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PEACE PROCESS**

**BRIEFING TO THE SECURITY COUNCIL
ON THE SITUATION IN THE MIDDLE EAST
16 December 2013**

Mr. President,

1. We have previously spoken of 2013 as a decisive year for the peace process. A year that would be pivotal for salvaging the two-state solution. A year that would decide whether the Palestinians – already accorded non-member observer state status by the General Assembly – could realize their aspirations for statehood, self-determination and an end to the occupation that began in 1967 through a negotiated solution. Only a negotiated solution would also bring Israel the security and recognition in the region it deserves. And a year that would test the commitment of the international community to reengage and break the deadlock in this conflict, in the face of competing priorities in the region and elsewhere. We also warned that the consequences of inaction could be dire for everyone, putting an already precarious situation on the ground at risk even further.

2. And indeed, Mr. President, it has certainly been an important year in which we have finally witnessed the renewal of direct talks, brokered by the US, now in their fifth month. Spurred by the unwavering personal involvement of Secretary of State Kerry, leaders on both sides have taken courageous steps, despite domestic headwind and public skepticism. Israeli and Palestinian negotiators have engaged quietly in some 20 rounds, and neither side is ready to give up or walk out of talks. Quartet Envoys continued to consult with each other and engage with the parties as well as with Arab partners. The European Union, in its Council conclusions issued today, expressed its full support to the efforts of the parties and of the US towards a just and lasting settlement for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. It offered “an unprecedented package of European political, economic and security support to both parties in the context of a final status agreement.” All this testifies to ongoing international and regional backing of the process.

3. Parties are approaching another important timeline in the negotiations, namely the third release of prisoners, scheduled for 29 December. We urge both sides to refrain from steps that would increase mistrust and undermine the prospects for progress in the critical period ahead when bolder decisions are required to bridge the gaps towards a final status agreement.

4. There is good reason to be concerned about the fragile situation on the ground. Indeed the current environment is far from conducive. Continued settlement activity cannot be reconciled with the goal of the two-state solution and is illegal under international law. The United Nations is further concerned about recurrent violence and incitement.

5. During this reporting period, Israeli security forces carried out some 217 search and arrest operations. A total of 352 Palestinians were arrested and 206 injured, including during demonstrations against the barrier. Six Israeli soldiers were also injured. Six Palestinians were killed, including when on 26 November Israeli security forces shot dead three allegedly al-Qaeda affiliated Salafist extremists near Hebron – who were reportedly carrying explosives and weapons and planning lethal attacks on Palestinian and Israeli targets. One Palestinian was shot dead on 30 November while in Israel without a valid permit and another died on 28 November of injuries sustained at Qalandiya checkpoint in March.

6. In a troubling incident on 7 December a 14-year old Palestinian was shot in the back by Israeli security forces and died in Jalazun refugee camp, next to the Israeli settlement of Beit El, allegedly after throwing stones at Israeli forces. This shooting follows a recent series of serious injuries to Palestinians from live fire and rubber coated metal bullets by Israeli security forces at or near the camp. We urge the Israeli authorities for a timely conclusion of their inquiry into the circumstances of this fatal incident, and to act with maximum restraint and avoid the use of excessive force.

7. Palestinian security forces, working to maintain law and order in the West Bank, carried out major security operations in Jenin and Nablus, which included the arrest of over 20 alleged Salafist extremists on 1 December.

8. Violence between Palestinians and settlers continued. Settler attacks injured eight Palestinians, including four children. Price tag attacks by settlers on Palestinian property included racist graffiti and vandalism on several occasions in the West Bank. Palestinian stone throwing attacks, on the rise in recent months, injured four settlers, including two children.

9. Demolitions of unlicensed Palestinian structures in Area C and East Jerusalem have been increasing. A total of 74 structures, including over 30 in the Jordan Valley this last week, were demolished, leading to the displacement of 98 Palestinians, including 55 children. The United Nations has repeatedly called for a halt to demolitions and for Palestinian access to a fair planning regime that meets their residential and development needs.

10. Three Palestinian administrative detainees on hunger strike since 16 November, in protest of their detention, have been transferred to hospital in Israel due to deterioration in their health conditions. We reiterate that persons in administrative detention should be either charged or released.

Mr. President,

11. Turning now to Gaza, as reported previously, thanks to a generous Turkish contribution, a safety net is in place to allow the most critical water, sanitation and health-related facilities to continue operating. However, Gaza's wanting infrastructure was not able to cope with the impact of the current inclement weather. While the West

Bank was also affected, heavy flooding in many parts of the Gaza Strip has resulted in the displacement of approximately 10,000 people. The UN is actively engaged with relevant parties to address the most urgent issues. With the support of the UN humanitarian system on the ground, shelter, equipment to remove flood water, and non-food items, particularly fuel, are being provided to those in need. While Israel was hit by the same inclement weather conditions, it responded to an urgent request to provide four water pumps for Gaza. With the Erez crossing flooded and temporarily inoperable, Israeli authorities have expanded operations and opening hours of the only other crossing at Kerem Shalom. We hope that the Rafah crossing will also resume normal operations as soon as possible to help address the difficult humanitarian situation.

