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WORLD COMMUNITY CANNOT AFFORD ANOTHER YEAR LIKE 2006 IN MIDDLE EAST.

SAYS UNDER-SECRETARY-GENERAL, BRIEFING SECURITY COUNCIL

Ibrahim Gambari Says Recent Months Marked by Instability, Suffering. Combined with Renewed International Urgency to Find Political Way Forward

Ibrahim Gambari, Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs, briefed the Security Council this morning, saying, "None of us can afford another year like the last one in Lebanon and the Middle East."

The period since the former Secretary-General's final report to the Council in early December, he continued, had been marked by heightened levels of instability and suffering, combined with a renewed sense of international urgency to find a political way ahead. Underscoring the "clear priority" of a resumed political process between Israel and the Palestinians, he said solutions were urgently needed also to the political impasses among the Palestinians and in Lebanon. United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon had encouraged leaders in both contexts to overcome their difficulties and move forward in the best interests of their people.

For many Lebanese, ugly spectres of the past had again begun to emerge, he said, stressing the shared responsibility of all sides to resolve their political differences peacefully through the democratic process in order to spare their populations further anxiety, insecurity and turmoil. The Secretary-General was attending today's "Paris III" Conference, where he would reiterate strong support for Lebanon and urge redoubled efforts by all sides to return to dialogue and break the paralysing political impasse.

Noting that the demonstrations starting in Beirut on 1 December had been largely peaceful until 23 January, he said events two days ago had shown how easily political tensions could spill over into violence. There was great concern regarding those risks and their effect on Lebanon's stability and security. The United Nations remained in contact with all parties encouraging an early return to dialogue and supported continuing efforts, including those of the League of Arab States, to bring the leaders to compromise and consensus.

General stability had returned to southern Lebanon due to the deployment of the enhanced United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) and the Lebanese Armed Forces, which continued to enjoy a high level of cooperation, he said. The Lebanese Army was playing a crucial role in the south, in Beirut and elsewhere in the country, which underscored the importance of timely support for the army, as promised by the international community.

While UNIFIL also continued to maintain good relations with the Israel Defense Forces, that country's violations of Lebanese airspace continued, he said. Civilians continued to be killed and injured by the cluster munitions dropped on Lebanon during last year's conflict. The United Nations was continuing to identify and remove unexploded ordnance in the south, and at least 840 individual cluster strike locations had been identified to date, each containing up to hundreds of individual bomblets or sub-munitions.

Turning to Israeli-Palestinian developments, he said both Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas and Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert had been working hard to ease tensions and move towards resuming political dialogue. The ceasefire in Gaza, agreed to at the end of November, remained in place, although militants had fired more than 104 rockets into southern Israel in the past two months, according to Israeli officials. To its credit, the Israeli Government had shown considerable restraint in the face of those attacks.

However, the ceasefire had not been extended to the West Bank and operations to arrest or kill wanted Palestinians continued regularly, he said. During the reporting period, 28 Palestinians had been killed and more than 130 injured in Israeli military operations, while 10 Israelis had been injured by Palestinian militants. Egypt continued to lead efforts for the release of the Israeli corporal captured last summer and of Palestinian prisoners in Israel, but they had yet to yield results.

Nevertheless, President Abbas and Prime Minister Olmert had met on 23 December and agreed to revive the joint committees established in the Sharm el-Sheikh understandings, he said. The Prime Minister had also undertaken to transfer to the President's office \$100 million of the more than half a billion dollars withheld by Israel; to intensify the upgrading of crossings between the Gaza Strip and Israel; and to ease checkpoint procedures in the West Bank while removing a number of roadblocks. However, the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) had reported only a modest easing in the operation of a few West Bank checkpoints and the anticipated removal of roadblocks had yet to be observed.

Furthermore, the Government of Israel had approved the repopulation of a settlement deep in the Jordan Valley, in violation of the [Road Map](#), he said. While that decision had been put on hold after international protests, settlement activity continued, and the number of West Bank settlers, excluding those in East Jerusalem, had increased by nearly 6 per cent since 2005. Moreover, the Government's pledges to remove outposts remained unfulfilled, and the construction of the barrier on the Occupied Palestinian Territory continued, despite the advisory opinion of the International Court of Justice.

