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SECURITY COUNCIL PRESIDENTIAL STATEMENT WELCOMES ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN

AGREEMENT ON RAFAH CROSSING AS 'IMPORTANT STEP FORWARD'

Political Affairs Under-Secretary-General Briefs on Recent Trip: Returns 'Hopeful', but with Renewed Appreciation for Immense Challenges

The Security Council today welcomed the 15 November Agreement on Movement and Access and the Agreed Principles for the Rafah Crossing between the Government of Israel and the Palestinian Authority, and the successful opening of the Rafah crossing on 25 November, as an important step forward.

Through a presidential statement read out by its President for the month, Andrei I. Denisov (Russian Federation), the Council commended the efforts of the Quartet, its Special Envoy and his team, as well as the positive contributions of the Government of Egypt, and it expressed its strong appreciation to the European Union for assuming the role of third-party monitor.

In that connection, the Council called on the parties to take immediate action to implement the terms of both agreements according to their timelines. It also called for renewed action in parallel by the Government of Israel and the Palestinian Authority on their obligations under the [Road Map](#), to ensure continued progress towards the creation of a viable, democratic, sovereign, and contiguous Palestine living side by side with Israel in peace and security.

Earlier today, the Council heard a briefing by the Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs, Ibrahim Gambari, who, having recently returned from a visit with the Secretary-General to Iraq, and then gone on himself to Lebanon, Israel and the occupied Palestinian Territory, told Council members, "I return from the region hopeful about the future, but with a renewed appreciation for the immense challenges it faces."

Mr. Gambari said he had seen "with my own eyes" several very real challenges to progress: the extent to which the barrier, checkpoints and Israeli settlements dominated the West Bank landscape; the dire economic and social situation of many people in Gaza and the West Bank; the weakness of the rule of the law in the areas under Palestinian control; the genuine insecurity and fear that Israelis faced on a daily basis; and the border between Israel and Lebanon, always tense, recently volatile, where the Lebanese Government had yet to assert its full control.

Laying out the six aspects of this month's Agreement on Movement and Access between the Israeli Government and the Palestinian Authority, he said that, for the first time in their history, Palestinians had assumed control of part of their border, at the Rafah crossing. The Agreement envisaged an unprecedented third-party role for the European Union, an enhanced contribution by the United States Security Coordinator, support from the Quartet Special Envoy, and the continued close involvement of the United Nations and the World Bank. Its full implementation was a vital first step towards Palestinian economic recovery, which also required strengthened Palestinian institutions and economic management.

He added that today's briefing was also informed by the fragile security situation and the continued violence in the reporting period since the last briefing on 20 October, the combination of Israeli settlement activity and barrier construction creating "new and significant" facts on the ground in the West Bank, and the further rounds of Palestinian municipal elections in December, Palestinian legislative elections scheduled for January 2006, and Israeli elections scheduled for the end of March. Lebanon, he said, was also at a critical stage in its history, and faced a number of important challenges, which should be met through a process led by the Lebanese and supported by the United Nations and the international community, as necessary.

The meeting at which Mr. Gambari briefed the Council began at 10:15 a.m. and was adjourned at 10:33 a.m. The second meeting began at 1:25 p.m. and adjourned at 1:29 p.m.

Presidential Statement

The presidential statement, to be issued as S/PRST/2005/57, reads as follows:

"The Security Council welcomes the Agreement on Movement and Access and the Agreed Principles for the Rafah Crossing reached between the Government of Israel and the Palestinian Authority on 15 November 2005. The successful opening of the Rafah crossing on 25 November 2005 represents an important step forward.

"The Security Council commends the efforts of the Quartet, its Special Envoy and his team, as well as the positive contributions of the Government of Egypt, and expresses its strong appreciation to the European Union for assuming the role of third party monitor.

"The Security Council calls on the parties to take immediate action to implement the terms of both agreements according to the time lines established therein.

"The Security Council calls for renewed action in parallel by the Government of Israel and the Palestinian Authority on their obligations in accordance with the Road Map, to ensure continued progress towards the creation of a viable, democratic, sovereign, and contiguous Palestine living side by side with Israel in peace and security. The Security Council stresses the importance of, and the need to achieve, a just, comprehensive, and lasting peace in the Middle East, based on all its relevant resolutions, including its resolutions 242 (1967), 338 (1973), 1397 (2002) and 1515 (2003), the Madrid terms of reference and the principle of land for peace."

