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UNDER-SECRETARY-GENERAL FOR POLITICAL AFFAIRS

BRIEFING TO THE SECURITY COUNCIL
ON THE SITUATION IN THE MIDDLE EAST
18 February 2010

Mr. President,

1. Since the 27 January briefing, efforts to bring about Israeli-Palestinian negotiations have continued. A proposal from US Envoy Mitchell to the parties to begin indirect talks with US mediation is currently under serious consideration. Israel has indicated its readiness to work on this basis, while President Abbas has been engaged in intensive consultations and sought clarifications. The Secretary-General hopes that President Abbas will move forward on the basis of this practical proposal so that serious talks can begin. He notes Prime Minister Netanyahu's stated commitment to a two State solution, although confusion as to the government's intentions arises from statements by various government officials.

2. We continue to stress the importance of doing everything possible to ensure that negotiations lead in a clear timeframe to an agreement resolving all final status issues, including Jerusalem, borders, refugees, security, settlements and water. We believe that the international consensus on what it takes to reach a sustainable agreement is strong, and that an active Quartet will be vital to support the process.

3. The Israeli government's partial restraint on settlement construction in the West Bank, excluding East Jerusalem, remains in effect, and has led to a slowdown of construction activity. However, violations of the restraint orders have been identified by the Israeli authorities in at least 29 settlements, with the Defence Ministry stating that it is issuing demolition and stop work orders against violators. While the Israeli government's settlement restraint constitutes a step beyond previous positions, settlements are illegal – and continued settlement activity violates Israel's Roadmap obligations and prejudices the outcome of negotiations. We therefore urge additional measures to enforce the restraint. We also urge its extension into a comprehensive freeze, including in East Jerusalem, as well as its continuation beyond the current ten month period.

4. There were no demolitions of Palestinian homes or evictions in East Jerusalem during the reporting period, a positive development which we hope will continue. We continue to call for the re-opening of Palestinian institutions in East Jerusalem in accordance with Roadmap obligations. The status of Jerusalem is to be determined through negotiations, and we believe that a way must be found through negotiations for Jerusalem to emerge as the capital of two States.

5. The Palestinian Authority's efforts to meet its Roadmap obligations to combat terrorism have continued in the West Bank, reflecting impressive achievements in reform,

professionalization, and performance. It is important that the Palestinian Authority leadership continues to speak out against violence and incitement. On 10 February an Israeli soldier was killed by a knife attack. The incident was condemned by Palestinian Prime Minister Fayyad.

6. There were 79 Israeli army incursions into West Bank towns and villages in response to alleged security threats. Nearly 500 Palestinians were arrested. On 12 February, Israeli security forces shot and killed a Palestinian for attempting to stab a soldier in Hebron, while 41 other Palestinians were injured in IDF actions. Israeli security forces also carried out extensive operations in Shuafat refugee camp in East Jerusalem between 8 and 10 February.

7. Palestinian, Israeli and foreign protesters continued demonstrating against the barrier where it is being constructed within the West Bank in contravention of the Advisory Opinion of the International Court of Justice. There have been raids into Ramallah against individuals and organizations involved in protests. In a positive action, we note that Israel began work on 10 February to reroute a section of the barrier around the village of Bil'in to implement a 2007 Israeli High Court order, which is expected to return 700,000 square meters of arable land to the village, while leaving approximately 150,000 square meters west of the barrier.

8. We are also concerned at continued settler violence. There have been 8 reported attacks by settlers on Palestinians, including on 9 February when settlers shot and injured a Palestinian teenager.

9. We note legitimate Israeli and Palestinian security concerns. Sustainable security will best be achieved by intensified cooperation, continued empowerment of PA security efforts and PA performance, curtailment of IDF incursions into Palestinian areas, full respect for legitimate non-violent protest, Israeli action to curb settler violence, Palestinian action against incitement, and progress in both political negotiations and economic development.

10. OCHA recorded the removal of 24 closure obstacles throughout the Hebron governorate, continuing the gradual easing of Palestinian movement in areas to the east of the Barrier. However, as of 16 February, 550 obstacles to movement remain in place throughout the West Bank, of which 89 are permanently and partially staffed checkpoints. The Israeli government recently allowed tourist buses to use the Jalameh vehicle crossing from northern Israel into the West Bank, with the aim of boosting the Palestinian tourism sector. The Israeli government is encouraged to continue to facilitate this access, and to take more far-reaching measures as well.

11. The important work of Palestinian state-building through institutional reform and development is continuing. However, the recurrent financing requirements facing the Palestinian Authority are still substantial, projected at about \$1.2 billion in 2010, despite reduced spending on wages and subsidies. We encourage donors to channel their assistance, first and foremost through the Single Treasury Account, and to support the

priorities articulated by the Palestinian Authority for 2010. We welcome recent transfers and pledges and also strongly encourage those donors who have not yet done so to frontload financial support, to allow for greater predictability. We also stress the importance of applying accepted principles of aid effectiveness to ensure better targeting and maximize program impact.

Mr. President,

12. On 8 February the Palestinian Cabinet called for local elections to be held on 17 July 2010, in accordance with the local election law for all 335 municipal councils in the West Bank and Gaza. The Palestinian Central Election Commission is planning to start registering voters on 6 March. We take this opportunity to urge Hamas to respond positively to this important part of the democratic process.

