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BRIEFING TO THE SECURITY COUNCIL
ON THE SITUATION IN THE MIDDLE EAST
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Mr. President, Members of the Security Council,

We meet today against the background of the recent disturbing cycle of violence in Gaza and Israel and a dangerous escalation which concluded with the Egyptian-brokered ceasefire agreement on 21 November. At the same time, this week the Palestinians are expected to follow through with their intention to approach the General Assembly seeking the status of Non-Member Observer State.

These two significant political developments supersede any other aspect of our regular reporting and merit dedicated focus in my briefing today. Both underscore the status quo is unsustainable and that it is all the more vital to identify a way ahead to urgently put the peace process back on track. And both take place amidst other growing regional concerns, mainly linked to the conflict in Syria which continues at alarming rates.

On Gaza, the Secretary-General briefed you last week about his urgent visit to Egypt, Israel, the occupied Palestinian territory, and Jordan and the intense diplomatic effort that culminated in the announcement of a ceasefire agreement welcomed by this Council, which principally calls for a reciprocal cessation of hostilities. Therefore, I will focus my remarks first on the next steps which require difficult work to finalize the details left open in the agreement before the ceasefire can take firm hold. I will also brief you on the UN's proactive role on addressing recovery and humanitarian needs in Gaza where I visited on Sunday.

Mr. President,

The Secretary-General asked me to stay in Cairo in the days following the announcement of a truce, and his own efforts, for the purpose of contributing to reaching agreement on the comprehensive elements of the ceasefire. In the so called "Understanding for Ceasefire", Israel and Palestinian factions agreed to stop "all hostilities" and after an initial period of a 24-hour calm begin discussions on some of the long-standing issues to be addressed for a broad, durable ceasefire to take firm hold over the longer term. Security remains central to these discussions. I can report that Egypt and the parties have already commenced intense discussions on how to deal with issues listed in the Understanding. The United Nations, present on the ground, is closely working with Egypt in providing inputs and suggestions to these discussions.

The calm has largely held despite few rockets fired in the hours following the agreement and renewed shooting incidents during a demonstration along the fence inside Gaza

which claimed the life of one Palestinian demonstrator. It is now paramount that parties respect the calm and allow time for other elements of the understanding to be worked out. Yet we know this will not be easy.

It is painful that despite consistent warnings we had yet another major escalation four years after "Operation Cast Lead". The devastating round of violence is a stark reminder that the status quo is unsustainable. There will be no progress if Israel's legitimate security concerns are not addressed. At the same time, it will give Palestinians a strong additional stake in a durable calm if it leads to a lifting of the closure on Gaza. This is at long last the opportunity to address the underlying causes of conflict captured in resolution 1860 (2009) which provides the international legal framework to stabilize the situation in Gaza. Core elements of the resolution remain unimplemented. These include an end to weapons smuggling and a full opening of crossings. The Understanding now provides a framework to address the opening of crossings, and facilitate the movement of people and transfer of goods, as well as refrain from restricting residents' free movement and targeting residents in border areas. It has been agreed that other matters as may be requested shall be addressed. Efforts to prevent the trafficking of arms and put in place long-term security arrangements should also be part of the discussion for a sustainable and durable calm.

I am pleased to note that implementation has started in earnest and that Israel has, in principle, agreed to the extension of the maritime fishing limit to 6 nautical miles. This is already a significant result. But it is not sufficient on its own. More needs to be done with respect to crossings and freedom of movement. As a next concrete measure of progress, we hope to see a liberalization of import of construction material, including aggregate, steel bars and cement (ABC) through existing crossings. Exports from Gaza, as well as transfers into the West Bank, should also become part of the mechanism.

But it is also essential that we address other aspects of resolution 1860, which calls for tangible steps towards Palestinian reconciliation. The Secretary-General has continually supported efforts for Palestinian unity, in the context of the PLO commitments, and the work of Egypt in this regard. It is my hope that the crisis in Gaza has also created an opportunity to overcome differences in very tangible ways. People both in Gaza and in the West Bank expect nothing less from their leaders.

