

**Briefing to the Security Council on the Situation in the Middle East
Including the Palestinian Question**

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Thank you, Mr. President, for this opportunity to brief the Council on my visit to the occupied Palestinian territory and Israel from 14 to 18 February. I spent a day in Gaza, a day in the West Bank, and a morning in Sderot in Southern Israel; I also called on Israeli Government officials, the Prime Minister of the Palestinian Authority and others; and held intensive discussions with the UN and other humanitarian agencies and NGOs working in both the West Bank and Gaza, and with representatives of civil society.

Mr. President,

I found conditions for the people of Gaza grim and miserable, and far from “normal”. Eight months of severe restrictions on the movement of goods and people entering and leaving the territory, following the Hamas take-over in June 2007, have taken a heavy economic and social toll, coming on top of years of difficulty and economic decline. Whilst the most basic humanitarian goods, particularly food aid, have mostly continued to struggle through, other imports have been progressively closed off, including critical spare parts and raw materials such as cement. Only about 10% of what went into Gaza in January 2007 was allowed to enter in January 2008. In addition, in October Israel started to reduce the flow of industrial diesel used to operate the single power station in Gaza. In February, the amount of electricity supplied to Gaza from Israel was also reduced. Since June 2007, the movement of Palestinians in and out of Gaza has been virtually impossible, apart from the short period when the Rafah wall was down and with limited exceptions made for urgent medical cases, pilgrims, those with student and work visas and foreign residence documentation.

The consequences are increasingly severe and visible. Almost 80% of the population are now receiving food aid; most industry and agriculture have collapsed, raising unemployment and poverty to new heights; frequent and lengthy power cuts severely impair the functioning of essential services and infrastructure; water quality is declining rapidly, where it is available at all; the inadequacies of the sewage system are increasingly exposed, with a real risk of a sewage lagoon at Beit Lahiya collapsing; the medical and education systems are teetering on the edge of failure, as lack of equipment, spare parts, qualified staff and psychological strains undermine their functioning. Vulnerability of the weakest to disease is rising, notably among children, who make up more than half of the population of Gaza. For instance, in October 2007 the number of children under the age of three diagnosed with diarrhoea increased by 20% compared to the previous year and anemia amongst children is up by 40%. This bleak situation is further compounded by bureaucratic difficulties between the Palestinian Authority and those administering health care for example in Gaza.

The Israeli government has said that, while there are security concerns about the crossing points themselves, which have been fired on, and through which attempts have been made to

smuggle arms and potential bombers, the main motivation for the restrictions is the continuing firing of Qassam rockets from Gaza. My visit to Sderot, which has been the target of more than 4,300 rockets since 2004, brought out the physical and psychological damage to the population there from this constant barrage. These crude rockets are aimed at hurting civilians and clearly constitute terrorism. Their continued firing is completely unacceptable and must be halted unconditionally. Hamas, which claims to govern the Gaza Strip, must accept its full share of responsibility for the suffering in Gaza. Above all, it must act to stop these rockets immediately.

However, I also made clear publicly and privately my view that, whatever the provocation and illegality of the rockets, the effective Israeli isolation of Gaza is not justified, given Israel's continuing obligations to the people of Gaza. It amounts to collective punishment and is contrary to international humanitarian law. Moreover, it does not appear to be having the desired effect either in halting the rockets or weakening Hamas' position among the people of Gaza, or more widely. Only those who want to see further radicalization can be happy with the present situation.

Meanwhile the consequences for civilians on both sides are dramatic, not only through the imposed restrictions and the continuous firing of rockets, but also the resulting repeated incursions into and military clashes inside Gaza, which cause many civilian casualties, however unintended these might be. The fundamental principles of distinction between combatants and non-combatants and of proportionality in attacks during the conduct of hostilities must be respected by all sides.

