

**JEFFREY FELTMAN
UNDER-SECRETARY-GENERAL FOR POLITICAL AFFAIRS**

**BRIEFING TO THE SECURITY COUNCIL
ON THE SITUATION IN THE MIDDLE EAST
19 November 2013**

Mr. President,

1. When intensive Israeli-Palestinian negotiations resumed earlier this year, tensions were to be expected along the way. Nobody predicted this would be an easy process. And indeed, four months since their resumption, the talks have reached a delicate moment. On the positive side, it appears that the negotiators have been engaging on substance and have gone some way towards narrowing their differences, notwithstanding the great difficulties that peace will entail. But strains have been growing dangerously between the parties, and these can and must be overcome.

2. International engagement, which is critical, remains strong. US Secretary of State Kerry visited the region again for in-depth discussions with leaders on both sides, following his regular consultations with the Arab Foreign Ministers, which took place in Paris last month. Quartet Envoys met on 29 October in Jerusalem, in addition to their separate on-going engagement with the parties. All maintained respect for the confidential nature of the talks.

3. Nevertheless, the process suffered a significant setback with a series of announcements of settlement plans in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, following the agreed release on 29 October of 26 pre-Oslo prisoners in the second of four tranches. We have been following with growing concern these critical

developments, especially the announcement on 13 November of plans for advancement of some 24,000 units, including in E-1, which cannot be reconciled with the goal of a negotiated two-state solution.

4. On the same day, Prime Minister Netanyahu instructed the Minister of Housing to reconsider the plans announced on 13 November. Special Coordinator Serry discussed this reconsideration with Israeli chief negotiator Tzipi Livni, and we hope that these plans are suspended. The Secretary-General has reiterated the United Nations' unequivocal position that settlements are contrary to international law and an obstacle to peace. He expects the Government of Israel to put a full stop to these plans. In protest over these developments, Palestinian negotiators submitted their resignations, now under consideration by President Abbas, who has nevertheless made it clear that this does not constitute a Palestinian departure from talks. Parties should now intensify efforts and refrain from actions that undermine trust and the spirit of talks.

Mr. President,

5. The situation on the ground remains tense. Israeli security forces carried out some 356 search and arrest operations. In one such operation, on 22 October near Ramallah, an Islamic Jihad militant, reportedly involved in the bombing of a bus in Tel Aviv on 21 November 2012, was shot dead. Searches uncovered a weapons cache in Hebron on 8 November and the arrest on 9 November of a Palestinian carrying pipe bombs near Nablus. A total of 355 Palestinians were arrested, including two Hamas members of the Palestinian Legislative Council. A total of 154 Palestinians were injured, including during continued demonstrations against the barrier as well as during the commemoration of President Arafat's death on 11

November. Three Palestinian civilians were shot dead. These included two in separate incidents on 7 November near Salfit and Bethlehem while allegedly threatening Israeli soldiers at checkpoints and another during an incursion near Jenin on 31 October, although Israeli forces denied being the source of fire. We urge that a thorough investigation is conducted into all such cases, and that accountability for any violations of international law is ensured.

6. Violence between settlers and Palestinians continued on a daily basis throughout the West Bank. Settler attacks resulted in nine Palestinians injured, including six children, as well as material losses, including over 600 trees and saplings damaged during the olive picking season. Palestinian attacks, including stone and firebomb throwing, resulted in eight Israeli settlers injured.

7. We continue to be deeply concerned by any act of violence and incitement, which we condemn. On 13 November, an Israeli soldier was stabbed to death in the Israeli city of Afula by a 16 year-old Palestinian from the Jenin area. We are also deeply concerned about the fate of a Palestinian man who, a day earlier, was critically injured when reportedly attacked in the Old City by two young Israelis who dropped a stone on his head. We reiterate our call on all to refrain from violence. The need for calm is all the more important at this critical juncture.

8. We also remain worried about continued demolitions of unlicensed Palestinian structures. During the reporting period, a total of 27 were demolished leading to the displacement of 65 Palestinians, including 31 children. The issuance on 1 November of demolition orders for ten apartment buildings in the East Jerusalem neighbourhood of Ras Khamis, if implemented, would result in the

displacement of some 1,500 people. We reiterate the importance of Palestinian access to a fair planning and zoning regime.

9. On 5 November a 22-year old Palestinian who was under administrative detention died from cancer after having been transferred to an Israeli hospital when his condition deteriorated in mid-October. As in all cases of prisoners in critical medical condition, we note that access to timely and acceptable healthcare is a human right. I also recall the Secretary-General's position that persons in administrative detention should be either charged or released.

Mr. President,

10. Turning to Gaza, one year since the understanding for a ceasefire agreement signed in Cairo, the situation is once again deteriorating amidst renewed violence and worsening economic and humanitarian conditions. On 31 October, Israeli forces conducted an incursion some 200 meters into the Gaza strip to demolish a recently discovered tunnel into Israel. The operation came under attack by Hamas militants and an explosive device detonated in the tunnel, injuring five Israeli soldiers. Subsequent shelling by Israel killed four Hamas militants. Additional violence in and around Gaza during this period included the firing of four rockets and four mortar shells from Gaza into Israel. One rocket was intercepted while the other projectiles landed in Israel without causing injuries or damage. Israel retaliated with five airstrikes into Gaza that injured two Palestinians, and conducted a total of seven incursions.

