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THE SECRETARY-GENERAL

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BRIEFING TO THE SECURITY COUNCIL

New York, 8 February 2012

Mr. President,
Distinguished members of the Security Council,
Excellencies,

I welcome this opportunity to brief the Council following my recent visit to the Middle East.

Let me begin, however, with the situation in Syria.

For too many months, we have watched this crisis deepen. We have seen escalating violence, brutal crackdowns and tremendous suffering by the Syrian people.

Throughout, I have called on the international community to speak with one clear voice and act to end the bloodshed. I deeply regret that the Security Council has been unable to do so.

This failure is disastrous for the people of Syria. It has encouraged the Syrian government to step up its war on its own people. Thousands have been killed in cold blood, shredding President Assad's claims to speak for the Syrian people.

I fear that the appalling brutality we are witnessing in Homs, with heavy weapons firing into civilian neighbourhoods, is a grim harbinger of worse to come.

Such violence is unacceptable before humanity. It is time to stop. How many deaths will it take to halt this dangerous slide toward civil war and sectarian strife.

Violence is not, and will never be, a solution. I condemn it, by all sides, and call on all Syrians to abide by the principles of national unity, non-violence, mutual respect and equal rights.

Such gross violations of human rights must be independently investigated. Their perpetrators must be brought to justice. Syrian authorities must recognize that they will be held accountable for the crimes committed by their forces against the Syrian people.

At this moment of such grave consequence, it is more urgent than ever to reach agreement on a solution.

We have heard too many broken promises, even within the past 24 hours.

We should call on the Syrian government to immediately end these attacks against its citizens. We should insist on an end to violence by all parties. We should push for a political solution that respects the will and aspirations of the Syrian people, with full guarantees for fundamental freedoms and human rights for all.

The role of regional actors remains central. I am convinced that the deteriorating situation in Syria will not leave the rest of the region untouched.

Yesterday, I received a telephone call from the Secretary-General of the League of Arab States, Nabil al-Araby. We discussed how to end the violence and begin political negotiations.

He informed me that he intends to send the Arab League observer mission back to Syria and asked for UN help. He further suggested that we consider a joint observer mission in Syria, including a joint special envoy.

We stand ready to assist in any way possible. I have mobilized all UN agencies, funds and programmes to assess the situation and prepare to do their utmost to help Syria's people.

Several of your governments have expressed, in different ways, their intention to work toward this end. That is welcome.

Mr. President,

We are also at a critical moment for the Middle East peace process.

In Jordan, I commended King Abdullah and Foreign Minister Nasser Judeh for their initiative and persistent efforts to sustain the negotiations.

In Israel and the occupied Palestinian territory, I urged the parties to remain engaged, to submit comprehensive proposals on territory and security, and to take steps to build confidence and encourage a climate that would be conducive to advancing their negotiations.

The Palestinian leadership has put forward its proposals, a sign of willingness to work towards a solution. Israeli officials have assured me of their seriousness in coming forward with meaningful proposals.

In Israel, government leaders and others stressed that there is no alternative to direct talks if core issues are to be resolved. Their apprehensions about developments in the region figured prominently in our discussions.

I understand Israel's concerns. At the same time, current events represent a once-in-a-generation opportunity to shape the region for the better -- an opportunity that will bring potentially great benefits for Israel, as well others.

In my meeting with President Abbas in Ramallah, I stressed that negotiations are the only viable option to achieve a lasting two-state solution. President Abbas is undertaking a series of consultations internally and with the Arab League on the way forward.

I spoke with President Abbas again two days ago, following his agreement with Hamas leader Khaled Meshal to form a new government of technocrats.

I reiterated our support for unity under the leadership of President Abbas and within the framework of the PLO commitments, the Quartet principles and the Arab Peace Initiative. Palestinian unity should preserve existing security achievements and lay the basis for a Palestinian State. I believe that the two tracks -- of Palestinian reconciliation and negotiations with Israel -- need not be mutually exclusive.

In the West Bank, I saw concrete signs of the development of Palestinian institutions fundamental to the functioning of a future state. I was struck by the professionalism of the security forces. However, those achievements are unsustainable without a political horizon. Prime Minister Fayyad faces a challenging fiscal situation, including the limitations imposed by continued occupation, settlement activity and a stalled political process.

From Palestinian civil society, I heard skepticism about the success of talks and sensed growing frustration about the Palestinian divide and the impact of Israeli settlements on daily life.

In Gaza, I was struck once again by the unsustainable nature of the situation. I called on Israel for further measures to lift the closure on Gaza. In particular, we need timely and steady flows of approval for UN projects for housing and other priorities. There has been some progress in this respect; a construction site in Khan Younis that was stalled two years ago now has a further large section ready for occupancy.

