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**ASSISTANT SECRETARY-GENERAL FOR POLITICAL AFFAIRS**

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**BRIEFING TO THE SECURITY COUNCIL  
ON THE SITUATION IN THE MIDDLE EAST**

**22 March 2011**

Mr. President,

1. Since last month's briefing, there has been an increase in violent incidents and tensions on the ground, while efforts to restart the Israeli-Palestinian negotiations have not produced visible results. We must not let the recent surge in violence further undermine the possibility of finding a way towards an agreement on final status issues, or undermine the state-building achievements thus far. The wider region has continued to witness dramatic developments, which add to the importance of redoubling efforts to break the deadlock as progress towards peace and meeting the legitimate aspirations of the Palestinian people to statehood could be an important stabilizing force in the Middle East.
2. During the reporting period, the Quartet continued its efforts to help the parties to find a way back to direct negotiations. As agreed in Munich on 5 February, Quartet envoys have met separately with Palestinian and Israeli negotiators, and are giving serious consideration to the views of the parties on how to bring about resumed negotiations on all core issues, including borders and security. Quartet envoys will further engage with both sides, and the Quartet is planning to meet at Principals level in April. It is hoped this meeting can help set the stage for renewed negotiations and the United Nations is working actively towards this goal.
3. On 11 March, a shocking murder of five members including three young children of an Israeli family of seven took place at the settlement of Itamar in the occupied West Bank. The Secretary-General and the Quartet unequivocally condemned the murders, offered condolences, and called for those responsible to be brought to justice and for all to act with restraint. The Quartet stated that attacks on any civilians are completely unacceptable in any circumstance. President Abbas condemned the murders and

offered the help of Palestinian security forces in bringing the perpetrators to justice. We expect strong action against incitement or glorification of any violent acts.

4. Israeli forces were deployed in several areas throughout the West Bank with the goal of detaining the perpetrators and containing attempts by Israeli settlers to attack Palestinians and their property, in reprisal for the killings. Despite these efforts, during the three days following the murders, OCHA recorded 8 incidents that resulted in injuries to Palestinians and 23 that caused damage to property throughout the West Bank as a result of settler violence. As well, the Israeli security forces reinstated the Hawwara check point near Nablus which had been removed on 11 February.
5. Overall, settler violence considerably increased during the reporting period as 60 incidents resulted in damage to property and 24 Palestinians were injured by settlers in 18 incidents in the West Bank. In one of these incidents, this Monday, a Palestinian was stabbed and injured by settlers close to Hebron and in another incident that took place yesterday, two Palestinians were shot and wounded by settlers. We recall that the Israeli government must fulfill its obligation to protect the Palestinian population in the occupied West Bank.
6. Citing security concerns, Israeli security forces conducted 320 search operations in the West Bank. 111 Palestinians were injured by Israeli security forces and 217 were arrested. About half of these injuries occurred in the East Jerusalem neighborhood of Silwan during clashes between local residents and the Israeli Police, in the context of protests against settler activities in the neighborhood.
7. We are also concerned by the increased violence and tensions in and around Gaza during the reporting period. Twelve missiles, one of which was a Grad rocket, and 55 mortars were shot indiscriminately towards Israeli civilian areas, including some fifty mortar shells in an alarming escalation during the night between 19 and 20 March. We condemn these attacks which are a violation of resolution 1860 (2009) and must cease immediately. 15 Israeli air strikes and 13 incursions took place resulting in the death of three Palestinian civilian and 28 injured as well as two militants killed and five injured. All parties must exercise restraint and respect international humanitarian law.
8. On 15 March Israeli forces intercepted the ship 'Victoria' 200 nautical miles from the Israeli coast. The ship carried some 25 tones of weapons and ammunition. The Israeli authorities believe the arms were destined for militant groups in Gaza. If this destination were to be confirmed, it would constitute a violation of Security Council Resolution 1860 (2009), which provides for the prevention of illicit trafficking of arms and ammunition.

Mr. President,

9. We are deeply concerned about the decision of 12 March by the Israeli Government to approve the construction of approximately 400 housing units in the West Bank in reaction to the heinous murder in Itamar. On 1 March, the Jerusalem Municipality issued a permit for the construction of 14 apartments for Israeli settlers in the Ras El-Amud neighborhood in East Jerusalem. These are provocative actions that only serve to exacerbate tensions. Once again I would like to express the United Nations position that any settlement activity by Israel in occupied territory is illegal under international law and detrimental to efforts to resume negotiations and achieve the two state solution.
10. Israeli authorities demolished 59 Palestinian structures throughout the West Bank during the reporting period. As a result, 119 people have been forcibly displaced. Israel as the occupying power is prohibited from destroying property belonging to individuals or communities except when absolutely required by military necessity.
11. On 7 March, the Israeli Government announced its intention to demolish all illegal West Bank outposts built on private Palestinian land by the end of 2011. We welcome this announcement. However, we note that it fails to address the issue of the existence of more than one hundred other West Bank outposts constructed not only in defiance of international law, but also in violation of the Israeli government's own regulations. On 28 February, the Israeli authorities demolished a number of structures in an outpost in the Northern West Bank, prompting violent clashes with settlers which led to seventeen arrests. Following the confrontation, militant settlers attacked a nearby Palestinian village, fire-bombing a house and injuring two children, as well as damaging property. Prime Minister Netanyahu condemned their actions.

