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BRIEFING TO THE SECURITY COUNCIL
ON THE SITUATION IN THE MIDDLE EAST
24 October 2011

Madame President,

1. On 18 October, Israel and Hamas implemented the first stage of a prisoner exchange agreement. Israeli Sergeant Gilad Shalit, held in Gaza without international access since 25 June 2006, was released by Hamas. 477 Palestinian prisoners – many of whom had been imprisoned for involvement in attacks on Israelis – were released, mostly to Gaza, but also to the West Bank, East Jerusalem, the occupied Syrian Golan and Israel proper. 42 prisoners were released to Turkey, Qatar, Syria and Jordan. In all, 205 prisoners were transferred in accordance with the exchange agreement to locations other than their residence before detention.
2. In their public remarks following the exchange, Hamas officials unfortunately and unacceptably lauded violent resistance, and some of the released prisoners made deplorable statements glorifying acts of violence. Prime Minister Netanyahu announced that Israel would continue to fight terrorism.
3. Approximately 5,000 Palestinians remain in Israeli prisons. A further 550 of them are to be released within two months in the second phase of the exchange agreement. Palestinian prisoners in Israeli jails suspended a hunger strike the day before the prisoner exchange, following the reported agreement of the Israeli authorities to end solitary confinement. We continue to follow closely the security, political and human rights dimensions of the prisoner issue.
4. The Secretary-General, who had long called for the end of the unacceptable captivity of Gilad Shalit and for the release of Palestinian prisoners, welcomed the releases as a significant humanitarian breakthrough. UNSCO actively supported channels of dialogue throughout this period. We reiterate the Secretary-General's thanks to Egypt for its contribution to this outcome, and to Germany for its efforts.

Madame President,

5. We have seen political will brought to resolve a humanitarian issue, and a readiness in that context to take difficult decisions. We call for this same determination to be displayed regarding the most important issue – the quest for a lasting peace. The parties must rise to this challenge.

6. The 23 September 2011 Quartet statement provides a framework for the parties to find a way forward. We welcome the expected separate meetings on 26 October of negotiators on each side with Quartet Envoys and the Quartet Representative to agree on a method for proceeding in the negotiation. Special Coordinator Serry will participate in these meetings and is in close dialogue with the parties in preparation for them. We remind the parties that the Quartet reaffirmed the international legal basis for peace talks and called for the parties to overcome the obstacles and resume negotiations without preconditions. The Quartet further called for proposals within three months on borders and security, with a view to achieving substantial progress within six months and an agreement no later than the end of 2012. The Quartet stressed the need for the parties to refrain from provocations and reiterated their Roadmap obligations.

7. In this regard, we have registered our deep concern at Israel's settlement actions. The Israeli announcement of 1,100 East Jerusalem settlement units on the day the Council last met was followed by 11 new housing units in the East Jerusalem neighborhood of Pisgat Zeev on 10 October. On 11 October, the Israeli authorities significantly advanced plans for the construction of some 2,600 housing units in the East Jerusalem settlement of Givat Hamatos, which would amount to a new settlement in an area of vital importance for the viability of a two State outcome. The Israeli authorities are also not acting effectively against the construction of illegal outposts on private Palestinian land. On 14 October, the Secretary-General made clear that these developments are unacceptable, running counter to the Quartet's call and Israel's commitments under the Road Map. Settlement activity, I would remind you, is illegal under international law and should cease. Unilateral actions on the ground will not be recognized by the international community.

8. At the same time, restrictions continue on land allocation and planning for Palestinian construction in Area C and East Jerusalem. IDF demolitions in Area C displaced 145 people, including 81 children, during the reporting period. We remain concerned at plans to relocate around 2,300 Bedouins in the vicinity of the so-called E-1 corridor connecting East Jerusalem to West Bank settlements.

9. The Palestinian application for United Nations membership is being examined by this Council, and is a matter for Member States. Also, the Palestinian request for membership in UNESCO is being reviewed before a vote by the General Conference. This step could have repercussions for the Organizations as it has legal and political implications for the funding provided by some Member States. The Secretary-General is increasingly concerned about ramifications of such a step for the United Nations and asks all to act wisely in determining a course of action. Regardless of these developments, a negotiated two State solution, to which both leaders are committed, must remain the highest priority.

Madame President,

10. In the West Bank, both the application for statehood and the prisoner release evoked significant public demonstrations, but few acts of violence. Demonstrations against the barrier, which deviates from the Green Line in contravention to the advisory opinion of the International Court of Justice, also largely remained peaceful. Coordination between the parties remains essential to maintain a secure environment.

