

[As delivered]

## **Secretary-General's remarks to Security Council briefing on the Situation in the Middle East**

**New York, 21 October 2014**

I thank Argentina for organizing this important briefing session. As you know, I returned last week from Egypt, Israel and Palestine, which included my first visit to Gaza since this summer's conflict.

In Egypt, I attended the Conference on Palestine which focused on Gaza's reconstruction. I would like to thank the co-chairs, Egypt and Norway, for their leadership.

The event surpassed expectations with pledges from some 50 countries amounting to \$5.4 billion. It is important that these promises quickly materialize into concrete assistance on the ground.

The clock is ticking. \$414 million is immediately needed for humanitarian relief, \$1.2 billion for early recovery needs and \$2.4 billion for reconstruction efforts.

More than 100,000 residents of Gaza remain homeless with over 50,000 still sheltering in UNRWA school buildings. Many still lack access to the municipal water network. Blackouts of up to 18 hours per day are common.

Meanwhile winter is approaching.

I urge the international community to move quickly to deliver much needed assistance.

Nothing could have prepared me for what I witnessed in Gaza.

I saw mile after mile of wholesale destruction. I visited a United Nations school in the Jabalia refugee camp which was shelled during the hostilities. Civilians had sought protection under the UN flag.

Parents and children shared heart-wrenching accounts of suffering and pain.

I met a young man whose brothers and sisters perished in the blasts. He is now confined to a wheelchair having lost his legs.

I look forward to a thorough investigation by the Israeli Defence Forces of this and other incidents in which UN facilities sustained hits and many innocent people were killed.

I am planning to move forward with an independent Board of Inquiry to look into the most serious of those cases, as well as instances in which weaponry was found on UN premises.

Israelis also suffered during the conflict. I travelled to a kibbutz where I met the grieving family of a four-year-old child named Daniel who was killed by a Hamas rocket - another innocent victim of this mindless conflict. As I said in Gaza, firing rockets is unacceptable, and the rockets have brought nothing but suffering.

I also visited a tunnel built by militants to launch attacks.

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I fully understand the security threat to Israel from rockets above and tunnels below. At the same time, the scale of the destruction in Gaza has left deep questions about proportionality and the need for accountability.

Despite the harsh reality on the ground, I left Gaza with a measure of hope.

During my visit to Gaza, the first supplies of urgently needed construction materials entered Gaza under the temporary mechanism brokered by my Special Coordinator.

If implemented in good faith, this mechanism can help bring stability to Gaza.

I also welcome the offer by Turkey of a ship to serve as a temporary power plant and Israel's positive consideration of this arrangement. This is the kind of action and cooperation needed now to alleviate the situation in Gaza.

Palestinians are taking critical steps to forge a united path to the future.

This includes an intra-Palestinian reconciliation agreement followed by a historic meeting in Gaza of the Cabinet of the Government of National Consensus. A united Palestinian Government is beginning to take shape.

During my visit, I met Prime Minister [Rami] Hamdallah and his Cabinet in Ramallah and Deputy Prime Minister [Ziad] Abu Amr and several Ministers in Gaza to further underscore UN support for a unified Palestinian leadership.

The national consensus government must be consolidated so it can assume its rightful responsibilities in Gaza, including deployment to the border crossings.

This is crucial, as effective management of Gaza's borders will facilitate the flow of construction materials into Gaza and allow the restoration of trade between Gaza and the West Bank.

Civil and administrative reform and other related issues must also become a priority to help unify the two separate strands of administration for the Gaza Strip.

I welcome the generous contribution by the Government of Qatar and the Emir, His Highness Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani, towards a one-time humanitarian payment by the end of this month in Gaza for a number of civil service employees.

Notwithstanding the immediate needs in Gaza, the situation in the West Bank demands renewed attention.

In my meetings in Jerusalem, I reiterated my deep concerns about plans to construct residential housing units in occupied East Jerusalem.

International law is clear: settlement activity is illegal. It runs totally counter to the pursuit of a two-state solution. I urge the Israeli Government to reverse these activities.

I also remain deeply concerned by unilateral actions, restrictions and provocations at the Holy Sites in Jerusalem.

I take note of Prime Minister [Benjamin] Netanyahu's personal assurance to me in Jerusalem of his Government's commitment to refrain from altering policies with respect to the Holy Sites that have been in place over many decades.

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I am also concerned about mounting numbers of attacks by settlers and others as well as Israeli plans to “relocate” some 7,000 Palestinian Bedouins, the majority of whom are refugees, from their current locations in the central West Bank, including in the strategic E1 area.

Such an action, if implemented in a forcible manner, would be contrary to international human rights and humanitarian law.

The cycle of build and destroy must end.

The international community cannot be expected to continually pick up the pieces of another war and then pick up the bill.

As I said in Cairo, let this be the last Gaza reconstruction conference.

I welcome the planned resumption of indirect ceasefire talks between Israel and the Palestinians, under Egyptian auspices in Cairo. I also recognize positive steps by Israel to ease restrictions on movement and trade in the West Bank and Gaza. These must be further expanded.

But, as I repeated throughout my visit to the region, there is no hope for long-term stability in Gaza without addressing the underlying causes of the conflict: an end to the occupation that has grinded on for nearly half a century, a full lifting of the blockade on the Gaza Strip and effectively addressing Israel’s legitimate security concerns.

Ultimately, long-term stability requires a comprehensive peace agreement leading to a viable and independent Palestinian state.

Leaders on both sides must overcome their differences and dispense with the unilateral initiatives that serve only to fuel mistrust and polarization. The two-state solution is the only viable option for a durable peace.

It is time for courage and vision to make the tough compromises that are needed now.

I challenge both sides to rise to the occasion.

Allow me to use this opportunity to also say a few words about Syria and Lebanon, neither of which can be considered in isolation from the broader context.

On Syria, last week I called on all parties to step up to protect civilians in the town of Ayn al-Arab/Kobane.

Ayn-al Arab/Kobane is just one of many places across Syria where civilians are under imminent threat.

In addition to the barbarity of ISIL or Daesh, the Syrian Government continues to brutally and indiscriminately attack populated areas, including with barrel bombs.

Our long-term strategic objective in Syria remains a political solution based on the Geneva Communiqué.

A purely military response to the vicious new threat posed by Daesh could ultimately contribute to the radicalization of other Sunni armed groups and spark a cycle of renewed violence.

I urge your full support for my Special Envoy’s efforts to reduce the suffering of the Syrian people and contribute to a political solution.

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In Lebanon, I am troubled by a dangerous escalation since the August attacks by Daesh and Nusra Front on Aarsal, the latest fighting earlier this month between the Nusra Front and Hizbullah outside the town of Brital.

I welcome efforts by Prime Minister [Tamam] Salam and Lebanese leaders to uphold national unity. The Lebanese parties should urgently demonstrate flexibility to open the way for the election of a President of the Republic of Lebanon without further delay.

In this context, the challenge of the refugee presence in Lebanon has become ever more complex. I welcome the upcoming meeting of the International Support Group for Lebanon in Berlin on 28 October.

Finally, I would like to underscore the importance of ensuring calm continues to prevail along the Blue Line. This is vital to the stability of Lebanon and the region.

I welcome the re-commitment by both Lebanon and Israel to their obligations under resolution 1701 and to cooperating fully with UNIFIL.

Thank you once again for this opportunity and thank you for your attention. Let us work together to bring long-sought peace and lasting stability to the people of the Middle East. Thank you.