



Security Council

PROVISIONAL

S/PV.6871
27 November 2012

Provisional

Security Council

Sixty-seventh year

6871st meeting

Tuesday, 27 November 2012, 10 a.m.
New York

President: Mr. Hardeep Singh Puri

(India)

Members: Azerbaijan
China
Colombia
France
Germany
Guatemala
Morocco
Pakistan
Portugal
Russian Federation
South Africa
Togo
United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland
United States of America

Mr. Mehdiyev
Mr. Wang Min
Mr. Alzate
Mr. Araud
Mr. Berger
Mr. Rosenthal
Mr. Loulichki
Mr. Tarar
Mr. Moraes Cabral
Mr. Churkin
Mr. Laher
Mr. Kandangha-Bariki
Sir Mark Lyall Grant
Mrs. DiCarlo

Agenda

The situation in the Middle East, including the Palestinian question

The meeting was called to order at 10.15 a.m.

Adoption of the agenda

The agenda was adopted

The situation in the Middle East, including the Palestinian question

The President: Under rule 39 of the Council's provisional rules of procedure, I invite Mr. Robert Serry, Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process and Personal Representative of the Secretary-General to the Palestine Liberation Organization and the Palestinian Authority, to participate in this meeting.

The Security Council will now begin its consideration of the item on its agenda.

I now give the floor to Mr. Robert Serry.

Mr. Serry: We meet today against the background of the recent disturbing cycle of violence in Gaza and Israel and a dangerous escalation that concluded with the Egyptian-brokered ceasefire agreement on 21 November. At the same time, this week the Palestinians are expected to follow through with their intention to approach the General Assembly seeking non-member State observer status.

Those two significant political developments supersede any other aspect of our regular reporting and merit dedicated focus in my briefing today. Both underscore that the status quo is unsustainable and that it is all the more vital to identify a way ahead to urgently put the peace process back on track. Both take place amid other growing regional concerns, mainly linked to the conflict in Syria, which continues at an alarming rate.

On Gaza, the Secretary-General briefed the Council last week about his urgent visit to Egypt, Israel, the occupied Palestinian territory and Jordan, and the intense diplomatic effort that culminated in the announcement of a ceasefire agreement welcomed by the Council, which principally calls for a reciprocal cessation of hostilities. I will therefore focus my remarks first on the next steps, which require difficult work in order to finalize the details left open in the agreement before the ceasefire can take firm hold. I will also brief the Council on the proactive role of the United Nations on addressing recovery and humanitarian needs in Gaza, which I visited Sunday.

The Secretary-General asked me to stay in Cairo in the days following the announcement of a truce and his own efforts for the purpose of contributing to reaching agreement on the comprehensive elements of the ceasefire. In the so-called understanding for a ceasefire, Israel and Palestinian factions agreed to stop "all hostilities" and, after an initial period of 24-hour calm, begin discussions on some of the long-standing issues to be addressed for a broad, durable ceasefire to take firm hold over the longer term. Security remains central to those discussions. I can report that Egypt and the parties have already commenced intense discussions on how to deal with the issues listed in the understanding. The United Nations, present on the ground, is working closely with Egypt in providing inputs and suggestions to those discussions.

The calm has largely held, despite the firing of a few rockets in the hours following the agreement and renewed shooting incidents during a demonstration along the fence inside Gaza, which claimed the life of one Palestinian demonstrator. It is now paramount that the parties respect the calm and allow time for the other elements of the understanding to be worked out. Yet we know that this will not be easy.

It is painful that, despite consistent warnings, we had yet another major escalation four years after Operation Cast Lead. The devastating round of violence is a stark reminder of the fact that the status quo is unsustainable. There will be no progress if Israel's legitimate security concerns are not addressed. At the same time, it will give Palestinians a strong additional stake in a durable calm if it leads to a lifting of the closure on Gaza. This is, at long last, an opportunity to address the underlying causes of conflict captured in resolution 1860 (2009), which provides the international legal framework for stabilizing the situation in Gaza. Core elements of the resolution remain unimplemented. These include an end to weapons smuggling and the full opening of crossings. The understanding now provides a framework to address the opening of crossings and facilitate the movement of people and the transfer of goods, as well as refrain from restricting residents' free movement and targeting residents in border areas. It has been agreed that other matters as may be requested shall be addressed. Efforts to prevent the trafficking of arms and put in place long-term security arrangements should also be part of the discussion for a sustainable and durable calm.

I am pleased to note that implementation has started in earnest and that Israel has, in principle, agreed to the extension of the maritime fishing limit to six nautical miles. This is already a significant result, but it is not sufficient on its own. More needs to be done with respect to crossings and freedom of movement. As a next concrete measure of progress, we hope to see a liberalization of import of construction material — including aggregate, steel bars and cement — through existing crossings. Exports from Gaza and transfers into the West Bank should also become part of the mechanism.