Summary of Briefing Statement

IBRAHIM GAMBARI said he had returned last week from his first visit to the Middle East in his capacity as Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs. He had accompanied the Secretary-General on his visit to Iraq, then proceeded on to Lebanon, Israel and the occupied Palestinian Territory. Updating the Council on events on the ground since his last briefing on 20 October, he noted that, two weeks ago, the Government of Israel and the Palestinian Authority reached an Agreement on Movement and Access. The Agreement had been made possible by months of hard work by Quartet Special Envoy James Wolfensohn and his team, and, at the end, the personal engagement of the United States Secretary of State, Condoleezza Rice, and the European Union High Representative for Foreign and Security Policy, Javier Solana.

He said that the Agreement envisaged an unprecedented third-party role for the European Union, an enhanced contribution by the United States Security Coordinator, support from the Quartet Special Envoy, and the continued close involvement of the United Nations and the World Bank. The first aspect of the Agreement was implemented last Saturday, when Rafah crossing reopened under Palestinian control for travellers in both directions, and outgoing passage of goods, with European Union supervision as a third party. On that day, 757 people entered Gaza at Rafah and 830 exited. The Union's 90-strong Border Assistance Mission would be responsible for resolving any disputes between Israel and the Palestinian Authority arising from the Agreement.

Second, the parties agreed that the crossings between Gaza and Israel would operate continuously, unlike previously, he explained. The aim was for 150 export trucks to be processed daily by the end of the year, and 400 by the end of next year. Goods would enter Gaza through Kerem Shalom, where Israel, Egypt and Gaza met. The European Union would monitor customs agreements, with its mission being reviewed in a year. Third, bus convoys between Gaza and the West Bank would start on 15 December, with truck convoys following on 15 January. Fourth, the Government of Israel had undertaken to review the system of movement restrictions in the West Bank and reduce them to the maximum extent possible by the end of the year. Fifth, construction of the seaport was to begin immediately. Sixth, the parties would continue discussions on the airport.

He said that the Agreement addressed several issues that were left hanging after Israel's withdrawal of settlements and military infrastructure from the Gaza Strip. The recent agreement resolved those issues or set up frameworks for doing so. All now hinged on full and timely implementation. Representatives of the United States Government were working closely with the parties on implementation, and Mr. Wolfensohn's team would be tracking progress on the Quartet's behalf. They deserved the Council's collective support and encouragement. The Special Envoy also intended to issue reports every two weeks or so to keep the international community informed of progress. His first report, issued yesterday, showed, among other things, that more than 800 people were passing through Rafah every day, even though the crossing was currently open for only four hours daily. Those numbers were expected to rise as Rafah moved towards a 24-hour operation.

The United Nations was playing its part in tracking progress in implementing the Agreement, including the easing of movement restrictions in the West Bank, he said. According to figures from the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), obstacles to movement had increased in the last two months from 376 to 396. The OCHA would confirm that figure with the Israel Defence Forces, but it appeared that much of the increase had been in the northern West Bank, the area where, in August, four Israeli settlements had been removed and where movement had previously eased.

Meanwhile, he continued, a picture was emerging of the West Bank divided into three distinct areas – north, central and south. While movement was relatively free inside those areas, travel, with the exception of Nablus, was severely hampered by a combination of checkpoints, travel permits and physical obstacles. As part of ongoing work, the United Nations was compiling a comprehensive set of recommendations to reduce obstacles, improve movement, and enhance Palestinian access to essential services and markets. Full implementation of the Agreement on Access and Movement was a vital first step towards Palestinian economic recovery. Recovery would also require the strengthening of Palestinian institutions and economic management, and the effective distribution of international aid.

At the mid-December meeting of the Ad Hoc Liaison Committee, which was the primary policy-making meeting of donors, the Palestinian Authority and the Government of Israel, it was hoped that the Palestinian Authority would announce new aid coordination structures designed to enhance Palestinian control of the coordination of donor assistance, and present a full outline of its medium-term development plan, he said. Together, those initiatives should contribute to the process of Palestinian institutional development, as envisaged in the Road Map. Hopefully, the Palestinian Authority would commit to tackle a number of outstanding issues in its plan. Its fiscal situation was also of immediate concern, and urgent action was required before the end of the year to redress the anticipated fiscal crisis.

Noting that the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) had held a successful conference of donor and host countries in Jordan this month to raise funds to continue support for Palestinian refugees in the region, he said that continued support for UNRWA's programmes was vital for both stability and recovery in the occupied Palestinian Territory in the post-engagement period.

He stressed that the fragile security situation and the need for more decisive action in accordance with the Road Map had been underlined by continued violence. Throughout the reporting period, the Israeli army targeted alleged militants in the West Bank and Gaza, and undertook major arrest campaigns in the West Bank. On 26 October, a suicide bomber blew himself up at Hadera market in Israel, killing six Israeli civilians. The Secretary-General had condemned that act of terror. Violence had taken its toll on Palestinian civilians, as well as Israelis; during the reporting period, at least seven Palestinian civilians were killed, including, tragically, an 11-year old boy carrying a toy gun, who was shot fatally by Israeli forces in Jenin on 3 November.

