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**ASSISTANT-SECRETARY-GENERAL FOR POLITICAL AFFAIRS AD INTERIM**

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

**17 NOVEMBER 2014**

Mr. President,

The Secretary-General is alarmed by the escalation of tensions in Jerusalem that has continued since the Security Council emergency session of 29 October. Clashes between Palestinian youths and Israeli security forces in many parts of East Jerusalem and the West Bank have been taking place on an almost daily basis. Of particular concern are attacks against religious sites, also given how such violence can resonate regionally and beyond.

Escalating tensions surrounding access to the holy sites have contributed significantly to the spike in violence. The shooting of a prominent campaigner for Jewish prayer rights on the Haram Ash-Sharif/Temple Mount on 29 October was followed by the brutal attack on 5 November at a light rail station in East Jerusalem in which two Israelis were killed and another 12 Israelis were injured when a Palestinian man rammed his car into passengers dismounting the train. Both Palestinian perpetrators of the two attacks were shot and killed by Israeli security forces. On the Palestinian side, clashes at Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount between Palestinian youth and Israeli security forces have resulted in multiple injuries, a number of them serious.

We are also deeply concerned that violence has spread elsewhere in Israel and the West Bank. Serious incidents have included Israeli police shooting and killing an Israeli Arab man in the village of Kafr Kanna in northern Israel on 8 November, alleging that he had threatened them with a knife. On the same day, thousands of people reportedly protested the killing, leading to clashes with the police in the village. On 10 November an Israeli soldier in Tel Aviv and an Israeli woman in the West Bank were stabbed to death. On 11 November, a Palestinian man was reportedly shot to death by Israeli security forces during clashes at a refugee camp near Hebron. On 12 November, suspected Jewish settlers allegedly torched a mosque near Ramallah in the West Bank. On the same day, a Molotov cocktail was reportedly thrown at the ancient synagogue of Shfaram. Over the weekend, a Jewish man was stabbed in Jerusalem serving as another indication that the violence continues unabated. The circumstances of the incident are still under investigation. During the reporting period, a total of 494 Palestinians, including 60 children and eight women, were injured by the IDF in the West Bank; eight IDF soldiers were also injured.

The Secretary-General has expressed his deep concern about the upsurge in violence and calls on all sides to do everything possible to avoid further exacerbating an already tense environment.

Preventing a further escalation of tensions makes it essential that all sides demonstrate responsible leadership, avoid taking provocative unilateral actions and refrain from inciting their supporters through inflammatory rhetoric.

The Secretary-General welcomes the renewed assurances by Prime Minister Netanyahu that there will be no changes made to the status quo regarding the holy sites. He expects Israel to continue to ensure the protection of the holy sites and the safety of all worshippers as per its agreement with Jordan. We note the recent separate meetings President Abbas and Prime Minister Netanyahu had with King Abdullah of Jordan and US Secretary of State Kerry in Amman on 13 November. We hope that the announced confidence-building measures and firm commitments to maintain the status quo regarding the holy sites will translate immediately into a de-escalation of tensions. In this regard, we are encouraged by the lifting on 14 November of age restrictions for access to the Haram Ash-Sharif/Temple Mount, where Friday prayers reportedly went without incident.

Mr. President,

Another worrying development is the increase in demolitions of Palestinian buildings, which is also contributing to rising animosity in Jerusalem. Since 21 October, a total of 82 structures, of which 47 are residential, were demolished in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem. The demolitions displaced 169 Palestinians, including 80 children.

We are also concerned about the risk of forcible transfer of the Um al-Kheir Bedouin refugee community after the recent demolition of five dwellings next to an Israeli settlement near Hebron. Demolitions and forcible transfer contravene international humanitarian law and international human rights law.

Meanwhile, Israel's ongoing settlement activity continues to undermine efforts to calm the tensions in Jerusalem. In defiance of the unanimous opposition to increased settlement activity expressed in the recent Security Council session on Jerusalem, plans have since been advanced to build some 500 residential units in the settlement of Ramat Shlomo. In addition, 28 new building permits and 200 new residential units were approved in the settlement of Ramot, in East Jerusalem.

