has been no improvement in the movement of goods and people in and out of Gaza. During the period, supplies of petrol, diesel, cooking gas and industrial gas fell short of weekly needs. The number of truckloads of imported goods allowed into Gaza decreased compared to the previous period. Construction projects valued at USD 240 million, including USD 149 million worth of UN construction projects, remain on hold due to the absence of construction materials.

16. The number of people who entered Israel for medical treatment during the first four weeks of September decreased by 38%, compared to the first four weeks of August. Some 150 students have been denied permission to leave Gaza to reach their places of study abroad. On 8 October, the IDF denied the entry of 8 Israeli medical volunteers into Gaza who had been issued permits, citing security concerns.

17. Fourteen Palestinians were reportedly killed as a result of collapses, closures or accidents in tunnels along the Gaza-Egypt border during the reporting period. Media reports suggest that several thousand Palestinians gain income from the tunnel industry, which is reportedly regulated by Hamas. The current situation underscores the importance of a sustained and orderly reopening of crossings into Gaza under the Palestinian Authority, in accordance with the 2005 Agreement on Access and Movement, as called for by the Quartet.

18. The continued split between the West Bank and Gaza is having increasingly adverse effects. Two Palestinians, including one child, were killed in Gaza in internal violence. The teachers' strike reported last month continued, affecting around 250,000 pupils. Thousands of new substitute teachers are being brought into the schools by Hamas, and frictions were evident on 21 October when a student was declared clinically dead after falling three stories following an altercation involving a Hamas-appointed teacher. The health workers' strike continued, causing concerns over the quality and timely provision of services and delays in elective surgeries and referrals. The percentage of essential drug items now at zero level has jumped to 22% - double that of essential drug items out of stock in August, when responsibility for delivering medical supplies to Gaza was transferred from WHO to the Palestinian Authority Ministry of Health.

19. The Egyptian-mediated process aiming at reunification of Gaza and the West Bank within the framework of the legitimate Palestinian Authority is ongoing. Egyptian mediators completed earlier this month a round of meetings with Palestinian factions, who have now received a draft proposal for consideration. President Abbas has also continued regional consultations, including a recent visit to Damascus. We look forward to all regional states lending their support to Egypt's efforts under the auspices of the League of Arab States, which will meet at Foreign Minister-level in Cairo next month.

20. We continue to call for the ICRC to be granted access to Israeli Corporal Gilad Shalit, now in his 26th month of captivity, and for his release. We reiterate our support for efforts to secure his release as well as that of a number Palestinian prisoners.

Mr. President,

21. No further indirect Israeli-Syrian negotiations under Turkish auspices have taken place during the reporting period. The Quartet expressed its desire to see these talks intensify with the goal of achieving peace in accordance with the Madrid terms of reference, and we hope they will resume soon. The situation in the occupied Syrian Golan remained quiet during the reporting period although Israeli settlement activity is ongoing.

22. A car bomb exploded in Damascus on 29 September, reportedly killing 17 civilians and injuring over a dozen others.

23. On 16 October, Lebanon and Syria signed an agreement providing for the establishment of diplomatic ties between the two countries. This is a landmark event that should bring benefits to both countries and to the region. The Secretary-General has reported on this development in more detail in his recent report on the implementation of Security Council resolution 1559.

24. In an important milestone in the implementation of the Doha agreement, the Lebanese Parliament passed a new electoral law on 29 September. The law reflects the electoral districting agreed upon at Doha and adopts some of the reforms that had been proposed by the Boutros Commission.

25. A year after the end of the fighting in the Palestinian refugee camp of Nahr el-Bared, the first phase of rubble removal began on 17 October and is expected to last for approximately eight months. This is a welcome development for the more than 27,000 people who were displaced as a result of the fighting. Funding is urgently required to meet reconstruction costs and the humanitarian needs of the displaced.

26. Security incidents have continued to occur in the northern city of Tripoli during the reporting period. On 29 September, a bomb that targeted Lebanese Army Forces in the city killed six people, including four soldiers. Alleged members of a terrorist cell, which the Lebanese authorities believe is affiliated with Fatah al-Islam, were subsequently arrested on 12 October by Lebanese security forces. This terrorist cell is believed to also have been behind two other deadly attacks against the LAF earlier this year.

27. The situation in UNIFIL's area of operations remained tense, but generally quiet during the past month. Israeli air violations continued at an average of ten per day during the past month.

28. The United Nations Special Coordinator for Lebanon, Michael Williams, began work as of 1 October. Mr. Williams is responsible for coordinating the work of the United Nations in Lebanon and representing the Secretary-General on all political aspects of the organization's work in the country. He is also responsible for following up the implementation of Resolution 1701.

Mr. President,

29. Notwithstanding the transition currently underway in Israel, we hope that Israeli-Palestinian negotiations will not only continue but intensify between now and the end of the year within the Annapolis framework. We look forward to the parties briefing the Quartet in the near future. Conditions on the ground in the West Bank must significantly improve through parallel actions and meeting of Roadmap commitments, especially on settlements. Conditions in Gaza must be eased, the calm extended, and unity pursued under Egyptian auspices. We encourage the continuation and intensification of indirect Israeli-Syrian talks. Further work is also essential to build on recent positive developments in Lebanon.

30. The Secretary-General will continue to work intensively for the implementation of all relevant Security Council resolutions and the achievement of a just, lasting and comprehensive peace in the Middle East.