

Open Meeting of the Security Council

24 August 2005

MIDDLE EAST

Briefing

by the Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs

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Introduction

Mr. President,

1. Israeli disengagement from Gaza and northern parts of the West Bank, which began on 15 August as announced, overshadowed other Middle East issues in the past month. Despite the dramatic scenes which all have seen on television and in newspapers, of Israeli military and police personnel removing settlers from their houses in Gaza, the operation had mostly proceeded smoothly and with surprising speed, aided by the restraint generally observed by militant Palestinian factions. Evacuation of Israeli settlers from Gaza was completed on Monday. Evacuation of settlers from the settlements earmarked for removal in the northern West Bank was carried out yesterday. The success of the implementation of the operation was marred, however, by the senseless and unprovoked murders of Palestinians by what Prime Minister Sharon has described as Jewish terrorists in the West Bank before and during the disengagement.

Quartet Engagement and Activities

2. Quartet envoys met last week in Jerusalem to assess the situation and to prepare for the Quartet principals' meeting which is due to take place on 20 September at UN Headquarters. While the settlers will long since have been evacuated at that time, Israeli military personnel will almost certainly still be in the Gaza Strip discharging the tasks that remain to be carried out before they withdraw completely, hopefully some time in October. The Secretary-General looks forward to the opportunity to assess, with his Quartet partners, the progress of withdrawal and the issues which will be left pending in connection with withdrawal, as outlined by James Wolfensohn, the Quartet Special Envoy for disengagement. The Quartet will also have the opportunity to chart the next steps in pursuance of the vision, to which the Quartet remains committed, of two states, Israel and a sovereign, viable, democratic and contiguous Palestine, living side by side in peace and security.

3. In four trips to the region before the start of disengagement, Mr. Wolfensohn continued to focus his efforts on resolving six key issues. These issues are: border crossings and trade corridors; linking Gaza and the West Bank; movement within the West Bank; the Gaza airport and seaport; the houses in Israeli settlements; and the greenhouses in the settlements. On all these issues, coordination between the Israeli and Palestinian sides intensified in the last month, and continues to this day. Members of the Council will agree that, since these

matters are still under discussion, it would not be wise to air them publicly lest the outcome be jeopardized.

Disengagement

4. On the night of 15 August, Prime Minister Sharon delivered a prime time televised address, explaining his regret that “changing reality in this country, in this region, and in the world” required a reassessment and change of position, because “Gaza cannot be held onto forever.” He alluded to the growth of the Palestinian population there, and their living “in incredibly cramped refugee camps, in poverty and squalor, in hot-beds of ever-increasing hatred, with no hope whatsoever on the horizon.”

5. Israeli soldiers began operations to remove settlers from Gaza settlements once the 15 August deadline for them to leave expired. Opponents of the withdrawal have not succeeded in blocking it. The IDF and Israeli police have carried out the operation efficiently, taking pains to avoid the use of force. They have completed evacuation of the settlers well in advance of the targeted date.

6. For its part, the Palestinian Authority renewed its commitment to a smooth and peaceful withdrawal and to cooperate and coordinate with the Israeli side to this end. On 9 August, President Abbas told the Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC) that “a successful withdrawal and maintaining security was the

responsibility of all Palestinians so that we can show the world we deserve our freedom and independence.” On 14 August a large force of Palestinian police began to deploy in several areas of the Gaza Strip, adjacent to Jewish settlements, to provide buffer cordons and deter firing of home made rockets and mortars. The Palestinian side’s cooperation has been manifest throughout the evacuation.

Security and violence

7. A spate of kidnappings of foreigners in the Gaza Strip over the past months reflects a decline in the internal security situation during the run-up to the disengagement. It also illustrates the breadth of the security problem which extends beyond armed factions to other family-controlled armed groups. The President of the Palestinian Authority, other high-level officials and community leaders have condemned the kidnappings. The United Nations has been compelled to increase security measures, but the critical humanitarian, emergency and security staff of the UN remain in Gaza and all operations and the delivery of services continue unchanged. It is hoped that the Palestinian Authority will implement promised changes and enhancements in the internal security arrangements without delay.

8. On the other hand, the renewed commitments to the cease-fire by Palestinian armed groups has led to a significant reduction in the number of Palestinian attacks on Israeli targets inside the occupied Palestinian territory and

Israel, and facilitated the smooth implementation of disengagement from Gaza.

US Security Coordinator General Ward continued his assistance to the PA in putting together the necessary resources to ensure that disengagement went smoothly. There will be a continuing need for international assistance so that over time the goal of a robust Palestinian security sector that ensures the “one authority, one weapon” policy can be realized.