He said the evolving Israeli-Palestinian dialogue was complicated by the internal political situation in both the Occupied Palestinian Territory, where factional tensions had risen to acute levels in mid-December and early January, and Israel. A total of 43 people had been killed in Palestinian-on-Palestinian conflict during the reporting period, nearly double the number killed by Israeli military operations. In Israel, political scandals and other developments underscored the coalition Government's difficulties in forging and implementing a clear agenda. The Israel Defense Forces Chief of Staff had resigned and an official inquiry into the conduct of last summer's conflict with Hizbollah continued.

Reporting on regional and international engagement in the region, he noted that the United States Secretary of State had recently announced her commitment to addressing the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the importance of a revitalized Quartet. The European Union High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy had visited the region last week and the Secretary-General would attend a meeting of the Quartet Principals (United Nations, United States, European Union and the Russian Federation) on 2 February in Washington, D.C. In addition, the Government of Syria had called publicly for resumed negotiations with Israel, while, on 16 January, the Israeli press had published understandings for a peace agreement between the two countries, arrived at through a private initiative. However, both Governments had strongly denied any official connection.

Prospects for a wider regional dialogue must be cautiously monitored and the door should remain open to discussions that might lead towards a wider, regional and comprehensive peace, he stressed. The Secretary-General had discussed with many interlocutors both the existing opportunities to make genuine strides towards peace and the very real obstacles that must be overcome. He considered next week's Quartet meeting as an important opportunity to chart a way towards revitalizing the peace process and implementing all relevant Security Council resolutions.

The meeting began at 10:05 a.m. and ended at 10:30 a.m.

Briefing Summary

Briefing the Security Council on the situation in the Middle East, including the question of Palestine, IBRAHIM GAMBARI, Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs, said that, since former Secretary-General Kofi Annan's briefing in December 2006, there had been a period of heightened levels of instability and suffering, combined with a renewed sense of international urgency to find a political way ahead. In addition to senior-level contacts at the international level and the proposed meeting of the Quartet for 2 February in Washington, D.C., as well as a possible tripartite meeting of President Mahmoud Abbas, Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and United States Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, he was also encouraged by reports that Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni would be meeting President Abbas in Davos. The Arab League and the Gulf Cooperation Council had also been engaged in the search for a renewed and credible dialogue towards a resolution of that intractable conflict.

He said that both President Abbas and Prime Minister Olmert had been working hard to try to ease tensions and move towards a resumption of political dialogue. The ceasefire agreed at the end of November in Gaza remained in place, although, according to Israeli officials, militants had fired more than 104 rockets into southern Israel during the past two months. In the face of those attacks, the Israeli Government, to its credit, had shown considerable restraint. Despite its flaws, the ceasefire had significantly reduced violence, and he encouraged the parties to build on it. However, it had not extended to the West Bank, where operations to arrest or kill wanted Palestinians continued on a regular basis in West Bank population centres. During the reporting period, 28 Palestinians were killed and more than 130 had been injured in Israeli military operations, while 10 Israelis had been injured by Palestinian militants.

Efforts led by Egypt were continuing on an arrangement to secure the release of the Israeli corporal captured last summer and of Palestinian prisoners in Israel, but those had yet to yield results, he noted. Nevertheless, President Abbas and Prime Minister Olmert had met on 23 December 2006 in Jerusalem, where they had agreed to revive the joint committees established in the Sharm el-Sheikh understandings and to resume the work of the quadripartite security committee between Israel, the Palestinian Authority, Egypt and the United States. Prime Minister Olmert had also undertaken to transfer to the Office of President Abbas \$100 million of the more than a half billion dollars of Palestinian clearance revenues being withheld by Israel; to intensify efforts to upgrade the crossings between the Gaza Strip and Israel; and to ease procedures at a number of checkpoints in the West Bank and remove several roadblocks.

He said that implementation of those understandings had proceeded slowly. Israel, in the past few days, had transferred the \$100 million. The Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs had reported a modest easing of the operation of a few West Bank checkpoints, but the anticipated removal of roadblocks had yet to be observed. Access and movement should be improved. During the first 16 days of 2007, the average exports out of Kami stood at approximately 46 trucks a day. That represented an improving trend, but still reflected only 11 per cent of the target of 400 per day. He encouraged further progress in the regard. In the same period, Rafah had been opened primarily for pilgrims for only 32 per cent of the scheduled opening hours. Finally, there had been no discernable improvement in movement for Palestinians in the West Bank. According to OCHA, the number of barriers currently on the ground – 527 – represented a 25 per cent increase over the course of 2006.