While in Gaza, I also received appeals about the situation of Palestinian prisoners in Israeli jails. I continue to call on Israel to abide by international law. I regret having been unable to meet with Gazan civil society representatives who chose instead to protest the prisoners' plight. It was a missed opportunity.

In southern Israel, I visited Sapir College, only 3 kilometers away from the border. I saw the terrible effects of rocket attacks and mortar fire out of Gaza, including six that had landed the night before my visit, luckily without causing any injuries. The indiscriminate firing of rockets against Israeli populated areas must stop.

The outlines of an agreement have long been clear. What is important now is for the parties to engage seriously on substance. I sincerely hope that both leaders will realize that this is the moment to rebuild the confidence and momentum that have been lost. Goodwill gestures and positive facts on the ground will go a long way in strengthening domestic support for a negotiated settlement. Time is not on the side of either party.

Mr. President,

Let me say a few words about others issues in the Middle East.

During my visit to Beirut last month, I discussed the extension of the mandate of the Special Tribunal for Lebanon with Prime Minister Mikati. Because the Tribunal's work is not complete, it is now urgent to address this question. In line with the recommendations of the late former President Cassese and current President Baragwanath, I intend to extend the mandate by an additional period of three years. I am currently in the process of carrying out the necessary consultations with the Government of Lebanon on this period.

In addition, my Legal Counsel, Ms. O'Brien, is conducting separate meetings with individual members of the Security Council to provide them with further information on the matter.

On Iran: Throughout my travels, and particularly in Israel, I heard grave concerns expressed about Iran's nuclear program. I call again on Iran to comply fully with Security Council resolutions and to openly and directly address issues raised by the International Atomic Energy Agency.

Mr. President,

Let me close with a few remarks on critical issues on Africa.

During my visit to Addis Ababa for the African Union Summit, I held a series of wide-ranging bilateral meetings on various peace and security concerns. Those included emerging transnational challenges in West Africa and Central Africa such as terrorism, illicit drug trafficking, the rise of piracy in the Gulf of Guinea and the impact of the Libyan crisis on the Sahel. I reiterated the commitment of the United Nations to work closely with the African Union and the continent's sub-regional organizations.

On Somalia: I welcomed the progress made through the efforts of the Transitional Federal Government and AMISOM. But of course there remain concerns about the ongoing rifts in the Parliament, and there continues to be a need for sustained and unimpeded humanitarian access. There is also a need for the Security Council to increase the number of uniformed personnel serving with AMISOM. I expect the London Conference later this month to send a strong signal of international support.

Finally, on Sudan and South Sudan:

The Government of Sudan should be commended for progress in the Darfur peace process and for today's inauguration of the Darfur Regional Authority. The Government must now show the same willingness to end the conflict in South Kordofan and Blue Nile States and to pursue an inclusive constitutional review process.

I am also deeply concerned about the growing humanitarian crisis in the border states. While the Government of Sudan should work positively to end hostilities and ensure that assistance reaches those in need, the Government of South Sudan must show its willingness to ensure that there is no cross-border support to SPLM-North and other rebel groups operating in Sudan.

I am very concerned by the lack of progress in negotiations on post-independence issues. The unilateral decisions taken by both Governments over their oil dispute, and their increasingly hostile rhetoric, could easily escalate militarily.

The potential humanitarian implications are stark. Growing conflict could affect an additional 2 million people in Southern Sudan alone, according to the World Food Programme.

Already, the breakdown in trust is hampering deliveries of assistance. Food insecurity and refugee influxes, as well as the possible return of 500,000 additional people from Sudan, are creating a difficult situation.

The talks on all pending issues are scheduled to resume in Addis-Ababa on 10 February. I call on the parties to re-commit to these negotiations and reach agreements on all outstanding issues. I also urge them to resolve the Abyei dispute, fully implement the 20 June Agreement on Abyei, and facilitate the operations of the United Nations Interim Security Force for Abyei. The moment has come for both Heads of State to display once again the leadership that brought them to amicably agree on the secession — and to make the necessary compromises that will guarantee a peaceful and prosperous future for both Nations.

I stressed these very points to President Salva Kiir of South Sudan when we met in Addis Ababa.

I also expressed my concerns over the continuing crisis in Jonglei State and the Government's plans to commence forcible disarmament. I underlined the importance of the Government demonstrating its readiness to uphold the rule of law and protect civilians. And I urged him to implement the political and economic measures that will restore confidence in the communities and create the conditions for voluntary disarmament. These measures are necessary for the State to establish its authority in Jonglei and prevent inter-communal tensions elsewhere, including in Warrap and Unity.

The international community and this Council must do everything it can to help, including through political support and the provision of resources for the humanitarian response.

Mr. President,
Excellencies,

That ends my briefing. I look forward to your questions and comments.

Thank you.