

**BRIEFING TO THE SECURITY COUNCIL  
ON THE MIDDLE EAST  
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FOR POLITICAL AFFAIRS**

**30 November 2005**

Mr. President,

I returned last week from my first visit to the Middle East in my capacity as Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs. I accompanied the Secretary-General on his visit to Iraq, and then proceeded to Lebanon, Israel and the occupied Palestinian territory.

In this briefing, I will describe events on the ground since the last briefing to the Council on 20 October, and share with you some impressions gained during my visit. I will try not to go over ground covered by the Secretary-General and the Under-Secretary-General for Peacekeeping Operations in their recent briefings.

**Post-disengagement agenda**

Two weeks ago, the Government of Israel and the Palestinian Authority reached an Agreement on Movement and Access. The Agreement was made possible by months of hard work by Quartet Special Envoy James Wolfensohn and his team, and, at the end, the personal engagement of US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and EU High Representative for Foreign and Security Policy, Javier Solana. The agreement envisages an unprecedented third party role for the EU, an enhanced contribution by the US Security Coordinator, support from the Quartet Special Envoy, and the continued close involvement of the United Nations and the World Bank.

The first aspect of the Agreement was implemented last Saturday, when Rafah crossing reopened under Palestinian control for travelers in both directions, and outgoing passage of goods, with EU supervision as a third party. On that day, 757 people entered Gaza at Rafah and 830 exited. The European Union's 90-strong Border Assistance Mission will be responsible for resolving any disputes between Israel and the Palestinian Authority arising from the agreement.

Second, the parties agreed that the crossings between Gaza and Israel would operate continuously, unlike previously. The aim is for 150 export trucks to be processed daily by the end of 2005, and 400 by the end of next year.

Goods will enter Gaza through Kerem Shalom, where Israel, Egypt and Gaza meet. The EU will monitor customs arrangements, with its mission being reviewed in a year

Third, bus convoys between Gaza and the West Bank will start on 15 December, with truck convoys following on 15 January. Fourth, the Government of Israel has undertaken to review the system of movement restrictions in the West Bank and reduce them to the maximum extent possible by the end of this year. Fifth, construction of the seaport is to begin immediately. Sixth, the parties will continue discussions on the airport.

The agreement addresses a number of the issues that were left hanging after Israel's withdrawal of settlements and military infrastructure from the Gaza Strip. The recent agreement resolved those issues or sets up frameworks for doing so. All now hinges on full and timely implementation.

Representatives of the US government are working closely with the parties on implementation, and Mr. Wolfensohn's team will be tracking progress on behalf of the Quartet. They deserve our collective support and encouragement. The Quartet Special Envoy intends to issue reports every two weeks so as to keep the international community informed of progress. His first report, issued yesterday, shows, among other things, that over 800 people are passing through Rafah everyday, even though the crossing is currently open for only four hours a day. These numbers are expected to increase as Rafah moves towards a 24-hour operation.

In this regard, the United Nations will be playing its part in tracking progress in the implementation of the agreement, including on the easing of movement restrictions in the West Bank. According to OCHA figures, the number of obstacles to movement has increased in the last two months from 376 to 396. OCHA will be confirming this figure with the IDF, but it appears that much of the increase has been in the northern West Bank, the area where in August four Israeli settlements had been removed and where movement had previously been eased.

Meanwhile, a picture is emerging of the West Bank divided into three distinct areas – north, central and south. While movement is relatively free inside these areas, travel with the exception of Nablus between them is severely hampered by a combination of checkpoints, travel permits and physical obstacles. As part of its ongoing work, which will now feed in to implementation of the Agreement on Access and Movement, the United Nations is compiling a comprehensive set of recommendations to reduce obstacles,

improve movement, and enhance Palestinian access to essential services and markets.

### **PA reform and international support**

Full implementation of all aspects of the Agreement on Access and Movement is a vital first step towards Palestinian economic recovery. Recovery will also require the strengthening of Palestinian institutions and economic management, and the effective distribution of international aid. These issues will be on the agenda of the mid-December meeting of the Ad Hoc Liaison Committee, which is the primary policy-making meeting of donors, the Palestinian Authority and the Government of Israel.

At the AHLC meeting, it is hoped that the Palestinian Authority will announce new aid coordination structures designed to enhance Palestinian control of the coordination of donor assistance, and present a full outline of its Medium Term Development Plan. Together, these initiatives should contribute to the process of Palestinian institutional development, as envisaged in the Road Map. It is hoped that the PA will commit to tackle a number of outstanding issues in its plan. The PA's fiscal situation is also of immediate concern, and urgent action will be required before the end of the year to redress the anticipated fiscal crisis.

I should add that UNRWA held a successful conference of donor and host countries in Jordan this month to raise funds for continued support to Palestine refugees in the region. Continued support for UNRWA programmes will be vital for both stability and recovery in the occupied Palestinian territory in the post-disengagement period.