Mr. President,

The devastating impact of the violence during the eight days of fighting is now clear. An estimated 158 Palestinians were killed, including 103 civilians (33 children and 13 women). In a particularly distressing example of civilians bearing the brunt of the suffering, 10 members of the Dalu family were killed in an Israeli air strike on their house on 18 November. Approximately 1,269 Palestinians were reported injured. Six Israelis (four civilians and two soldiers) were reported killed by Palestinian rocket fire and 224 Israelis were injured, the vast majority civilians. The bomb attack in Tel Aviv, on 21 November, which the Secretary-General condemned in the strongest terms, injured 23 people, three severely.

The Secretary-General has stressed that his paramount immediate concern is for the safety and well-being of all civilians, no matter where they are. He has condemned the excessive use of force that endangers civilian lives. He has at the same time consistently condemned indiscriminate rocket fire against Israel, which is unacceptable and will only trigger escalation. Put simply, all parties must respect international humanitarian law to ensure the protection of all civilians, at all times.

Distressed that conditions during his visit so shockingly resembled the situation four years ago, the Secretary-General has instructed me and the rest of the UN system to urgently activate recovery and humanitarian assistance in Gaza and step up our existing support. I visited Gaza on Sunday, and witnessed myself the destruction that resulted from the hostilities. I have visited refugee families – UNRWA beneficiaries – and extended my condolences as they lost several of their members in an Israeli airstrike. I also saw a newly built UNRWA school which was badly damaged in the fighting. And I spoke to Gazan fishermen of the local cooperative whose office building was also impacted by the fighting.

The conclusion of hostilities prevented a large-scale humanitarian emergency. Nevertheless, there was a sharp increase of Palestinians leaving their homes to seek shelter in UNRWA and government schools just before the cease fire agreement was agreed. At its peak, the number of IDPs reached nearly 12,000. The UN and its partners were able to rapidly respond to the needs of these families and on Saturday had already fully resumed pre-existing humanitarian operations that were ongoing prior to 14 November. I am pleased to report that virtually all families have now returned home. UNRWA and public schools re-opened on 24 November and municipalities throughout the Gaza Strip have started to remove rubble.

On the same day, I also visited Rishon Lezion, a suburb of Tel Aviv, where a rocket from Gaza destroyed large parts of an apartment building whose residents were fortunately unharmed. On behalf of the Secretary-General, I expressed my sympathies to the Israelis affected. I held some discussions with young residents that impressed on me how the recent escalation had also placed the safety of millions of Israeli civilians at stake, reaching far into the center of the country.

Mr. President,

I would now like to turn to the stated Palestinian intention to table a resolution in the General Assembly related to the status of Palestine later this week. The passion this potential move has generated is indicative of how far apart the parties remain.

The UN Charter is clear that issues of recognition of a State and status in the General Assembly are a responsibility for Member States and the UN inter-governmental bodies to decide, not the Secretariat.

The Secretary-General has said on numerous occasions that the Palestinians should have an independent and viable State of their own living side by side with the State of Israel in peace and security. A Palestinian state is long overdue and is key to addressing the legitimate aspirations of both peoples and paramount to the stability of the region. The Secretary-General hopes all concerned look at the consequences of any decision they make responsibly.

But regardless of the outcome of the move in the General Assembly on 29 November, it is also important to plan for the day after, including protecting the crucial achievements of the Palestinian Authority in building robust state institutions. These steps have brought real security and economic improvements, but both are dangerously at risk. President Abbas and Prime Minister Fayyad must be commended for these achievements and they must be protected.

The Secretary-General is also aware that the effectiveness of the Quartet has been called into question including by members of this Council and I have also in the past warned that the Quartet's credibility is at stake. In its recent meeting amidst the Gaza crisis on 17 November, the Arab League called for the need to reconsider the Arab position towards the Palestinian cause, the peace process and other instruments including the Quartet. The sense of urgency is now all the greater for Quartet members to take stock of events of the past months and reassess their role in shaping the way forward.

Mr. President,

I have also consistently warned about the risks of prolonged stalemate in the peace process for the two-state solution and the viability of the Palestinian Authority. There is no substitute to meaningful negotiations to achieve this vision. This must remain our collective priority. Unfortunately, that effort continues to be undermined by actions on the ground, including continued settlement activity, settler violence, and clashes between Palestinians and Israeli security forces, during which 2 Palestinian demonstrators were killed. The spillover of violence from the Gaza crisis into the West Bank was largely contained thanks to the effectiveness of the Palestinian Security Forces.