9. Amongst the killings in the past month two incidents were particularly shocking because they took place in the period immediately prior to, and during, the Israeli disengagement. On 4 August, an Israel Defense Force soldier who had deserted from the army to protest the disengagement opened fire on the passengers of a civilian bus in the Arab town of Shfa' Amr killing 4 people and injuring at least 12 other passengers. In a reminiscent act of terror, on 17 August an Israeli killed four Palestinians and wounded two others when he opened fire on a group of Palestinians in the industrial area of the West Bank settlement of Shiloh. The acts in themselves were utterly horrendous and inexcusable. However, those extremists who have used inflammatory language bordering on incitement carry a heavy responsibility for creating the atmosphere in which the attacks took place.

10. Thus, while Israel's bold first withdrawal from occupied Palestinian territory is welcome, the situation elsewhere in the occupied Palestinian territory continues to fester, with many Palestinians fearing that Israel is consolidating its

occupation in the West Bank including East Jerusalem. Of concern, in this connection, are the recent statements by Hamas leaders that they will carry their resistance to the West Bank. Violence as a means to achieve any objective should be rejected. At the same time, it would be unwise to lose sight of the concern of mainstream Palestinians in both Gaza and the West Bank that their legitimate aspirations may be put off indefinitely.

Settlement Activity

11. Reports by non-governmental monitoring groups indicate that settlement activity in the West Bank continued during the past month. The Ministry of Housing and Construction has issued tenders for the building of 235 housing units in settlements this year, the majority of which are for location in settlements near metropolitan Jerusalem. On 4 August 2005, the Housing Ministry also issued two tenders for the building of 72 housing units in the settlement of Betar Ilit, which is situated between Jerusalem and the Etzion bloc of settlements in the southern West Bank. In Jerusalem, on 25 July 2005, the Israeli Local Planning Committee of the Jerusalem Municipality approved a scheme presented by the Ministry of Housing to construct a new Jewish settlement in the Muslim Quarter of Jerusalem's Old City.

12. In late July 2005, the economic ministerial committee of the Knesset approved a three-year aid plan to provide 97 million shekels to improve

infrastructure, agriculture and settlement expansion in the Jordan Valley area. The project is to be carried out in cooperation with the settlement councils in the area and the Ministries of Housing and of Finance.

13. It was reported in the Israeli press that Prime Minister Sharon in a speech last Sunday confirmed his intention to continue building in the settlement blocs in the West Bank, ensuring a permanent territorial link between Israel and the Ariel settlement and also uniting the settlement of Ma'aleh Adumim with Jerusalem.

Barrier Construction

14. Settlement expansion cannot be separated from the ongoing construction of Israel's security barrier. Last month, Alvaro de Soto, the UN Special Coordinator, reported the approval by the Israeli cabinet of the remaining details of the route of the barrier around Jerusalem, to be completed in September. This week, land expropriation orders for approximately 396 acres were issued in the Jerusalem Governorate. The orders are for the construction of a portion of the already-approved barrier around the Ma'aleh Adumim settlement. The route would cut a reported 23 kilometers into occupied Palestinian territory, and would separate the northern West Bank from the south. Confiscation of land and barrier construction continued the past month throughout the West Bank.

Closure and Movement Restrictions

15. Partly as a consequence of continued barrier construction which rendered them redundant, there has been a significant reduction of roadblocks and earth mounds in the West Bank. No change in the number of checkpoints was noted, while a significant increase has been noted in the number of mobile, sporadic controls by IDF personnel in military vehicles, known as “flying checkpoints.” Severe limitations remain on Palestinian movement, and it has yet to be seen whether the reductions significantly palliate the damage that the closure regime inflicts on the Palestinian depressed economy and humanitarian conditions.

16. Following the 12 July suicide bombing in Netanya, a general closure on the occupied Palestinian territory was imposed by the IDF. Workers and merchants from the West Bank were unable to reach their places of work in East Jerusalem and Israel. The closure is still imposed on the West Bank but was eased for several days for Gaza Strip workers and merchants traveling to Israel, only to be imposed again on 13 August due to the disengagement. Movement of Palestinian males aged 16-35 years through Rafah terminal is only permitted with advance coordination.

Elections

17. President Abbas signed the amendments made to the Palestinian Basic Law on 14 August, pursuant to the amendments to the electoral law by the Palestinian

legislative Council in June. The President recently decreed that the legislative elections would be held on 25 January 2006. The amended law stipulates that the term of the President of the PA is four years. It also stipulates that Palestinian Legislative Council elections will be held every four years.