### **Security and violence**

The fragile security situation, and the need for more decisive action in accordance with the Road Map, was underlined by continued violence. Throughout the reporting period, the Israeli army targeted alleged militants in the West Bank and Gaza, and undertook major arrest campaigns in the West Bank. On 26 October a suicide bomber blew himself up at Hadera market in Israel, killing six Israeli civilians. The Secretary-General condemned this act of terror. Violence took its toll on Palestinian civilians as well as Israelis; during the reporting period, at least seven Palestinian civilians were killed, including, tragically, an eleven year old boy carrying a toy gun, who was shot fatally by Israeli forces in Jenin on 3 November.

The Palestinian security services have taken some action, including arrests, against those who persist in terrorist attacks. Measures have also been taken to keep weapons off the streets and to assert the rule of law in areas under Palestinian control. More work needs to be done in this regard. There have also been efforts to rehabilitate former militia members through employment in the security services, which have, however, given rise to serious fiscal concerns. Continued effort is necessary to develop viable and effective strategies to deal with militias.

President Abbas has established a leadership committee on security reform, which in turn has mandated a technical team to develop a white paper on safety and security for Palestinians. This process will involve public dialogue in an effort to build national consensus. These efforts have received the strong support of the US Security Coordinator Lt. General William Ward, whose successor, Lt. General Keith Dayton, will soon be on the ground. The US Security Coordinator has also been supporting efforts to improve Israeli-Palestinian security cooperation.

### **Barrier construction and settlement activity**

The Road Map calls for a freeze of all settlement activity, including natural growth of settlements, and for settlement outposts constructed since March 2001 to be dismantled. On 24 November, the Israeli press reported that Housing Minister Yitzhak Herzog published tenders for an additional 350 housing units in the West Bank settlement of Ma'ale Adumim.

Israel has also continued construction all along the projected route of the Barrier, including on occupied Palestinian territory in East Jerusalem and between Jerusalem and Ramallah. A new terminal was opened at the main entrance to Bethlehem, located some 500-600 meters further inside occupied Palestinian territory than the previous checkpoint, and functioning much like an international border-crossing. Israel officials have indicated that there will be a series of such crossings along the route of the Barrier between East Jerusalem and the remainder of the West Bank. The Israel Defence Forces have also continued to issue military land requisition orders in various parts of the West Bank, to acquire land for Barrier construction.

As I witnessed during my visit, the combination of settlement activity and Barrier construction is creating new and significant facts on the ground in the West Bank. This is particularly the case in and around East Jerusalem, where the route of the Barrier fragments and isolates Palestinian neighbourhoods. I reiterate the Secretary-General's call on Israel to abide by its legal obligations

as set forth in the 9 July 2004 advisory opinion of the International Court of Justice and General Assembly resolution ES-10/15.

## **Elections**

Mr. President,

Against this backdrop, we enter a delicate electoral period, with further rounds of Palestinian municipal elections in December, Palestinian legislative elections scheduled for 25 January 2006, and Israeli elections scheduled for the end of March following Prime Minister Sharon's request to the President of Israel to dissolve the Knesset.

Primary elections for the ruling Fateh party have already taken place in several locations, but after claims of fraud and the storming of a number of Gaza polling stations by militants two days ago, primaries were suspended. Nevertheless, technical preparations by the Palestinian Central Election Commission are well under way to meet the unchanged target date of 25 January 2006 for the legislative elections. The United Nations will assist the Commission through a Liaison and Support Unit, to coordinate international observers, similar to that set up for last year's Presidential election.

The main concerns of the election commission are that the modalities of the poll in East Jerusalem be finalized as soon as possible; that freedom of movement of candidates during the January campaigning period be assured by Israeli Authorities; and that prisoners in Israeli jails be able to vote.

The Israeli Authorities, while expressing their intention not to interfere with the poll, said that they would not cooperate in its conduct. Under the Road Map, the Palestinian Authority is committed to holding free, open and fair elections, and Israel must support the development of Palestinian democracy and facilitate elections, including in East Jerusalem.

In Israel, Labour has elected a new leader, Amir Peretz, who has informed Prime Minister Sharon that Labour will leave the coalition government. New elections are expected by the end of March. Mr. Sharon has announced his intention to leave the Likud party and seek re-election as Prime Minister as head of the new Kadima, or "Forward," party. It is too early to say what the impact of these major political realignments will be on Israel's approach to the peace process, but this is no doubt an important time for the future of both Israel and the Palestinians.

## **Lebanon**

Lebanon is also at a critical stage in its history, and faces a number of important challenges. During my visit to Beirut, I told all Lebanese interlocutors of the UN's commitment to continue working closely with the Government of Lebanon, and to support Lebanon's independence, sovereignty, stability and security. I reiterated our belief that the challenges facing Lebanon should be met through a process led by the Lebanese and supported by the United Nations and the international community as necessary.

In my discussions on the work of the investigation into the assassination of Prime Minister Hariri, I underlined that resolution 1636, adopted recently by the Security Council, made clear Syria's obligation to extend its full support and cooperation to the UNIIIC. I reiterated that the modalities of such cooperation should be agreed in a bilateral fashion between the Syrian authorities and the UNIIIC. As reported, last Friday, UNIIIC and the Syrian authorities reached an agreement to conduct the interviews of the Syrian individuals in Vienna.