Mr. President,

Let me now turn briefly to Syria where the conflict, now in its 21st month, is reaching new and appalling heights of brutality and violence. I'll keep my remarks short, as Joint Special Representative Brahimi will brief this Council in more details in private consultations later this week. Destruction, death and suffering have become part of daily life across Syria. The humanitarian crisis is becoming more acute with the winter upon us and the number of those in need growing, potentially reaching 4 million inside Syria by the end of 2012. The flow of refugees also continues. The overall number of registered or assisted Syrian refugees is now around 450,000, with Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan hosting over 100,000 each. Over 10,000 Palestinian refugees from Syria have also fled the violence mostly to Lebanon, but also to Jordan. We continue to call on the donor community to support our humanitarian assistance programmes.

Against this background, the Secretary-General and Joint Special Representative Brahimi continue their efforts aimed at reaching a political solution, and pulling the parties out from the military logic in which they remain locked.

As a consequence of the internal conflict in Syria, the situation in UNDOF's area of operation remains volatile. Armed clashes between the Syrian Arab Armed Forces, and armed members of the opposition take place daily inside the Area of Separation. Fire across the ceasefire line showed potential for escalation between Israel and Syria. In several instances, mortar shells fired by Syrian government forces landed in the Israeli-occupied Golan, with the Israel Defense Forces retaliating on three occasions. Syrian authorities reported that two Syrian soldiers were killed on 18 November as a result of the IDF fire across the ceasefire line. Israeli authorities also reported that small arms fire has impacted IDF patrols on a number of occasions. This situation clearly jeopardizes regional stability and the ceasefire between the two countries. We have repeatedly called on both sides to respect the Disengagement agreement.

Mr. President

The situation in Lebanon also remains vulnerable to the ongoing conflict in Syria. Special Coordinator Plumbly will also brief this Council in more details later this week, so I will just mention a few highlights. There are continuing reports of cross-border shelling and arms smuggling. Clashes between salafists and Hizbullah in a predominantly Shia neighbourhood in the southern city of Sidon on 11 November reflected ongoing tension between supporters and opponents of the Syrian regime, causing three fatalities and a number of injuries. The Lebanese Armed Forces deployed to control the situation and prevent any further escalation of the violence.

As for the general situation in Lebanon, the main development since last briefing was the terrorist attack which killed Brigadier-General Wissam al Hassan, the Head of the Information Branch of the Lebanese Internal Security Forces in Beirut on 19 October. Two others were killed and dozens were injured as the explosion occurred in the residential neighbourhood of Achrafieh. This political assassination triggered violence across the country which caused at least eight further deaths and approximately 30 injured. The opposition have called for the resignation of the government of Prime Minister Miqati and announced that they will not engage in dialogue with the government.

President Sleiman continues to hold consultations with political leaders to find a path forwards that meets with broad support. His efforts deserve strong support. The principles of the June Baabda declaration, including the "disassociation" policy, remain the fundamental compact agreed by all Lebanese political factions for the security and stability of Lebanon. Meanwhile, it is essential for the institutions of the State to continue their role in ensuring security, stability and justice.

A further session of the National Dialogue is scheduled to be held on 29 November. It is in the interests of Lebanon's continued stability that all parties continue to exercise

restraint, avoid provocative rhetoric and work cooperatively as preparations begin for the 2013 elections.

The situation inside the UNIFIL area of operations has remained generally quiet. On 19 November, two “grad” rockets were discovered by members of the Lebanese Armed Forces near the village of Mazra al Islamiye in south Lebanon. The rockets had reportedly been prepared to be launched across the Blue Line into Israel. UNIFIL and the LAF have increased their level of alert and the number of coordinated operational activities following the outbreak of violence in Gaza and southern Israel. Efforts to ensure calm against the backdrop of that violence have received broad political backing, including from Hizbullah. Mr. President,

This week alone the Council will hear three briefings on the Middle East, not to mention the expected General Assembly proceedings – testimony to the highly dynamic times the region is undergoing. Last week, with the situation in Gaza, we came very close to the brink of a crisis that could have engulfed the region. We should take this as a wake-up call that we are all challenged to work together to restore prospects for a durable regional peace. The region is headed for an unpredictable future with multiple sources of uncertainty. What is certain though is that the Arab-Israeli conflict cannot be ignored in shaping this future constructively. I remain convinced that a solution of the Palestinian-Israeli issue, in the form of a negotiated two-state solution, is the best contribution we can make at this time to regional stability.