Mr. President,

11. The deteriorating socioeconomic situation in the Strip can be seen as a combined energy and construction crisis. Rolling blackouts increased to up to 16 hours per day following the shutdown on 1 November of the Gaza powerplant, which was producing 25 % of the total power available in Gaza. This has affected the lives of the Gazan population and the functioning of basic services, including health and water facilities. While a stop-gap measure to replenish the on-site reserves for these critical facilities is now being implemented with UN assistance, thanks to a donation by the Turkish Government, a longer-term solution to provide Gaza with the required 450 Megawatts is now more urgent than ever and requires concerted efforts by all.

12. On 13 October Israel suspended the import of all construction materials, including for international projects, following the discovery of a reinforced tunnel dug from Gaza into Southern Israel. Virtually all construction projects in Gaza, including for the United Nations, have been suspended, putting thousands of people out of work. During the last several years, the United Nations has implemented a growing package of housing, schools and infrastructure projects with stringent control procedures, agreed to with the Government of Israel, to preserve the integrity of each project and avoid misuse of materials. While we recognize Israel's legitimate security concerns, we are confident that those procedures remain adequate. We therefore call on Israel to urgently reconsider its decision to temporarily halt the import of construction material into Gaza.

Mr. President,

13. UNRWA's financial situation has become more serious despite efforts to streamline services and mobilize additional resources. Unless the \$36 million deficit is bridged before the end of the year, UNRWA will be unable to adequately fund its core services - especially in education, health, and poverty mitigation – and will be unable to pay December salaries of its 30,000 teachers, medical personnel and social workers. We strongly appeal to all donors to step up their contributions to support Palestine refugees and help prevent an already dire situation from worsening.

Mr. President,

14. As the Council will be briefed next week on Lebanon and resolution 1701, I will keep my remarks on Lebanon brief. Lebanon witnessed a further devastating attack today in the Bir Hassan neighbourhood of Beirut, apparently targeting the Iranian Embassy. Initial reports indicate that at least 23 people were killed, including one Iranian diplomat. Over 140 people were injured. This appalling attack was widely condemned by Lebanese politicians across the political spectrum. The Secretary-General issued a statement condemning this terrorist attack and extending his condolences to the Governments of Lebanon and of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

15. Turning to the political situation in Lebanon, it is now eight months since Prime Minister Mikati resigned but there is still no progress on forming a new government. Meanwhile, the caretaker government continued to work with the World Bank and the UN on a national stabilization response to the impact on

Lebanon of the Syrian crisis, and on the creation of a multi-donor trust fund for Lebanon as envisaged by the International Support Group for Lebanon.

16. As of 18 November, 1,500 families fleeing fighting in the Qalamoun region of Syria are reported to have crossed the Lebanese border to the town of Aarsal in the Beqaa valley. UNHCR in coordination with other UN agencies and partners and the Lebanese Ministry of Social Affairs are assessing the situation and providing assistance. Earlier, on 14 November, there were reports of two separate violations of Lebanese airspace by Syrian military helicopters which fired at least four missiles towards Aarsal. In a statement, President Sleiman stressed the need to “protect civilians and Lebanese villages and prevent the recurrence of such attacks.”

17. In Tripoli, calm was restored but tensions remain high since fighting began on 21 October, resulting in six fatalities. Additional suspects have been arrested both for the 23 August bombings in Tripoli and in connection with the firing of rockets earlier this year on the southern suburbs of Beirut and towards the Presidential Palace in Baabda. Credible reports suggest that Hizbullah fighters continue to support Syrian government forces in battles in Syria in clear violation of Lebanon’s “disassociation policy.”

18. There were no major incidents in the UNIFIL area of operations and along the Blue Line, although Israeli air violations of Lebanese airspace continued on an almost daily basis.

19. In Syria civilians continue to bear the brunt of the conflict, with warring parties failing in their responsibilities to offer protection. Already, half of the

country's population is in need of assistance and displaced from their homes. Palestinian refugees also remain trapped in the conflict. UNRWA is particularly concerned about the situation of civilians in Yarmouk and other Palestine refugee camps. The Agency managed some days ago to deliver some food to several dozen refugees in Yarmouk when an upsurge in conflict required the operation to withdraw. UNRWA is standing by until an arrangement can be made with the parties to the conflict to access the camps.

20. More fighting will bring nothing but further suffering and despair for the Syrian people. It is past time to move to a political process. The Secretary-General and the Joint Special Representative for Syria continue to work hard to bring the Syrian sides to the negotiating table to jointly agree on how to fully implement the Geneva communiqué of 30 June 2012 in accordance with Security Council resolution 2118 of 27 September. I would like to take this opportunity to reiterate our appreciation for the hospitality and generosity of Syria's neighbours towards refugees from Syria in spite of their own growing socio-economic challenges.

21. Let me also reiterate the Secretary-General's call for stemming the flow of arms and foreign fighters to Syria as well as his commitment to deliver humanitarian assistance to all in need in Syria and in neighbouring countries. The Secretary-General will convene the second donor conference in Kuwait on 15 January 2014 and we hope that all will show generosity in supporting our humanitarian work.

22. In conclusion Mr. President, let me return to the status of the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian negotiations. The risks they face are apparent to all of us. Yet, a two-state solution remains the only way to fully realise the legitimate aspirations of

both peoples for self-determination, peace and security. The consequences of failure would be dire for Israelis and Palestinians alike. We thus continue to urge the parties to remain steadfast in their commitment to see this process through. But we fear that unless steps are taken to prevent the reoccurrence of negative developments such as those of recent weeks, the remaining chances to achieve a negotiated two-state solution may be irreparably damaged.