Settlement activity constitutes a violation of international law, fuels further polarization and heightens the level of mistrust between both sides. As the Secretary-General has consistently repeated, such unilateral actions will only further impede the chances for long-term stability and a durable peace and therefore should be reversed.

Returning to negotiations has never been more important. The absence of a credible political framework is further hardening positions on both sides and is providing greater political space to those seeking to exploit the lack of trust between the two parties for personal or political gain.

The Secretary-General urges the parties to return to peace talks. He notes the recent meeting on the peace process held in Washington and the call for the resumption of peace talks by the European Union's High Representative during her important visit to the region this month. Without a genuine commitment from the parties, and an overall improvement in the lives of Palestinians, we should anticipate further deterioration of the security situation and an expansion of the current violence.

Mr. President,

Two months ago, Special Coordinator Serry warned in this Chamber that averting a possible implosion of Gaza - or another tragic conflict with Israel - requires urgent changes to the fundamental dynamics in Gaza.

While some signs of progress have gradually started to emerge, the overall state of affairs in Gaza remains volatile and fraught with potential pitfalls.

On the positive side, the temporary Gaza reconstruction mechanism began its operations earlier this month. Led by the Palestinian Government of National Consensus and working through the private sector, the mechanism's priority is the provision of reconstruction material for urgent shelter repairs. By 13 November, 1,086 Gazans had been able to purchase much needed construction material, including some 10,146 bags of cement—approximately 558 metric tons of the 1,298 metric tons of cement imported through the mechanism for shelter repair -- to start the rehabilitation of their homes. A list of 1,926 Gazans cleared for import has been published by the Ministry of Public Works and Housing to date. Nine vendors have been cleared to import to date, of which four are actively importing and selling materials. A further 115 interested vendors are being processed to enable their imports as well. This is relative to the approximately 60,000 shelters in need of repair as soon as possible which the mechanism aims to reach. To date, an estimated 80,000 people remain without shelter, including about 30,000 in UNRWA facilities. Meeting these pressing needs is a monumental challenge. There are currently \$62 million worth of UN construction projects awaiting approval by the Israeli authorities for an average of 24 months. Timely approval of these projects would be an important step towards accelerating the much needed recovery and reconstruction efforts in the Gaza Strip.

The United Nations is actively assisting in facilitating the implementation of the mechanism. But in order for it to be successful we need a conducive environment and the cooperation of all the parties concerned. Homes continue to be surveyed and resources are being raised to provide assistance to those in need. Special Coordinator Serry has been leading efforts to accelerate this work. Now that the mechanism has become operational, it is critically important that donors honour their pledges made at the Cairo Conference on 12 October. Urgent funding is particularly

required to support critical infrastructure projects and address Gaza's acute electricity and water needs.

It is encouraging that Israel reportedly plans to increase the number of truckloads of construction materials entering the Gaza Strip, up to 800 trucks daily, instead of the current 350 trucks. The United Nations also views the temporary reconstruction mechanism not only as an important confidence-building step but also as a means to lift all closures on Gaza. We call on the Palestinian factions to uphold their responsibilities to ensure that the reconstruction material is not diverted to support illegal activities. We also encourage both Israel and Egypt to accelerate efforts to devise sustainable solutions that will address their legitimate security concerns while progressively easing border restrictions.

These efforts notwithstanding, the reconstruction of Gaza is doomed to fail without a long-term ceasefire between Israel and the Palestinians.

In this regard, we note Egypt's intention to host vital talks during the second half of November after their postponement last month. The importance of urgently continuing the negotiations cannot be overstated.

We strongly encourage the parties to use the opportunity of the talks to reach agreement on concrete arrangements that will sustain the ceasefire and reinforce reconstruction efforts.

This should involve serious discussion of tangible steps leading to the lifting of the closures that continue to perpetuate Gaza's socio-economic despair and embolden the proponents of extremism and violence.