18. For its part the Central Elections Commission has said that it is ready to carry out the legislative election in January 2006. The CEC affirmed that it has approved all plans and arrangements of the electoral campaigns and voting. It also affirmed that more than 80% of eligible voters have registered to vote.

19. Mobile registration teams have so far registered a total of roughly 90,000 new electors. It is expected that the total number of electors will slightly exceed 1,300,000. The CEC is also moving forward with voter education plans related to the new law, especially the new system of representation.

Lebanon

20. Turning our attention to Lebanon, we see that there have been several important developments since the last briefing to the Council.

21. The security situation in Lebanon continues to be unstable. On 22 August 2005 another explosion in Beirut injured several people and caused extensive material damage to buildings in the Zalka suburb. The Secretary-General strongly

condemned this act of terrorism. He supports the efforts of the Government of Lebanon to improve the security situation and urges it to bring to justice those behind this and other similar acts. The Secretary-General reiterates his call upon all parties to continue to work towards a united, sovereign and democratic Lebanon.

22. On 30 July, the proposed government of Prime Minister Fuad Siniora received a parliamentary vote of confidence, formally establishing the new government. The Secretary-General welcomed this important development and the new government's policy statement, which outlined a number of challenging yet essential reforms for the country. Shortly after the vote of confidence, the Secretary-General's Personal Representative for Southern Lebanon, Geir Pedersen, called on senior government officials, including the President, Speaker and Prime Minister, reiterating that the United Nations looked forward to working closely with the new government and offered the UN's assistance as required. In his discussions with the government, Mr. Pedersen underscored the importance of beginning a process of planning for the further deployment of the Lebanese Army throughout southern Lebanon, in accordance with the various UN resolutions to this effect. The UNIFIL Force Commander, General Alain Pellegrini, also met recently with Lebanese leaders. He emphasized the need to uphold the current calm along the Blue Line and to avoid any provocations,

especially given the current critical period for the region due to the Gaza disengagement.

23. On 8 August, the government announced the creation of a committee, headed by a widely-respected Lebanese official, former Foreign Minister Fuad Boutros, to oversee the discussions on the reform of the parliamentary electoral law. We view this as a positive indication of the government's determination to begin a series of important reform-oriented initiatives for the benefit of all Lebanese. Again, the United Nations and the international community stand ready to support the government of Lebanon in this regard if requested.

24. On 30 July, the Security Council adopted resolution 1614 which extended the peacekeeping mandate of UNIFIL by a further six months. Since our last briefing to the Council, the situation along the Blue Line has remained calm but tense. Israeli air violations of the Blue Line and Lebanese airspace have continued to occur, if only in reduced numbers.

Observations

25. Israeli disengagement from Gaza and the northern West Bank marks a watershed in that it constitutes the first removal by Israel of settlements on occupied Palestinian territory. The Israeli polity has demonstrated that it has the

requisite maturity to do what will be required to achieve lasting peace, and the Israel Defence Forces have demonstrated their ability to discharge their mission with carefully calibrated restraint. Prime Minister Sharon should be commended for his determination and courage to carry out the disengagement in the face of forceful and strident internal opposition. Under the leadership of President Mahmoud Abbas, the Palestinians are soberly welcoming this important stage in their history. Continued leadership from him will be needed at a time of rising expectations in Gaza and mounting concern in the West Bank. We call on all Palestinian factions to eschew violence and pursue their goals through peaceful and democratic means.

26. While substantial progress has been made in addressing the priority issues earmarked by Mr. Wolfensohn in the framework of disengagement, much work will be required to complete agreement on them. Mr. Wolfensohn has stressed the need to bring about agreement and implementation so as to provide hope and security for the Palestinians and Israelis. It is critical to concentrate efforts on the revitalization of the Palestinian economy, which has suffered so greatly in recent years.

27. However, the picture in the aftermath appears less clear. Real and difficult challenges still lie ahead in forging common ground amongst Israelis and Palestinians as peace partners.

Mr. President,

28. Neither party should be exempt from its Roadmap obligations. President Abbas must take up the difficult challenge to transform and develop the security sector and ensure that the Palestinian Authority holds the monopoly on the use of force. In facing this challenge, President Abbas will need all possible support from his own people as well as from Israel and the international community. For its part, Israel should freeze all settlement activity in the West Bank. The creation of new facts on the ground, which prejudice final status issues, can only but make the search for negotiated solutions far more difficult than they already are.

29. As the disengagement draws to an end, attention must turn to the aftermath – the “day after.” This will be at the forefront of the Quartet’s agenda next month. It will be necessary to bring the process back into the mainstream laid down in the Road Map, in order to realize the vision of two states living alongside each other, and to achieve a comprehensive and just peace in the region.