Mr. President,

12. We stress the importance of further enabling steps by Israel to ensure greater progress on the ground in support of Palestinian state-building efforts. Measures agreed by Prime Minister Netanyahu and Quartet Representative Blair have started to be implemented in some areas. For example, the Israeli Ministry of Communications released the remaining bandwidth to Wataniya mobile operator on 3 March. Such facilitation is critical to further the development of the Palestinian private sector, which is the engine of sustainable economic growth.
13. However, state-building efforts by the Palestinian Authority are at risk if the political process does not overcome the current impasse in the negotiations and will be further undermined if tensions and violence on the ground continue. They also continue to be impeded in Area C and East Jerusalem by Israeli measures which challenge movement and access, hinder basic service provision, and undermine the development of resources.

14. As the Ad Hoc Liaison Committee is about to meet on 13 April, I wish to emphasise that continued support from donors is important to meet recurrent budget expenses of the Palestinian Authority. To date, commitments are far below what is needed.

Mr. President,

15. The Secretary-General noted with much interest President Abbas' readiness to visit Gaza in an effort to end Palestinian disunity. He also discussed the importance of Palestinian unity with the Egyptian Foreign Minister in Cairo and noted Egyptian intentions to focus anew on this important issue. It is important that the leaders respond to the clear wish of the people for unity. We welcome serious efforts by all factions to advance Palestinian unity and continue to hope for real progress within the framework of the Palestinian Authority and the commitments of the Palestine Liberation Organization.

16. On 15 March demonstrations with several thousand participants were held in most of the major West Bank cities. On the same day, much larger demonstrations with participation estimated at 100,000 were held in Gaza. Protestors called for an end to the Israeli occupation and the Palestinian division. I report with concern that Hamas security forces clamped down on protesters in Gaza, reportedly injuring seven Palestinians. The following day they suppressed a gathering of students, resulting in tens of students injured. On 15 March Hamas security forces attacked local members of the press and on 19 March they stormed the bureaus of Reuters, CNN, and the NHK news channel, attacking journalists, confiscating tapes, and destroying equipment. We condemn these attacks and urge full respect for the freedom of the press in Gaza as elsewhere.

17. Notwithstanding the difficulties, preparations for municipal elections are ongoing. The Palestinian Central Elections Committee organized voter registration from 9 March until 15 March in the West Bank. It was unable to open its offices in Gaza due to Hamas' refusal. President Abbas confirmed on 8 March that the 9 July local elections would be held on time. However, he reiterated that there would be no presidential and legislative elections unless they are held in the West Bank and Gaza simultaneously.

Mr. President,

18. The situation of the civilian population in Gaza remains a concern. The weekly average of truckloads entering the Strip during this reporting period was 882, compared to 566 in June 2010 before the announcement of the revised Israeli policy. However, the current imports represent approximately only one third of the June 2007 pre-blockade weekly average.

19. United Nations projects with the total value of \$155.5 million have been approved thus far by the Government of Israel. It is now important to ensure timely implementation of these projects and a steady flow of approvals. The recent movement of 23,650 tons of aggregate from Sufa crossing is a welcome step. However, a fundamental upgrade in the entry of material through Israeli crossings is necessary for the United Nations to continue its work and, more importantly, for the rehabilitation of the private sector, which is critical for the revival of the economy in Gaza. Based on our estimates, the amount of construction materials that is now entering through the tunnels is substantially more than the amount passing through the Israeli crossings for approved international projects.
20. I regret to continue to report that Staff Sergeant Gilad Shalit remains in Hamas captivity without any humanitarian access for nearly five years. We reiterate our call for his release and for humanitarian access to be provided to him without delay. We are concerned by the continued detention of several thousands Palestinians in Israel, and call for their rights to be respected.

Mr. President,

21. As far as the regional aspects of the peace process are concerned, there has been no progress in efforts to promote Israeli Syrian peace negotiations. Settlement activities in the occupied Syrian Golan have also continued. We encourage the parties to pursue the resolution of the conflict in the context of the Arab peace initiative.
22. In Lebanon, Mr. Mikati, whom President Sleiman mandated on 25 January to form a new Government, has pursued his consultations with all political parties in a climate of increased political polarization. On 27 February, the 14 March coalition announced that it would not take part in the future Government. Mr. Mikati has placed great emphasis on forming a non-partisan government. The Secretary-General renews his hope that the new Government will meet the aspirations of all Lebanese and calls on it to respect Lebanon's international obligations.
23. On 13 March, the 14 March coalition held a major political rally to commemorate the sixth anniversary of its formation. All speakers at the rally expressed strong support for the Special Tribunal for Lebanon and denounced the continued existence of arms outside the control of the State and their use as a political instrument in the domestic arena.
24. I am concerned by the increase in verbal attacks and even some acts of violence against UNRWA staff in Lebanon, following the death of a young boy on 8 March in Ein el-Hilweh camp. I call on Palestinian factions to de-escalate the situation. UNRWA continues to strive for the delivery of improved services to the Palestinian

refugees it serves. I call upon the international community to step up support to UNRWA in order to urgently meet its funding requirements.

25. The overall situation in the UNIFIL area of operations has remained generally quiet and stable. Israeli air violations continued at high level, in violation of resolution 1701 (2006). Further details will be discussed by the Special Coordinator for Lebanon and the Department for Peacekeeping Operations when they brief this Council on the implementation of the resolution on 29 March.

Mr. President,

26. Let me conclude by reiterating a sense of urgency to break the current impasse in the Israeli-Palestinian negotiations. The important achievements, especially those related to the state-building agenda of the Palestinian Authority, would be at risk if the impasse in the political process is not overcome. A decisive effort must now be made by the international community and the Quartet to bring the parties back to negotiating the final status issues towards implementing the two state solution. We urge the parties to demonstrate leadership and rise to the challenge of making a historic peace.