11. However, tensions and violent incidents do continue. Settler attacks on Palestinians resulted in one death and 19 injuries, including to five Palestinian children. Violent settlers especially targeted Palestinians harvesting their olive groves and damaged 664 trees. Settlers also attacked an IDF patrol vehicle on 5 October, resulting in light injuries to an Israeli soldier. I urge the Israeli authorities to take decisive action against acts of violence perpetrated by Israeli citizens. I also note that on 3 October in Israel, a mosque was set on fire in the Upper Galilee village of Tuba Zangaria. This triggered unrest, vandalism and arrest of local residents, and subsequent desecration of Muslim, Christian and Jewish holy sites and property in several towns in Israel.

12. Palestinian attacks on Israelis in the occupied West Bank resulted in two injuries, including the stabbing of an Israeli child on 22 October, and

extensive material damage, mostly from stones and Molotov cocktails thrown at Israeli vehicles. On 6 October hundreds of Israeli pilgrims accompanied by IDF in the Palestinian city of Nablus discovered swastikas painted on the exterior walls of Joseph's Tomb. The same day Israeli authorities arrested five Palestinians in connection with the stoning of a vehicle traveling in the West Bank on 23 September, which caused the death of the Israeli driver and his infant son.

Madame President,

13. Turning to Gaza, despite the fragile relative calm six indiscriminate rockets and 13 mortar shells were fired by Palestinian militants into Israel during this reporting period, and two IDF incursions and five airstrikes resulted in injuries to three Palestinian militants and two Palestinian civilians. We call for an end to militant rocket fire into Israel, maximum Israeli restraint, and respect by all parties of international humanitarian law.

14. I echo the Secretary-General's expressed hope that the prisoner exchange will be followed by more far-reaching steps to end the closure of Gaza. These should be taken within the framework of full implementation of Security Council resolutions 1850 and 1860, and in close coordination with the Palestinian Authority.

15. Despite the recent economic growth and drop in unemployment in Gaza, the sustainability of this progress is unclear, and significant parts of the population remain food insecure and rely on humanitarian assistance. While agencies are implementing approved projects, ongoing restrictions limit the ability of the United Nations to support Gaza's economic recovery and reconstruction. There is a worrisome humanitarian and development vacuum that is being filled by other actors, fueled by an illicit tunnel trade largely controlled by the *de facto* authorities.

16. This situation presents genuine concerns regarding prospects for the emergence of a viable Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza, and deepens the Palestinian divide. We reiterate our call on Israel for more far-reaching steps to ease its land closures and facilitate entry of construction materials into, free movement of people in both directions and exports from Gaza, with due consideration for Israel's legitimate security concerns. We also reiterate our call for weapons smuggling to be brought under control.

17. Notwithstanding inter-factional contacts, there has been no concrete progress towards further implementation of the May 2011 reconciliation agreement. We reiterate our support for Palestinian reconciliation within the framework of Quartet principles, PLO commitments and the Arab Peace Initiative.

Madame President,

18. Turning to Lebanon, I am pleased to report that the situation in the UNIFIL area of operations has remained generally quiet and stable. UNIFIL recorded no major incidents or violations except for continued Israeli overflights of Lebanese airspace on an almost daily basis. I will not go into detail as the Security Council will hear more in-depth briefings on Lebanon in the coming weeks.

19. Lebanon, of course, continues to be affected by developments in neighbouring Syria. In several instances during the month of October, the Syrian army opened fire across the border, carried out incursions into Lebanon and raided houses to capture fleeing nationals and army deserters. On 6 October, Syrian troops killed a Syrian national on Lebanese soil. The United Nations continues to coordinate closely with the Government of Lebanon on the provision of assistance to the displaced Syrian nationals who crossed into Lebanon fleeing violence, as well as on matters of protection and the determination of their status.

20. These developments reflect the continuing political and human rights crisis in Syria, which has led to the deaths of over 3,000 people since March. Unfortunately, signs are that the face off will continue between the regime and the opposition, with all the negative consequences for Syria and the region. This is of great concern to the United Nations and the Secretary-General continues to call on the Syrian leadership to take urgent action to stop the killing. He also continues to emphasize the need for the international community to act in a coherent manner to prevent further bloodshed. In this regard, we note that the League of Arab States met on 16 October to discuss the situation in Syria. The Arab League called for dialogue and established a follow-up committee. Its ministerial delegation will travel to Damascus on 26 October.

Madame President,

21. Turning back to the Israeli-Palestinian peace, let me conclude by emphasizing our deep concern at the impasse between the parties, and its potential implications for the future. Leadership is urgently needed and the moderate Palestinian leadership must be supported. The parties must refrain from provocations and should stand ready to offer serious proposals on borders and security for negotiation. We urge them to approach their meetings with the Quartet envoys later this week in this spirit. Otherwise, the impasse will only deepen, and with it, the level of confrontation and the scale of the mistrust. The international community must stand ready to play an active role in helping steer the situation towards an agreement that resolves all final status issues, ends the occupation that began in 1967, ends the conflict, and creates an independent and viable Palestinian State living side by side with Israel within secure and recognized borders.

Thank you very much.