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IN BRIEFING TO SECURITY COUNCIL, SPECIAL COORDINATOR FOR MIDDLE EAST PEACE PROCESS

URGES CONDEMNATION OF GAZA VIOLENCE, STEPS TO HELP CIVILIANS

He Welcomes Humanitarian Response amid Ongoing Fighting in Northern Lebanon

Emphasizing that the "brutal violence" in Gaza should be condemned, and calling for measures to save its people from isolation, Michael Williams, the new Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process, urged support for the Palestinian Authority Government of President Mahmoud Abbas, as he delivered his first briefing to the Security Council today.

Gaza and the West Bank remained one Palestinian Territory, legally administered by one Palestinian Authority headed by President Abbas and the emergency Government he had appointed, he stressed. The United Nations had a key role to play in addressing a myriad challenges, not the least of which was the reopening of crossings in and out of Gaza and providing humanitarian aid.

He said it was vital that political and financial support from Israel and the international community be immediately delivered to the Palestinian Government, starting with the release of all withheld value added taxes (VAT) and customs revenues. Action was also needed on previous Israeli and Palestinian commitments, such as the removal of roadblocks, the release of prisoners and the evacuation of settlement outposts, on the one hand, and an end to violence and reform of Palestinian Authority institutions, on the other.

The Middle East region as a whole was highly volatile and unstable, he said. Renewed violence in Lebanon, including the recent assassination of parliamentarian Walid Eido and the continued fighting between the Lebanese Armed Forces and Fatah al-Islam in the north, threatened the nation's stability. In the Occupied Palestinian Territory, the figures of the past month told the whole gloomy story: 218 Palestinians dead and 910 injured in internal violence; 40 Palestinians killed and 159 injured by the Israel Defense Forces; a 13-year-old quadriplegic boy killed and 10 other Israelis injured by Palestinian militants; at least 166 rockets fired by Palestinian militants from Gaza into Israel and 77 mortars launched at the Erez crossing; 37 Israeli air strikes and multiple ground operations into the Gaza Strip; and 363 Israeli incursions and 287 arrests in the West Bank. In addition, two United Nations staff members had been killed in the Gaza violence, and many others injured.

The meeting began at 10:20 a.m. and ended at 10:45 a.m.

Briefing

MICHAEL WILLIAMS, Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process and Personal Representative of the Secretary-General, said the Council met today at a time of crisis in the Middle East. The violent seizure of de facto political authority in Gaza by Hamas, the end of the Palestinian National Unity Government, and the declaration of a state of emergency by President Mahmoud Abbas had created new political realities and worrying conditions in the Occupied Palestinian Territory. In Lebanon, renewed violence threatened the nation's stability. Israel had been subjected to rocket attacks on both its southern and northern borders. The entire region's volatility and instability overshadowed efforts to make political progress.

He said the figures of the past month told a gloomy story: 218 Palestinians dead and 910 injured in internal violence; 40 Palestinians killed and 159 injured by the Israel Defense Forces; a 13-year-old quadriplegic Israeli boy killed and 10 other Israelis injured by Palestinian militants; at least 166 rockets fired by Palestinian militants from Gaza into Israel and 77 mortars launched at the Erez crossing; 37 Israeli air strikes and multiple ground operations into the Gaza Strip; and 363 Israeli incursions and 287 arrests in the West Bank.

Turning to the situation in Gaza, he said that, since the February Mecca Agreement, it had become plain that the Palestinian National Unity Government faced

enormous obstacles. The accord had led neither to the integration of common security and political structures, nor to a lifting of Israeli and international measures against the Palestinian Authority Government imposed following the January 2006 elections. On 27 May, Egypt had brokered a truce after bitter factional fighting. That violence had drawn in Israel, which had responded with targeted air operations to intense Hamas rocket attacks against its civilian population. President Abbas had proposed, and the National Unity Government had endorsed, a ceasefire plan designed to ensure calm throughout Gaza and the West Bank. That plan had not materialized.

All that had been swiftly overtaken by the events of last week, he said. Between 9 and 15 June, Hamas' military wing and executive force had taken control of the Gaza Strip in a violent insurrection against the presidency and Palestinian Authority security forces. Hamas fighters had taken over key security and strategic sites in well-planned and executed operations, outperforming presidential forces and Fatah militants. During the fighting, there had been many grave violations of humanitarian and human rights law, including summary executions, attacks on hospitals and the throwing of people from buildings to their deaths. Palestinian Authority security premises and other institutions, including the presidential compound, had been burned or looted. Presidential forces had stolen three United Nations vehicles at gunpoint, returning them later.

The fighting had created some population movements, including hundreds of Fatah militants and ordinary civilians seeking to flee the violence, he said. About 3,500 Palestinians, including some who had been denied entry into Egypt, were reported to be awaiting re-entry into Gaza through the Rafah crossing. Another 250 people, some of whom were wounded or injured, were waiting at the Erez terminal for permission to cross through Israel towards the West Bank. They were receiving assistance from the United Nations, the International Committee of the Red Cross and the Israel Defense Forces. The situation at the Rafah and Erez crossings, still awaiting resolution, raised increasing concerns about protection, particularly of the children involved. There were reports of several seriously ill Palestinians being allowed entry today.

