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

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Mr. President,

I brief today, as we commence a new year, with a mounting sense of apprehension at the direction in which events are transpiring in the region.

Regrettably, since last month's briefing, neither the Palestinians nor the Israelis have taken the challenging steps, or made the bold decisions, required to begin the process of reversing the ever-widening trust deficit between the two sides. Instead, we have witnessed developments which may unfortunately further reduce the likelihood of talks resuming in the future.

On 30 December, a draft resolution was submitted to the Security Council seeking to reach a final status agreement and an end to the occupation by the end of 2017. The Secretary-General took note that the resolution failed to pass. However, as stressed by many Council members during their explanation of vote, he also believes that the status quo remains unacceptable and unsustainable.

On the following day, President Abbas signed instruments of accession to 18 international treaties, including the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC). On 2 January, 16 instruments of accession were submitted to the Secretary-General who accepted them in deposit after having ascertained that the instruments received were in due and proper form. On 3 January, Israel decided to freeze approximately US\$127 million in tax revenues collected on behalf of the Palestinian Authority for the month of December, contrary to Israel's obligations under the Paris Protocol of the Oslo Accords. We call on Israel to immediately resume the transfer of tax revenues. I also note that the League of Arab States has been meeting today in Cairo to discuss the latest developments on the Palestinian issue.

The Secretary-General is alarmed that the parties are now engaged in a downward spiral of actions and counter-actions and calls on both sides to refrain from any actions that would exacerbate existing divisions. And while the parties are ultimately responsible, the international community must uphold its responsibility to play an active role in shepherding an effective way forward towards the two-State solution and lasting peace.

Mr. President,

Let me turn to the situation in Gaza, where the security situation is showing signs of

serious deterioration. During the reporting period, Palestinian militants fired three rockets at Israel, two of which landed within Gaza while one landed in an open area of Israel without resulting in injuries or damage. In response, Israel conducted its first air strike into Gaza since the 26 August ceasefire. No casualties were reported. Militants also test fired some 22 rockets at the sea. On 24 December, an exchange of fire across the border resulted in one Hamas militant killed, three Palestinian civilians injured and one IDF personnel injured.

As we have consistently warned, the Strip is balancing on a tightrope that will continue to fray unless a number of critical issues, many of which are political, are tackled with both determination and a heightened sense of urgency. One of the most critical issues is the still outstanding payment of salaries to Gaza employees. In late October, the United Nations facilitated a one-time humanitarian payment to help temporarily address the matter. However, there has worryingly been no progress on this issue which is once again threatening stability in Gaza. On 14 January, tens of former Gaza employees disrupted the Government of National Consensus' weekly cabinet meeting demanding their salaries.

In addition to the salaries payment issue, since the Special Coordinator's last briefing, a number of other grave issues remain unaddressed and the status quo is very much in place. Reconstruction is not happening at the required scale and will not be achievable without some tangible progress on a number of key issues.

After almost five months, the ceasefire agreement between Israel and the Palestinians of Gaza remains perilously fragile, and there are no indications that a return to talks under Egyptian auspices is on the immediate horizon. The Palestinian factions have unfortunately failed to overcome their divisions and agree on a united path for the Palestinian people. Further, the Government of National Consensus has not yet taken control over the civil and security institutions as well as border crossings in Gaza, and there has still been no progress on civil service reform. In addition, once again, Gaza is facing critical energy shortages, the severity of which is being compounded by the harsh winter conditions.

As has been repeatedly emphasized, the Gaza Reconstruction Mechanism is temporary and is not a substitute for the lifting of all closures on Gaza as laid out in Security Council resolution 1860 (2009). While the mechanism has started to provide some much-needed relief to the people of Gaza, its ongoing implementation is being made increasingly difficult by the failure to address the critical issues I have just outlined.

Despite these unfavourable circumstances, I can report some positive news with regard to the implementation of the mechanism. Operations have scaled up significantly since mid-December. As of 11 January, over 38,000 individuals requiring construction material for shelter repairs have been cleared to procure materials under the mechanism, well beyond the 25,000 figure predicted for the end of December in our last briefing. Furthermore, over 23,000 individuals have procured construction materials. Ultimately, over 100,000 individuals are expected to access construction materials for shelter repairs through the

mechanism. Large-scale projects are also now being initiated.

These developments, while positive, must be viewed in the broader, more troubling, context of Gaza's overall reconstruction process. Up to 100,000 families are living in houses that have sustained varying degrees of damage while eighteen UNRWA school buildings continue to serve as collective centres for some 15,500 internally displaced persons. Obtaining the necessary financial resources to allow Palestinians in Gaza to procure materials continues to be a monumental challenge for the majority of those in need.

Most pressingly, donors have largely failed to fulfil their pledges, three months after the Cairo conference. This has severely handicapped the ability of the Government of Palestine, the United Nations and other development actors on the ground to make significant progress on recovery and reconstruction work. The importance of donors urgently meeting their pledges cannot be overstated.

Inflammatory criticism against the United Nations for its role in facilitating a temporary agreement between the Palestinian Government of National Consensus and Israel to open crossings for the import at the required scale of construction material, while also taking account of Israel's legitimate security concerns, is unhelpful. It could affect the United Nations' ability to continue supporting the mechanism. The United Nations remains committed to doing all that it can to facilitate resolutions of the problems, but parties with the responsibilities for the delays need to fully engage as well. The stark reality of the situation demands a resolute approach by all those engaged in Gaza's reconstruction, a daunting task under any circumstances.

