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Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs

UN HUMANITARIAN CHIEF STRESSES NEED FOR SUSTAINED ACCESS TO GAZA

(New York , 24 January 2009): Yesterday, on the third day of his visit to the occupied Palestinian territory and Israel , Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator (ERC) John Holmes briefed donors on his visit to Gaza and the forthcoming Flash Appeal to meet immediate and rehabilitation needs, which will be launched in early February. The ERC also discussed the situation with UN agencies and NGOs in Jerusalem.

On Thursday, Mr. Holmes met Israel's Social Affairs Minister Isaac Herzog and a group of representatives of other Israeli ministries to discuss the need for urgent and sustained access to Gaza to meet the needs of the people of Gaza . Mr. Holmes particularly underscored the need for regular and unimpeded movement of humanitarian aid workers and of relief supplies, through open crossings, for commercial as well as humanitarian goods. Mr. Herzog assured Mr. Holmes that the Government of Israel would work with the United Nations and its partners to ensure the provision of life-saving aid and the commencement of early recovery activities.

Today, in Ramallah and Jerusalem, the ERC heard the voices of the community in his meetings with Palestinian Authority, representatives of the Private Sector Council, and Palestinian non-governmental organisations (NGOs), Israeli NGOs, and Israeli academics. Members of civil society impressed upon the ERC the need for a sustained opening of the crossings into Gaza. Palestinian interlocutors expressed the deep anger of the Palestinian community and their demands for accountability.

The ERC also held meetings with the Palestinian Authority in Ramallah on scaling up humanitarian assistance, recovery, and emergency repairs, including the rehabilitation of key infrastructure.

The Palestinian Authority stressed the needed for sustained openings of the crossings to allow Gazans the necessities of life. Welcoming the support of governments and private organisations, they emphasized the importance of cash donations above in-kind aid, and asked that donors coordinate their aid with both the United Nations and the Palestinian Authority. The ERC pledged to work closely with all parties to ensure appropriate humanitarian assistance, and reiterated the need to open up Gaza.

On Sunday, the ERC will visit Egypt for meetings with representatives of the Government of Egypt and the League of Arab States, UN officials, the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and representatives from other humanitarian agencies.

"During my visit to Gaza earlier this week, the destruction I witnessed was devastating," said Mr. Holmes. " However, I end this visit encouraged by the determination of those I have met to respond as quickly as possible to the immediate needs of the people of Gaza, and to help them resume a life lived with dignity," he emphasized.

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