In this regard, we are troubled by reports that a number of rockets have been tested within Gaza. An additional rocket reportedly landed in southern Israel on 31 October, prompting the Israeli authorities to close Erez and Kerem Shalom crossings for the subsequent three days. Hamas reportedly arrested the group suspected of launching the rocket. We are also concerned that six Palestinians were reportedly shot and injured by the IDF in Gaza – three near the border fence, including a Palestinian boy on 16 November, and three fishermen at sea.

We strongly condemn the use of rockets by militants in Gaza. If continued, these actions would have seriously damaging consequences. Every rocket launched from Gaza cripples reconstruction efforts and risks renewing conflict with Israel.

Mr. President,

There has been little or no progress on implementing the agreement that established the Palestinian Government of National Consensus. The bombings that recently targeted Gaza-based members and facilities of Fatah underline the fragility of the reconciliation agreement. We strongly encourage the Palestinian factions to urgently undertake the necessary work to implement the agreement and refrain from any action that could undermine such efforts.

In particular, the Government of National Consensus must be empowered to assume its rightful security and governance responsibilities in Gaza. This is also necessary for reconstruction to be implemented at the required pace. The Secretary-General has underscored the support of the United Nations in this regard.

All parties concerned need to cooperate and urgently address important issues, such as the transfer of full control over the crossings to the Government and conducting urgent civil service reform, including importantly in the security sector.

The recent humanitarian payment to some 24,000 civil servants hired under the former de-facto authorities, facilitated by the United Nations, must now be used as a stepping stone towards civil service integration.

Mr. President,

The Council was briefed in detail on Lebanon and the Blue Line last week, but I would like to say a few words about Syria and the Golan before closing.

Last month, the Secretary-General's Special Envoy for Syria, Mr. de Mistura briefed you on his proposed action plan, including the idea of incremental "freezes", beginning with the city of Aleppo. Such freezes are first and foremost intended to lead to a de-escalation of violence, starting from specific areas with a national impact. They could also serve as building blocks to arrive to a national inclusive political process. Mr de Mistura pursued his regional consultations and has just concluded his second visit to Damascus. He held constructive discussions with President Assad and Government officials on the proposals he presented to the Council, which addressed the implementation of all relevant Security Council resolutions, including resolutions 2170 and 2178. As immediate next steps, Mr. de Mistura and his team will begin work on the modalities of the proposed freeze in Aleppo. We count on your continued support for the role and efforts of the Special Envoy.

On the Golan, the situation remains volatile. Following the offensive of 12 September and subsequent advances by armed members of the opposition and other groups in the area of separation, as a precautionary measure, UNDOF temporarily re-located from additional positions in the area of separation and Camp Faouar to the Alpha side, diminishing the Mission's activities on the Bravo side. UNDOF continued to observe heavy clashes between the Syrian armed forces and armed members of the opposition, as well as airstrikes by Syrian armed forces, inside the area of separation and area of limitation. These incidents are of serious concern as they jeopardise the ceasefire between Israel and Syria.

Mr. President,

In conclusion, we would like to stress that Gaza's reconstruction will not be possible without efforts to build trust between Israelis and Palestinians. This requires a strengthening of the

ceasefire, including a lifting of the closures, in the framework of Security Council resolution 1860, and the full and swift implementation of the temporary reconstruction mechanism in good faith. At the same time, the success of Gaza's reconstruction also relies on Palestinian willingness to truly unite and do what is necessary to facilitate the entry of the Government of National Consensus into Gaza. Addressing these challenges will not be easy but there is no alternative.

Elsewhere in the occupied Palestinian territory and Israel, the upsurge in violence may have been triggered by the culmination of several recent developments. However, the continued reality of the close to 50-year long occupation and the lack of progress towards the two-State solution ensure that the next round of violence is never too far below the surface. The time has come for leaders on both sides to make the difficult compromises that will promote stability and ensure long-term security for both Israelis and Palestinians.

Thank you, Mr. President.