I also encourage the Egyptian authorities to re-open the Rafah crossing while taking into account Egypt's legitimate security concerns. Humanitarian concerns are growing with around 17,000 registered people, including patients, waiting to exit Gaza, in addition to 37,000 others who wish to exit Gaza.

Meanwhile, violence is continuing in the occupied West Bank, including East Jerusalem. As of 12 January, Israeli security forces conducted some 390 search-and-arrest operations during the reporting period, resulting in the arrest of at least 500 Palestinians. Two Palestinians, including a teenager, were shot and killed by Israeli security forces and 145 Palestinians were injured, including 60 children and four women, during security operations. Palestinians injured three Israeli security personnel, including one during violent protests. Overall for 2014, Israeli forces killed 54 Palestinians and injured some 5,800 in the West Bank, the largest number of injuries recorded in a single year since 2005 and the largest number of fatalities since 2007. During the same period, Palestinian attacks resulted in 15 Israeli fatalities and some 270 Israeli injuries in the West Bank and Israel, the largest number of injuries recorded in a single year since 2006 and the largest number of fatalities since 2008.

Daily clashes continued to take place between Palestinians and Israeli settlers during the reporting period, resulting in two Palestinians injured, including one child. Settlers also

reportedly damaged some 5,000 Palestinian olive tree saplings, while Palestinians injured nine Israelis in the West Bank, including three children and two women.

The demolition of Palestinian structures in the occupied West Bank, including East Jerusalem, has continued during the reporting period. A total of 60 structures, including 17 residences, were demolished, leading to the displacement of some 47 Palestinians, including 16 children.

We are encouraged by the Israeli Supreme Court's decision of 25 December ordering the evacuation and demolition of the largest settlement outpost in the West Bank, Amona, within two years, and look forward to the swift execution of this judgment. The United Nations reiterates its call for the Israeli authorities to freeze and reverse all settlement activities in the occupied territory.

Mr. President,

Before closing, let me say a few words about Syria and Lebanon.

On Syria, separate consultations continued with the Syrian parties and a wide range of interlocutors inside and outside Syria on the parameters of the freeze starting with Aleppo City. The Special Envoy and his Deputy intend to return to Syria in the coming days to pursue the discussions that were launched in mid-December with the Government of Syria on implementation before being able to brief this Council on progress achieved. In the meantime, the Office of the Special Envoy is closely following developments relating to the Cairo and Moscow Forum meetings as well as related developments with the opposition.

In Lebanon, the dialogue between the Future Movement and Hizbullah, facilitated by Speaker Berri, started on 23 December. Two rounds of talks have now taken place aimed at calming sectarian tensions and helping to resolve the deadlock over the election of a new President. Efforts are also ongoing to initiate talks between the leaders of the two largest Christian parties, Samir Geagea and Michel Aoun. We welcome and encourage dialogue between the parties in Lebanon aimed at easing tensions, addressing security threats and contributing to stability. We hope that these processes will facilitate at the earliest the election of a new President, which is long overdue.

The Lebanese Armed Forces continue efforts to secure the border with Syria. On 26 December they killed three gunmen attempting to infiltrate near Aarsal. Twenty five Lebanese Army and security personnel remain in the captivity of the Nusra Front and ISIL. On 10 January, the Nusra Front claimed responsibility for the double suicide bombing in the Alawite neighbourhood of Jabal Mohsen in Tripoli which killed nine people and injured over 35 others. Council members have condemned in the strongest terms this new terrorist attack.

There are now over 1.1 million Syrian refugees registered in Lebanon. On 5 January, new procedures were formally introduced at entry points on the Lebanese border with

Syria, a consequence of which is a restriction on the entry of refugees except for extreme humanitarian cases.

UNIFIL's area of operations remained generally calm, as both Lebanon and Israel continued to cooperate with UNIFIL through its liaison and coordination arrangements, and demonstrated their continued commitment to the cessation of hostilities and to the stability along the Blue Line in accordance with Security Council resolution 1701 (2006). In a letter dated 12 December, Israel communicated to the Council concerns at media reports about Hizbullah's military capability. It is worth recalling that resolution 1701 calls for the disarmament of all Lebanese and non-Lebanese militias. Israeli violations of Lebanese airspace continued on an almost daily basis, as also regularly reported by Lebanon to the Council. In accordance with resolution 1701, it is also worth reiterating the calls on Israel to cease its overflights of Lebanese airspace.

Mr. President,

In conclusion, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is now entering uncharted territory, which, lamentably, seems to have dashed any immediate hope for a return to peace talks. We should be under no illusions about the perils that this new chapter may entail. The increasingly antagonistic and virulent nature of the discourse between the two sides should be cause for serious concern among those seeking to foster an environment conducive to a return to constructive dialogue.

The failure of the parties to take the steps necessary to overcome their mutual distrust has contributed to bringing us to this precarious phase - it is now up to both sides to determine their respective courses of action moving forward. I urge Palestinians and Israelis to plot a course that ultimately leads to a negotiated resolution of the conflict on the basis of a two-state solution in which Israel and Palestine live side by side in peace and security. The alternative is fraught with unknown hazards that may be irreversible.