Mr. President, the current situation in Gaza is not sustainable, and is extremely damaging to the prospects for the current peace process. Only political efforts can change this dynamic. Meanwhile, from a humanitarian point of view, while a return to the 2005 Agreement on Movement and Access is what is really needed, I pressed the Israeli government, and the Palestinian Authority, at least to ensure that more humanitarian and other goods are allowed in, on a more predictable and systematic basis. I made the same message clear to Hamas in what I said publicly. This means reopening the crossings and establishing better mechanisms for identifying and addressing the fundamental needs of the population. In particular, I asked that the materials necessary for the restart of \$213 million of frozen humanitarian United Nations' projects, in areas such as sanitation, housing, education and health, be allowed in by Israel and that spares and equipment for medical and sanitation services be given priority. There were some indications that the Israeli authorities are willing to respond positively to these requests.

I would add that the proposals of the Palestinian Prime Minister, Salam Fayyad, for the reopening of the key Karni crossing - the only one with adequate infrastructure to process large quantities of goods appropriately and effectively - deserve all our support. A properly negotiated role is also necessary for the Rafah crossing; a role which does not give credence to the idea that Israel can hand over its responsibilities and obligations for Gaza to Egypt or any other State or authority. Arrangements which ensure proper screening for goods passing in both directions through the crossings, to meet Israel's security concerns, should be possible, if necessary with appropriate international support.

Mr. President, the conditions of life I saw in the West Bank were obviously better than those in Gaza, but the situation there is of no less fundamental humanitarian concern. I had read

about the Barrier, the settlements, the permit regime and the access closures, but that had not prepared me for the visible and tangible reality on the ground. The combination of the construction of the Barrier, the steady expansion of the settlements, all still illegal, and the now 580 separate check points and blockages within the West Bank is fragmenting communities. It seriously impairs the access of tens of thousands of people to their land and to essential services, not least medical services. Severe restrictions on the movement of goods and people are affecting economic growth, as well as increasing poverty and food insecurity, and reducing health standards. They further threaten the viability of a future Palestinian state.

In my meetings with Palestinians in the West Bank, I felt that the despair and sense of humiliation and injustice were no less than in Gaza. This was particularly evident from my visit to Hebron, where the presence of a relatively small group of 600 settlers and the considerable security arrangements put in place to ensure their protection have divided the city and severely affect the economy and the lives of its citizens. Representatives of Palestinian civil society throughout the West Bank appealed passionately to the UN through me to do something about their plight and their lack of a viable future as they saw it.

Israel has legitimate security concerns and a right and duty to defend its citizens. But even in such circumstances, security cannot override all other concerns or justify so much damage to ordinary people's livelihoods and infringements of their human dignity and human rights. Israel has obligations towards the Palestinian population under occupation. I therefore pressed the Israeli authorities to begin implementing their commitments to ease at least some of the restrictions.

Mr. President, looking at these deteriorating realities on the ground in Gaza, and the West Bank, as well as in Sderot, the disconnect between these realities and the hopes and aims of the continuing peace talks seemed almost total, and indeed risks making a mockery of the readiness of the international community to invest \$7.7 billion dollars in the economic development of the occupied Palestinian territory. As the Special Coordinator has stressed, unless this chasm is bridged quickly, and the humanitarian indicators begin to rise and create some sense of hope for the future, the chances of success in the peace talks may be fatally undermined, no matter how great the sincerity and ingenuity of all concerned. And we desperately need those talks to succeed this year. The alternative comforts only the extremists.

Mr. President, notwithstanding all the difficulties, the humanitarian community will continue to do all it can to respond to the moral imperative of saving and improving lives and preserving human dignity. UNRWA and the other agencies and NGOs working in Gaza in particular are doing a heroic job under difficult and dangerous circumstances, not least due to the imposed restrictions on the movement and access of UN staff, which are too often not consistent with the immunities and privileges to which they are entitled. Meanwhile, I also appeal to the donor community to continue to respond generously to what has now become the third largest annual consolidated appeal for humanitarian funds after Darfur and the DRC. And I appeal to this Council to continue to speak up about the consequences for civilians, in both the occupied Palestinian territory and Israel, of what is happening, and about the overriding duty on all sides to comply with International Humanitarian Law, and the resolutions of this Council.

Thank you, Mr. President.