He said the fighting in Gaza inevitably had repercussions in the West Bank, pointing out that there had been clashes in Nablus and Ramallah. Elsewhere in the West Bank, Hamas supporters and officials had been detained and President Abbas had called for a halt to all violent acts, including reprisals against Hamas members. On 14 June, President Abbas had dismissed Prime Minister Ismail Haniyeh, which had led to the Government's dissolution. He had declared a state of emergency for 30 days, in accordance with the Palestinian basic law, and appointed Salam Fayyad as Prime Minister, Foreign Minister and Finance Minister, leading an emergency Government of 11 independents, mainly technocrats.

Meanwhile, he said, today marked the hundredth day in captivity for BBC journalist Alan Johnston. On 18 June, Hamas militants had surrounded the compound of the Doghmush clan, where Mr. Johnston was believed to be held. There had been no reports of progress in efforts to gain the release of Israeli Corporal Gilad Shalit, who, in five days time, would have been captive for one year. There had been troubling reports of harassment directed at Gaza's small Christian minority and, this morning, at least one rocket attack had reportedly been launched into Israel.

On 15 June, at the height of the crisis, the Secretary-General had convened a teleconference of the Quartet principals, he noted, adding that, in addition to sharing its great concern for the welfare and security of all Palestinians, the Quartet had expressed understanding and support for President Abbas' necessary and legitimate actions and for other legitimate Palestinian institutions. Arab Foreign Ministers meeting in Cairo had sent a strong message of support to President Abbas, as had the European Council.

With the formation of the Government, the European Union and the United States had announced their intention to renew direct assistance to the Palestinian Authority, he continued. Those decisions signalled the legitimacy of the new Government, and the fact that President Abbas' positions were consistent with those of the Quartet. The Secretary-General had telephoned President Abbas and Prime Minister Fayyad to convey his full support to the new Government. In a welcome development, Prime Minister Ehud Olmert had assured the Secretary-General in a 17 June meeting that Israel was examining options for the resumed transfer of VAT and customs revenues to the Palestinian Authority, and planned to substantially ease movement restrictions in the West Bank.

He said that, with the situation in Gaza now stabilizing to some extent, concerns about food and medical shortages were mounting. Reopening the crossings for commercial and humanitarian imports was the most immediate humanitarian concern for the United Nations. All parties had expressed their desire to ensure that basic supplies continued to reach the people of Gaza, and Israel's resumed fuel shipments for the power plant and petrol stations were welcome. Concrete steps must be taken to reopen the crossings, and work was under way to find the arrangements that would enable the parties make that happen.

Turning to the situation in Lebanon, he said the security situation remained unstable, having deteriorated even further during the reporting period. Explosions continued in and around Beirut. On 13 June, Walid Eido, a Member of Parliament, his son, two bodyguards and six others had been murdered in an assassination reminiscent of the terrorist attacks perpetrated in Lebanon throughout 2005. Following an exchange of letters between the Secretary-General and the Security Council President, and at the request of the Lebanese Government, the United Nations International Independent Investigation Commission had started to extend its assistance to the Lebanese authorities in their investigation of that latest crime.

In northern Lebanon, the Lebanese armed forces had continued intense fighting against Fatah al-Islam elements for five weeks now, he said. To date, 76 Lebanese soldiers and an estimated 50 civilians had died in the fighting, and the humanitarian conditions remained difficult. However, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), supported by other relief bodies of the Organization, had reported that food and non-food items, as well as medical supplies, were sufficient to meet current needs. The international community had responded promptly to UNRWA's recently launched flash appeal for \$12.7 million, with an additional \$12 million in cash assistance coming from Saudi Arabia. Overcrowding and public health issues were now the main challenges for the displaced.

Also in regard to Lebanon, he said the Secretary-General had begun to take measures to establish the special tribunal, in coordination with the Government. In addition, he had called the firing of two Katyusha rockets from southern Lebanon into Israel a "most serious" violation of Security Council resolutions and the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) had deployed to the area of the rocket's launch, finding no suspects.

In conclusion, he said the brutal violence in Gaza and the attacks on the legitimate institutions of the Palestinian Authority Government were totally unacceptable and should be condemned. Despite recent events, however, Gaza and the West Bank remained one Palestinian Territory, legally administered by one Palestinian Authority headed by President Abbas and the emergency Government he had appointed. It was vital that political and financial support from Israel and the international community be immediately delivered to that Palestinian Government, starting with the release of all withheld Palestinian VAT and customs receipts. Also needed was action on previous Israeli and Palestinian commitments, such as the removal of roadblocks, the release of prisoners and the evacuation of settlement outposts, on the one hand, and the end of violence and reform of Palestinian Authority institutions on the other.

Paying tribute to the entire United Nations team on the ground in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, he said two staff members, Abdel-Fatah Abu-Ghali and Ahmad al-Laham, had been killed on 13 June and others injured, while serving the people of Gaza.