But it is also essential that we address other aspects of resolution 1860 (2009), which calls for tangible steps towards Palestinian reconciliation. The Secretary-General has continually supported efforts for Palestinian unity in the context of the Palestine Liberation Organization commitments and the work of Egypt in this regard. It is my hope that the crisis in Gaza has also created an opportunity to overcome differences in very tangible ways. People, both in Gaza and in the West Bank, expect nothing less from their leaders.

The devastating impact of the violence during the eight days of fighting is now clear. An estimated 158 Palestinians, including 103 civilians — 33 children and 13 women among them — were killed. In a particularly distressing example of civilians bearing the brunt of the suffering, 10 members of the Dalu family were killed in an Israeli air strike on their house on 18 November. Approximately 1,269 Palestinians were reported injured. Six Israelis — four civilians and two soldiers — were reported killed by Palestinian rocket fire, and 224 Israelis, the vast majority of them civilians, were injured. The bomb attack in Tel Aviv on 21 November, which the Secretary-General condemned in the strongest terms, injured 23 people, three severely.

The Secretary-General has stressed that his paramount immediate concern is for the safety and well-being of all civilians, no matter where they are. He has condemned the excessive use of force that endangers civilian lives. He has at the same time consistently condemned indiscriminate rocket fire against Israel, which is unacceptable and will only trigger escalation. Put simply, all parties must respect international humanitarian law to ensure the protection of all civilians, at all times.

Distressed that conditions during his visit so shockingly resembled the situation four years ago, the Secretary-General has instructed me and the rest of the United Nations system to urgently activate recovery and humanitarian assistance in Gaza and to step up our existing support. I visited Gaza on Sunday and witnessed myself the destruction that resulted from the hostilities. I have visited refugee families — beneficiaries of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) — and extended my condolences as they lost several of their members in an Israeli airstrike. I also saw a newly built UNRWA school that had been badly damaged in the fighting, and I spoke to Gazan fishermen of the local cooperative whose office building was also affected by the fighting.

The conclusion of hostilities prevented a large-scale humanitarian emergency. Nevertheless, there was a sharp increase in Palestinians leaving their homes to seek shelter in UNRWA and Government schools just before the ceasefire agreement was reached. At its peak, the number of internally displaced persons reached nearly 12,000. The United Nations and its partners were able to rapidly respond to the needs of these families and on Saturday had already fully resumed pre-existing humanitarian operations that were ongoing prior to 14 November. I am pleased to report that virtually all families have now returned home. UNRWA and public schools reopened on 24 November and municipalities throughout the Gaza Strip have started to remove rubble.

On the same day, I also visited Rishon Lezion, a suburb of Tel Aviv where a rocket from Gaza had destroyed large parts of an apartment building whose residents were fortunately unharmed. On behalf of the Secretary-General, I expressed my sympathies to the Israelis affected. I held some discussions with young residents that impressed on me how the recent escalation had also placed the safety of millions of Israeli civilians at risk, reaching far into the centre of the country.

I would now like to turn to the stated Palestinian intention to present a draft resolution to the General Assembly related to the status of Palestine later this week. The passion that this potential move has generated is indicative of how far apart the parties remain.

The United Nations Charter is clear that issues of recognition of a State and status in the General Assembly are a responsibility for Member States and the United Nations intergovernmental bodies, and not the Secretariat, to decide. The Secretary-General has said on numerous occasions that the Palestinians should have an independent and viable State of their own, living side by side with the State of Israel, in peace and security. A Palestinian State is long overdue; it is key to addressing the legitimate aspirations of both peoples and paramount to the stability of the region. The Secretary-General hopes that all concerned will look at the consequences of any decision they make responsibly.

However, regardless of the outcome of the move in the General Assembly on 29 November, it is also important to plan for the day after, including protecting the crucial achievements of the Palestinian Authority in building robust State institutions. These steps have brought real security and economic improvements, but both are dangerously at risk. President Abbas and Prime Minister Fayyad must be commended for these achievements, which must be protected.

The Secretary-General is also aware that the effectiveness of the Quartet has been called into question, including by members of the Council, and I have also in the past warned that the Quartet's credibility is at stake. In its recent meeting amid the Gaza crisis on 17 November, the League of Arab States cited the need to reconsider the Arab position towards the Palestinian cause, the peace process and other instruments, including the Quartet. The sense of urgency is now all the greater, and Quartet members must take stock of the events of the past months and reassess their role in shaping the way forward.

I have also consistently warned about the threat of a prolonged stalemate in the peace process to the two-State solution and the viability of the Palestinian Authority. There is no substitute to meaningful negotiations to achieve this vision. This must remain our collective priority. Unfortunately, that effort continues to be undermined by actions on the ground, including continued settlement activity, settler violence and clashes between Palestinians and Israeli security forces, during which two Palestinian demonstrators were killed. The spillover of violence from the Gaza crisis into the West Bank was largely contained thanks to the effectiveness of the Palestinian security forces.