The Palestinian security services had taken some action, including arrests, against those who persisted in terrorist attacks, he said. Measures had also been taken to keep weapons off the streets and to assert the rule of law in areas under Palestinian control. More work should be done in that regard. Efforts had also

been undertaken to rehabilitate former militia members through employment in the security services. Those had, however, given rise to serious fiscal concerns. Continued efforts were necessary to develop viable and effective strategies to deal with militias.

Continuing, he said that President Abbas had established a leadership committee on security reform, which, in turn, had mandated a technical team to develop a white paper on safety and security for Palestinians. That process would involve public dialogue in an effort to build national consensus. Those efforts had received the strong support of the United States Security Coordinator, Lieutenant General William Ward, whose successor, Lieutenant General Keith Dayton, would soon be on the ground. The United States Security Coordinator had also been supporting efforts to improve Israeli-Palestinian security cooperation.

He recalled that the Road Map called for a freeze of all settlement activity, including natural growth of settlements, and for settlement outposts constructed since March 2001 to be dismantled. On 24 November, the Israeli press reported that Housing Minister Yitzhak Herzog published tenders for an additional 350 housing units in the West Bank settlement of Ma'ale Adumim.

Israel had also continued construction along the projected route of the barrier, including on Occupied Palestinian Territory in East Jerusalem and between Jerusalem and Ramallah, he said. A new terminal was opened at the main entrance to Bethlehem, located some 500 to 600 metres further inside Occupied Palestinian Territory than the previous checkpoint, and functioning much like an international border crossing. Israeli officials had indicated that there would be a series of such crossings along the route of the barrier between East Jerusalem and the remainder of the West Bank. The Israel Defence Forces had also continued to issue military land requisition orders in various parts of the West Bank to acquire land for barrier construction.

He said that the combination of settlement activity and barrier construction was creating "new and significant" facts on the ground in the West Bank. That was particularly the case in and around East Jerusalem, where the route of the barrier fragmented and isolated Palestinian neighbourhoods. He reiterated the Secretary-General's call on Israel to abide by its legal obligations, as set forth in the 9 July 2004 advisory opinion of the International Court of Justice and General Assembly resolution ES-10/15.

Against that backdrop, he said that the situation was entering a delicate period, with further rounds of Palestinian municipal elections in December, Palestinian legislative elections scheduled for 25 January 2006, and Israeli elections scheduled for the end of March, following Prime Minister Sharon's request to the President of Israel to dissolve the Knesset. Primary elections for the ruling Fatah party had already taken place in several locations, but after claims of fraud and the storming of several Gaza polling stations by militants two days ago, primaries had been suspended. Nevertheless, technical preparations by the Palestinian Central Election Commission were well under way to meet the unchanged target date of 25 January 2006 for the legislative elections. The United Nations would assist the Commission through a Liaison and Support Unit.

He said the main concerns of the elections Commission were that the modalities of the poll in East Jerusalem be finalized as soon as possible, that freedom of movement of candidates during the January campaigning period should be assured by Israeli authorities, and that prisoners in Israeli jails be able to vote. The Israeli authorities, while expressing their intention not to interfere with the poll, said that they would not cooperate in its conduct. Under the Road Map, the Palestinian Authority was committed to holding free, open and fair elections, and Israel must support the development of Palestinian democracy and facilitate elections, including in East Jerusalem.

In Israel, he noted, Labour had elected a new leader, Amir Peretz, who had informed Prime Minister Sharon that Labour would leave the coalition government. New elections were expected by the end of March. Mr. Sharon had announced his intention to leave the Likud Party and seek re-election as Prime Minister as head of the new Kadima, or "Forward", Party. It was too early to say what the impact of those major political realignments would be on Israel's approach to the peace process, but that was no doubt an important time for the future of both Israel and the Palestinians.

He said that Lebanon was also at a critical stage in its history, and faced a number of important challenges. During his visit to Beirut, he had told all Lebanese interlocutors of the United Nations' commitment to continue working closely with the Lebanese Government and to support Lebanon's independence, sovereignty, stability and security. He had reiterated his belief that the challenges facing Lebanon should be met through a process led by the Lebanese and supported by the United Nations and the international community as necessary.

In his discussions on the investigation into the assassination of Prime Minister Hariri, he had underlined that Security Council resolution 1636 (2005) had made clear Syria's obligation to extend its full support and cooperation. He had also reiterated that the modalities of such cooperation should be agreed in a bilateral fashion between the Syrian authorities and the United Nations International Independent Investigation Commission. As reported last Friday, the Investigation Commission and the Syrian authorities reached an agreement to conduct the interviews of the Syrian individuals in Vienna.

