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**MIDDLE EAST: WRITTEN MINISTERIAL STATEMENT (20/11/07)**

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr. David Miliband):

I visited Israel, the Occupied Palestinian Territories and Egypt between 17 and 20 November. I met Presidents Abbas and Peres, Prime Ministers Olmert and Fayyad, Foreign Ministers Livni, Malki and Aboul Gheit as well as French Foreign Minister Kouchner, Ministers Barak and Suleiman, the Arab League Secretary General Amr Moussa, and the leader of the Likud Party, Benjamin Netanyahu. I also heard different perspectives from students, business people, university directors and deans, journalists and civil society activists. I spoke to them all about the current situation in the region, the prospects for progress towards a just and lasting settlement of the Middle East conflict, preparations for the forthcoming Annapolis meeting, the post-Annapolis process, and how the UK can contribute.

The bedrock of our approach on the Middle East Peace Process is threefold – first, to be unstinting in our support for the principle of a two-state solution; second, to give every support to all those who are committed to peaceful progress in the region; and third, to support economic, institutional and social development across the OPTs. The focus now must be on: maximising consensus for a positive outcome at Annapolis; launching a process of negotiations between the parties that makes real progress during 2008 towards the shared goal of a viable Palestinian state next to a secure Israel; and developing practical contributions from international partners towards economic, social and security goals.

I do not underestimate the difficulties but my firm conclusion is that there is now a real opportunity for making progress. The leadership commitment of Israel and the Palestinian Authority, the full engagement of the US, the important Arab Peace Initiative, and the united support of EU countries, are all key components of progress. I was impressed by the level of seriousness on all sides. I urged all my interlocutors to seize the opportunity that Annapolis represents – a political horizon to break the freeze that has existed for several years.

We are working closely with our international partners to support the Annapolis process, led with real determination by the US. As the Prime Minister has noted, the road from Annapolis will be as important as the road there. Although as both sides have made clear, it is for them to negotiate the details of a two-state solution, the international community has offered its support and encouragement and the UK stands ready to help them move forward.

For the UK this means supporting the Palestinian leadership of Mahmoud Abbas and Salam Fayyad in two key areas: security and economic development.

Security is fundamental to a just solution. I visited Jericho to see the EU's civil police training mission (EU COPPS), a mission initiated by the UK which underlines our continuing commitment to enhancing the security capacity of the Palestinian Authority. I am pleased that the UK has been able to increase its commitment by £1.2 million. We are also working closely with General Dayton, the US Security Co-ordinator, and his team including through the provision of additional security advisors.

Economic development is crucial in building a viable Palestinian state. The Prime Minister announced last week a commitment of up to \$500 million to Palestinian development, conditional on progress towards peace and creating the necessary conditions. We are working closely with Tony Blair, who announced the first major projects yesterday. His work will be central to delivering a future Palestinian state with strong institutions and a robust economy. We are preparing for the Donors Conference to be hosted by France in Paris on 17 December.

The humanitarian situation in Gaza continues to give cause for concern. We recognise Israel's security dilemma, and deplore the rocket attacks that endanger Israeli citizens. It is equally imperative that measures in response be consistent with international law and not cause suffering to innocent civilians. We have made clear our determination to continue supporting all the Palestinian people. In addition to the significant sums we have just pledged, the UK provided in 2007: i) £100 million over the next 5 years to UNRWA; ii) an additional £1 million bilateral contribution to the Red Cross' work in the West Bank and Gaza; and iii) £15 million through the Temporary International Mechanism. Restrictions on movement and access, both through the crossings into Gaza and the restrictions in the West Bank, have serious economic, social and security consequences that require the urgent attention of the Palestinian Authority and Israeli Government.

Over the next week I will continue to urge all parties to take decisions which create the conditions and confidence for a successful conference and follow-up. I welcome the statement of Prime Minister Olmert yesterday about settlements and outposts. I look forward to further commitments from all those concerned with this conflict to make a practical and political contribution to a meaningful process of negotiations. Such a process is vital to regional and global stability. The UK will play its full part in this drive.

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