My visit confirmed my earlier assessment that Lebanon remains committed to moving ahead with a challenging and important programme of political and socio-economic reform. Prime Minister Siniora's government has been working to formulate a financial and economic plan that will be the subject of the next meeting of the Core Group of countries that have offered their support to Lebanon's various reform initiatives.

The critical importance of the Government of Lebanon extending its full control over all its territory was underlined on 21 November, when Hezbollah initiated heavy attacks in Ghajar Village and the Shebaa Farms from the Lebanese side of the Blue Line. The exchange of fire subsequently extended all along the Blue Line. Mr. Guehenno briefed you on these attacks last week, and the Council has spoken very clearly on them.

Consistent with its mandate, UNIFIL played an important role, in collaboration with the ICRC, in bringing about a ceasefire and securing the handover of three Hezbollah fighters killed, while Mr. de Soto and Mr. Pedersen remained in close touch with Israeli and Lebanese interlocutors respectively.

I must also report that Israel violated Lebanese airspace on many occasions during the reporting period – including, before the Hezbollah attacks, along coastal areas, as well as two large sonic booms over civilian areas; and, after the attacks, dropping leaflets over Beirut. Since 21 November, 12 air violations by Israel have been recorded. Israel claims its actions were necessary in the face of evidence of possible hostile acts by Hezbollah, while the

Government of Lebanon claims that the violations serve to provoke attacks. Their cessation, for which the UN has repeatedly called, would contribute to the maintenance of calm along the Blue Line. Nonetheless, the United Nations will continue to assert in the strongest terms with both parties that one violation cannot justify another. It is imperative to reduce tensions and achieve security on both sides of the Blue Line.

## **Conclusion**

Mr. President,

I return from the region hopeful about the future, but with a renewed appreciation of the immense challenges it faces.

I have seen many things that make me optimistic – the Rafah crossing where Palestinians have assumed control of part of their border for the first time in their history; the Gaza settlements that Israel evacuated and destroyed, setting a vital precedent for the future; the resolve of Palestinian officials to proceed with elections and reform; the awareness of Israeli officials that they must consider the impact of their actions on the very Palestinian partner with whom they must try to make peace; and, in Beirut, the determination of the Government of Lebanon to assert its control over the entire country, which is vital if regional peace is to be secured.

But I have also discussed with interlocutors, or seen with my own eyes, a number of the very real challenges to progress – the extent to which the Barrier, checkpoints and Israeli settlements dominate the landscape in the West Bank; the dire economic and social situation of many people in Gaza and the West Bank; the weakness of the rule of the law in the areas under Palestinian control; the genuine insecurity and fear that Israelis face on a daily basis; and the border between Israel and Lebanon, always tense, recently volatile, where the Government of Lebanon is yet to assert its full sovereignty and control.

I have also seen, with great admiration, the determination of the UN system on the ground to help improve the situation.

Above all, I return from the region with the strong belief that the only way forward for Israelis and Palestinians alike is, on the one hand, for the parties to ensure the success of disengagement by fully implementing the recent Agreement on Movement and Access; and on the other hand, for renewed action by both parties in parallel to fulfil their obligations under Phase One of the Road Map.

The Palestinian Authority must implement proper restructuring of its security services and take action against individuals involved in violence. Israel must act with restraint: it is in its own interest to support the Palestinian Authority's efforts to establish calm during the coming weeks and months. Palestinians also need an Authority which manages budgetary resources carefully and plans effectively for the future Palestinian state. I look forward with great interest to reports on Palestinian institutional strengthening and economic development which will be delivered to the Ad Hoc Liaison Committee in two weeks' time.

The Government of Israel is yet to fulfill its Road Map obligations to cease settlement activity and to dismantle settlement outposts constructed since March 2001. Israel's continued creation of "facts on the ground" damages the Palestinian leaders who are seeking election on a platform of peaceful negotiation with Israel. It also complicates efforts to achieve a viable two-state solution, with contiguity of the West Bank including East Jerusalem, and meaningful linkages between the West Bank and the Gaza Strip.

Finally, Mr. President, the coming electoral period calls for the utmost wisdom and political determination from both sides and should be turned into a opportunity for forward movement and not stagnation. The Palestinian elections can serve as a platform on which to base the necessary transition from a heavily and disparately armed society to one built on the rule of law in which the Palestinian Authority holds the monopoly of the instruments of violence. We hope that all will support the Palestinians' right to decide on their conduct, including participation, and that Israel will cooperate so that the playing field is level.

If the Palestinian elections are successfully conducted, and once Israelis determine at the ballot box the political direction they wish their leaders to take, we may yet see the emergence of new circumstances in which to press forward, quickly and decisively, with the implementation of all phases of the Road Map, towards the goal of a just and lasting peace, based on two States, Israel and Palestine, living side-by-side in peace, within secure and recognized borders, in accordance with Security Council resolutions. The United Nations will continue to work towards the goal of a comprehensive and just peace in the region. I believe strongly that that goal is both imperative and achievable.

Thank you, Mr. President.