12. As you are aware, we have been expressing our deep concern about the critical energy situation in Gaza, especially since the Gaza Power Plant ceased operations on 1 November. I have been working closely with the Palestinian Authority and other relevant parties to address this issue. I am pleased to report that the Government of Qatar has come forward with a donation of USD 10 million for the Palestinian Authority to purchase fuel for the Gaza Power Plant. In addition, a Qatari shipment of 18,000 metric tons of fuel is expected to reach an Israeli port in due course. The Israeli authorities have confirmed their cooperation in transferring 450,000 litres of fuel per day through the Kerem Shalom crossing. As a result, the Gaza Power Plant has resumed operations as of yesterday. This is an important, but by no means sufficient development to start addressing Gaza's structural energy problems.

13. I am pleased to note the decision of the Government of Israel to resume the transfer of construction materials for UN projects in Gaza, under an agreed mechanism for the secure transfer and use of this material. Work has now resumed on critical construction projects, part of the USD 500 million package the UN is implementing in the Strip, such as schools, social housing and water and sanitation facilities. While we recognize Israel's legitimate security concerns, it remains important that Israel also reinstates its September decision to begin allowing imports of construction materials for the private sector. The UN remains ready with other Quartet partners to help in defining agreed modalities for the secure transfer and use of this material.

14. During the last month, the security situation in and around Gaza has witnessed a relative calm. One rocket and four mortar shells fired from Gaza landed in Israel and Israel conducted one incursion and four airstrikes, none of which caused casualties or damage. Six Palestinian civilians were injured by Israeli live fire near the border and three were arrested. The past year having registered the lowest level of violence and civilian casualties in Gaza and southern Israel in 13 years, preserving the ceasefire understanding of a year ago will provide a basis for progress on other issues as well, including the further opening of the crossings.

Mr. President,

15. Turning to Syria, you heard a briefing by the Secretary-General earlier today on the use of chemical weapons. Yet, the vast majority of killings and destruction continue

to be carried out with conventional weapons. The warring parties continue to disregard their legal and moral responsibilities to protect the civilian population as they try to settle their scores by military means. With almost half of the population in need of urgent assistance and displaced, the humanitarian tragedy is reaching new highs every day, particularly with the onset of winter.

16. As the United Nations is now working very hard to prepare the Geneva II Conference on 22 January, we also need to see steps from the Syrian parties and the international community that would help the Conference succeed. All Syrian parties need to immediately work towards the cessation of violence, humanitarian access, release of detainees and return of refugees and internally displaced people to their homes. All those with influence on the Syrian sides should help them prepare for constructive engagement in Geneva and to take immediate confidence-building measures.

17. On the Golan, the situation remains volatile. The Department of Peacekeeping Operations will brief the Council later this afternoon on the details.

Mr. President,

18. Turning to Lebanon, there was a serious incident yesterday with the shooting of an Israel Defense Forces soldier by a Lebanese Armed Forces soldier in the vicinity of Naqoura. The Secretary-General deplored the incident and called for calm. The IDF and the LAF are cooperating with UNIFIL to ascertain the facts. Both reaffirmed their commitment to work through the established liaison and coordination arrangements with UNIFIL to ensure that this remains an isolated incident, and reaffirmed their commitment to the cessation of hostilities under resolution 1701. The Secretary-General commends both sides for exercising restraint.

19. The security situation has been tense since the terrorist attack against the Iranian Embassy last month. On 4 December, a senior Hizbullah commander was assassinated in Beirut. On 22 and 29 November, the Lebanese army defused a car bomb in the Bekaa and another in Zahle. Separately, there have been reports of further deaths of Hizbullah militants fighting in Syria in violation of the Lebanese government's policy of disassociation. By 3 December, some 40,000 refugees crossed the border into Aarsal, fleeing fighting in the Syrian region of Qalamoun.

20. On 30 November, a fresh round of fighting in Tripoli between Sunni and Alawite neighborhoods led to 14 fatalities, including two children, as well as one soldier of the Lebanese Armed Forces who were heavily deployed. On 2 December the city's security was placed under the responsibility of the army for six months, with the support of the Internal Security Forces. The situation is currently calm. There have also been incidents of concern in the Palestinian refugee camp of Ain el Helweh where clashes led to two fatalities, on 1 and 3 December. In the southern city of Sidon, two LAF checkpoints were attacked yesterday, resulting in the death of one soldier and four of the assailants.

21. Meanwhile, the political situation remains deadlocked. This Council has urged all parties in Lebanon to engage constructively to facilitate the formation of a Government as soon as possible. It is vital that all parties assume their responsibility in this regard so as to address effectively the acute security and humanitarian challenges facing the country. Serious commitment is also required to hold Presidential elections on time in 2014 before the end of President Sleiman's term.

Mr. President,

22. Let me conclude. As this year comes to a close, parties are engaged in a serious effort to implement their commitment to a negotiated two-state solution. We sincerely hope that this effort will lead, next year, to decisive and irreversible progress towards a comprehensive settlement realizing the vision of two states for two peoples: Israel and Palestine, living side by side in peace, security and mutual recognition of each other's legitimate rights, including self-determination, with each state ensuring equal civil rights for all its citizens. If both parties, with continued effective support by the international community, take the bold steps needed to see through what they have started this year, we will reach in 2014 a moment of truth regarding a two-state solution.

Thank you.