13. Senior Fateh and independent figures visited Gaza during the reporting period in an effort to ease tensions and promote reconciliation. Other factions in the Gaza Strip have also been active in this direction, and an Arab parliamentary group visited the Strip on 15 and 16 February. However, to date, there has been no further progress in finalizing an agreement based on Egypt's proposal.

14. It is deeply regrettable that there has been no breakthrough on a prisoner exchange to secure the release of Corporal Shalit and Palestinian prisoners, despite intensive efforts in recent months.

15. While the Hamas de facto authorities are reportedly exerting efforts to prevent the launching of rockets at Israel, 19 projectiles were fired from Gaza and 11 reached southern Israel during this reporting period, with no damages or injuries reported. Three barrels of explosives washed up on Israeli beaches between 1 and 3 February, with a further two detonating at sea. There was an IED attack on a convoy of ICRC vehicles on 4 February which damaged one vehicle, and two other IED attacks, reportedly by Salafist elements, killing one Hamas militant and injuring four others. One Palestinian was killed in an Israeli air strike, and 7 others were injured in IDF incursions and operations. We continue to condemn rocket fire and call for its cessation, and on all parties to maintain calm and strictly observe international humanitarian law.

16. We continue to receive reports of smuggling of weapons supplied from within the region. Egypt is maintaining its efforts as all states are called on to do in Security Council resolution 1860. Egypt is also seizing explosives and installing metal sheeting in areas along its border with Gaza. These efforts further underscore the vital importance of the opening of all legitimate crossings for imports and exports as envisaged in the 2005 Movement and Access Agreement and in resolution 1860.

17. The Israeli closure of Gaza remains in place. This counter-productive policy is empowering smugglers and militants, destroying legitimate commerce, and causing unacceptable hardship for the civilian population, more than half of whom are children.

18. During the reporting period, food and hygiene products comprised 84% of imports, and a weekly average of 561 trucks entered the Strip – slightly more than the previous reporting period, but far short of the weekly average of 2,087 trucks before the Hamas takeover in June 2007. Cooking gas supplies met only 48% of estimated weekly needs during the reporting period. We take positive note of the entry of a slightly wider range of materials, such as glass, electricity spare parts, and one elevator for a maternity hospital. The first phase of the Northern Gaza wastewater treatment plant project was completed in late January. We also note that the export of cut flowers and strawberries continued.

19. However, the scale and quantity of goods entering Gaza through the Israeli crossings, as well as the level of exports, remains far short of requirements. Sufficient materials to re-start civilian reconstruction are still not entering Gaza through the Israeli crossings. We again express our disappointment that there has been no satisfactory Israeli response to the UN's proposal to complete stalled projects for housing, schools and health facilities. We also continue to be concerned about fuel shortages at the Gaza power plant as a result of funding shortfalls and technical failures, leading to rolling blackouts.

Mr. President,

20. Turning to the regional situation, we deplore the heightened and belligerent rhetoric during the reporting period and call for its cessation.

21. We continue to support all efforts to revive the Israeli-Syrian track and a broader resolution to the Arab-Israeli conflict as envisaged in Security Council resolutions and the Arab Peace Initiative. The situation in the occupied Syrian Golan remained calm despite continued settlement activity.

22. In Lebanon, on 14 February, a large rally took place in Beirut to commemorate the fifth anniversary of the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri and 22 others. On that occasion, leaders of the 14 March coalition commemorated Mr. Hariri's contribution to Lebanon's development and reaffirmed their determination to establish the truth behind his murder. Prime Minister Saad Hariri emphasized the importance of national unity and Lebanon's role with regard to inter-Arab reconciliation. In a statement, the Secretary-General said that he stood with the people of Lebanon, and he reaffirmed the commitment of the United Nations to the efforts of the Special Tribunal for Lebanon.

23. On 15 February clashes between members of radical Islamist movements and members of Fatah broke out in the Palestinian refugee camp of Ain el Hilweh, near Saida. At least one person was killed as a result of the fighting before calm was restored to the camp. This incident disrupted an otherwise generally calm situation in the camps.

24. Even as progress is being made in the reconstruction of the Nahr el Bared refugee camp, funding remains a major concern. The United Nations urges the international community to renew its financial support to the reconstruction of Nahr el Bared so that progress can be sustained.

25. The situation in the area of operations of UNIFIL remains quiet. On 31 January 2009, the IDF apprehended a 17-year old Lebanese shepherd in the vicinity of Kafr Shouba, alleging he had crossed south of the Blue Line. On 1 February, the civilian was handed over to UNIFIL who, in turn, handed him to the Lebanese authorities. An investigation is ongoing into the incident.

26. Israeli overflights have continued on an almost daily basis, with a marked increase on several days in early February.

Mr. President,

27. We remain deeply concerned at the current stalemate. We call for the resumption of talks on final status issues, implementation of Roadmap commitments, continued efforts to improve economic and security conditions, and a different and more positive approach to Gaza. We remain committed to an end to the occupation that began in 1967 and an end to the conflict, through the creation of an independent Palestinian State living side-by-side with Israel in peace and security, and comprehensive regional peace, in accordance with Security Council resolutions, previous agreements, the Roadmap, and the Arab Peace Initiative.

Thank you Mr. President.