Let me now turn briefly to the Syrian Arab Republic, where the conflict, now in its twenty-first month, is reaching new and appalling heights of brutality and violence. I shall keep my remarks short, as Joint Special Representative Brahimi will brief the Council in more detail in private consultations later this week.

Destruction, death and suffering have become part of daily life across Syria. The humanitarian crisis is becoming more acute now that winter is upon us, and the number of those in need is growing, potentially reaching 4 million inside Syria by the end of 2012. The flow of refugees also continues. The overall number of registered and assisted Syrian refugees is now approximately 450,000, with Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan hosting over 100,000 each. Over 10,000 Palestinian refugees from Syria have also fled the violence, mostly to Lebanon, but also to Jordan. We continue to call on the donor community to support our humanitarian assistance programmes.

Against this background, the Secretary-General and Joint Special Representative Brahimi continue their efforts aimed at reaching a political solution and pulling the parties out of the military logic in which they remain locked.

As a consequence of the internal conflict in Syria, the situation in the United Nations Disengagement Observer Force area of operation remains volatile. Armed clashes between the Syrian Arab Armed Forces and armed members of the opposition take place daily inside the area of separation. Fire across the ceasefire line has shown potential for escalation between Israel and Syria. In several instances, mortar shells fired by Syrian Government forces landed in the Israeli-occupied Golan, with the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) retaliating on three occasions. Syrian authorities reported that two Syrian soldiers were killed on 18 November as a result of the IDF fire across the ceasefire line. Israeli authorities also reported that small arms fire has affected IDF patrols on a number of occasions. The situation clearly jeopardizes regional stability and the ceasefire between the two countries. We have repeatedly called on both sides to respect the Disengagement Agreement.

The situation in Lebanon also remains vulnerable to the ongoing conflict in Syria. Special Coordinator Plumbly will also brief the Council in more detail later this week, so I will just mention a few highlights. There are continuing reports of cross-border shelling and arms smuggling. Clashes between Salafists and Hizbullah in a predominantly Shia neighbourhood in the southern city of Sidon on 11 November reflected ongoing tension between supporters and opponents of the Syrian regime, causing three fatalities and a of injuries. The Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) were deployed to control the situation and prevent any further escalation of the violence.

As for the general situation in Lebanon, the main development since the last briefing was the terrorist attack that killed Brigadier General Wissam al-Hassan, Chief of the Information Branch of the Lebanese Internal Security Forces, in Beirut on 19 October. Two others were killed and dozens were injured as the explosion occurred in the residential neighbourhood of Achrafieh. That political assassination triggered violence across the country that caused at least eight more deaths and approximately 30 injured. The opposition has called for the resignation of the Government of Prime Minister Mikati and announced that it will not engage in dialogue with the Government.

President Sleiman continues to hold consultations with political leaders to find a path forward that is met with broad support. His efforts deserve strong support. The principles of the June Baabda Declaration, including the disassociation policy, remain the fundamental compact agreed by all Lebanese political factions for the security and stability of Lebanon. Meanwhile, it is essential for the institutions of the State to continue to play their role in ensuring security, stability and justice. A further session of the national dialogue is scheduled to be held on 29 November. It is in the interests of Lebanon's continued stability that all parties continue to exercise restraint, avoid provocative rhetoric and work cooperatively as preparations begin for the 2013 elections.

The situation inside the area of operations of the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) has remained generally quiet. On 19 November, two Grad rockets were discovered by members of the Lebanese Armed Forces near the village of Mazraa al-Islamiya in southern Lebanon. The rockets had reportedly been prepared to be launched across the Blue Line into Israel. UNIFIL and the LAF have increased their level of alert and the number of coordinated operational activities following the outbreak of violence in Gaza and southern Israel. Efforts to ensure calm against the backdrop of that violence have received broad political backing, including from Hizbullah.

Let me conclude. This week alone, the Council will hear three briefings on the Middle East, not to mention the expected General Assembly proceedings, which are testimony to the highly dynamic times the region is experiencing. Last week, with the situation in Gaza we came very close to the brink of a crisis that could have engulfed the region. We should take this as a wake-up call that challenges all of us to work together to restore prospects for a durable regional peace.

The region is headed for an unpredictable future with multiple sources of uncertainty. What is certain, though, is that the Arab-Israeli conflict cannot be ignored in constructively shaping that future. I remain convinced that a solution of the Palestinian-Israeli issue, in the form of a negotiated two-State solution, is the best contribution we can make at this time to regional stability.

The President: I thank Mr. Serry for his briefing. I now invite Council members to informal consultations to continue our discussions on the subject.

The meeting rose at 10.35 a.m.

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