He said his visit had confirmed his earlier assessment that Lebanon remained committed to moving ahead with a challenging and important programme of political and socio-economic reform. Prime Minister Siniora's Government had been working to formulate a financial and economic plan that would be the subject of the next meeting of the core group of countries, which had offered support to Lebanon's various reform initiatives.

The critical importance of the Lebanese Government extending its full control over all its territory was underlined on 21 November, when Hezbollah initiated heavy attacks in Ghajar Village and the Shabaa Farms from the Lebanese side of the Blue Line, he said. The exchange of fire subsequently extended all along the Blue Line. Consistent with its mandate, the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) had played an important role, in collaboration with the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), in bringing about a cease-fire and securing the handover of three Hezbollah fighters killed.

He also reported that Israel had violated Lebanese airspace on many occasions during the reporting period – including, before the Hezbollah attacks, along coastal areas, as well as two large sonic booms over civilian areas, and after the attacks dropped leaflets over Beirut. Since 21 November, 12 air violations by Israel had been recorded. Israel claimed its actions had been necessary in the face of evidence of possible hostile acts by Hezbollah, while the Lebanese Government claimed that the violations served to provoke attacks. Their cessation, for which the United Nations had repeatedly called, would contribute to the maintenance of calm along the Blue Line. Nonetheless, the United Nations would continue to assert in the strongest terms with both parties that one violation could not justify another. It was imperative to reduce tensions and achieve security on both sides of the Blue Line.

"I return from the region hopeful about the future, but with a renewed appreciation for the immense challenges it faces", Mr. Gambari said. He had seen many things that made him optimistic – the Rafah crossing where Palestinians had assumed control of part of their border for the first time in their history; the Gaza settlements that Israel had evacuated and destroyed, setting a vital precedent for the future; the resolve of Palestinian officials to proceed with elections and reform; the awareness of Israeli officials that they must consider the impact of their actions on the very Palestinian partner with whom they must try to make peace; and, in Beirut, the determination of the Lebanese Government to assert its control over the entire country, which was vital if regional peace was to be secured, he said.

He had also seen "with my own eyes" a number of very real challenges to progress – the extent to which the barrier, checkpoints and Israeli settlements dominated the landscape in the West Bank; the dire economic and social situation of many people in Gaza and the West Bank; the weakness of the rule of the law in the areas under Palestinian control; the genuine insecurity and fear that Israelis faced on a daily basis; and the border between Israel and Lebanon, always tense, recently volatile, where the Government of Lebanon was yet to assert its full sovereignty and control.

He said he had also seen, with great admiration, the determination of the United Nations system on the ground to improve the situation. Above all, he returned from the region with a strong belief that the only way forward for Israelis and Palestinians alike was, on the one hand, for the parties to ensure the success of disengagement by fully implementing the recent Agreement on Movement and Access, and, on the other hand, for renewed action by both parties in parallel to

fulfil their obligations under phase one of the Road Map.

The Palestinian Authority must implement proper restructuring of its security services and take action against individuals involved in violence, he said. Israel must act with restraint. It was in its own interest to support the Palestinian Authority's efforts to establish calm during the coming weeks and months. Palestinians also needed an Authority that managed budgetary resources carefully and planned effectively for the future Palestinian State.

Meanwhile, he said, the Government of Israel had yet to fulfil its Road Map obligations to cease settlement activity and to dismantle settlement outposts constructed since March 2001. Israel's continued creation of "facts on the ground" damaged the Palestinian leaders who were seeking election on a platform of peaceful negotiation with Israel. That also complicated efforts to achieve a viable two-State solution, with contiguity of the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, and meaningful linkages between the West Bank and the Gaza Strip.

The coming electoral period called for the utmost wisdom and political determination from both sides and should be turned into an opportunity for forward movement and not stagnation, he stressed. The Palestinian elections could serve as a platform on which to base the necessary transition from a heavily and disparately armed society to one built on the rule of law in which the Palestinian Authority held the monopoly of the instruments of violence. Hopefully, everyone would support the Palestinians' right to decide on their conduct, including participation, and Israel would cooperate so that the playing field was level.

He said that, if the Palestinian elections were successfully conducted, and once Israelis determined at the ballot box the political direction they wished their leaders to take, there might yet be the emergence of new circumstances in which to press forward, quickly and decisively, with the implementation of all phases of the Road Map, towards the goal of a just and lasting peace, based on two States, Israel and Palestine, living side by side in peace, within secure and recognized borders, in accordance with Security Council resolutions. The United Nations would continue to work towards the goal of a comprehensive and just peace in the region. "I believe strongly that that goal is both imperative and achievable", he concluded.

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