The Government of Israel had approved the repopulation of a settlement deep in the Jordan Valley by 30 families evacuated from Gaza in 2005; such a relocation was in violation of the Road Map, he said. The decision was to put that on hold after international protests, but settlement activity continued, and the number of West Bank settlers, excluding in East Jerusalem, had increased by nearly 6 per cent since 2005. Moreover, the Government's pledges to remove outposts remained unfulfilled, and the construction of the barrier on the Occupied Palestinian Territory continued, despite the Advisory Opinion of the International Court of Justice. The evolving Israeli-Palestinian dialogue was complicated by the internal political situation in both the Occupied Palestinian Territory and Israel.

In the Occupied Palestinian Territory, he said, the pendulum had swung between worsening civil conflict and renewed efforts to forge national unity. Factional tension had risen to acute levels in mid-December and again in early January. Deploable incidents had included: the killing of three children as they were being taken to school; a shootout between gunmen at the Rafah terminal as Prime Minister Haniyeh returned from a regional tour; and a siege on the home of an official in Gaza, killing the official and several others. In total, 43 had been killed in Palestinian-on-Palestinian internal conflict during the reporting period – nearly double the number killed by Israeli military operations.

He said that internal violence had been accompanied by heightened and negative political rhetoric and threats, and strengthening of factional forces. President Abbas had announced that the Hamas-affiliated Executive Special Force, under the Ministry of Interior, was illegal unless immediately integrated into existing security services. Tensions had also flared in late December, and the President had called for early presidential and parliamentary elections unless agreement was reached on a National Unity Government. Nevertheless, each time factional fighting had threatened to spin out of control, President Abbas and Prime Minister Ismail Haniyeh had reached understandings to de-escalate tensions.

Efforts to form a Palestinian National Unity Government had resumed, involving dialogue in Gaza, as well as in Damascus, he continued. It appeared the main issues of disagreement were over control of the interior ministry and the strength of the language concerning the commitment to Arab and international resolutions. While refusing to countenance recognition of Israel, exiled Hamas leader Khaled Mashal recently told news outlets that Israel's existence was a reality and that, with the formation of a Palestinian State on the 4 June 1967 borders, "there will remain a State called Israel, this is a matter of fact".

He said that President Abbas had recently met Syrian President Bashar al-Assad in Damascus and subsequently met Khaled Mashal. A joint statement issued after that meeting had stated that progress had been made towards a National Unity Government; the leaders had called for an end to internal fighting. The statement had also rejected the concept of an interim Palestinian State with provisional borders. President Abbas had subsequently reaffirmed that early elections remained on the table if a National Unity Government was not formed.

On the Israeli side, he said that several political scandals and other developments had underscored the difficulties the Coalition Government was facing in forging and implementing a clear agenda. The Chief of Staff of the Israel Defense Forces, Dan Halutz, resigned, and an official inquiry into the conduct of last summer's war with Hizbollah continued. The campaign for Labour Party Chairman, the junior coalition partner, was under way in preparation for primaries in May. Several senior ministers had discussed publicly their views and plans on how to carry forward a political process. That had highlighted both a growing Israeli interest in addressing the conflict through negotiations and internal divisions over how to do so.

He reported that regional and international leaders had intensified their engagement in the Israeli-Palestinian arena. There had been consultations among several countries in the region, and the Syrian Government had publicly called in recent months for a resumption of talks with Israel. On 16 January, the Israeli press published understandings for a peace agreement between Israel and Syria, which had been arrived at through a private initiative. However, both Governments had strongly denied any official connection with that initiative.

It was exactly one year today since Palestinian legislative elections had brought the Hamas-led Palestinian Authority to power, leading to a reassessment of donor programmes and the cessation of financial transfers by Israel. However, international aid to the Palestinians had actually increased, except that it was mostly bypassing the Palestinian Government. Total assistance to Palestinians last year – not including funds channelled to the Palestinian Authority Government or Hamas by regional donors – had been some \$1.2 billion, which represented a nearly 10 per cent increase over 2005. Humanitarian assistance alone had doubled since 2004, taking mainly the form of food aid and cash-for-work programmes. However, real gross domestic product (GDP) per capita had declined by at least 8 per cent in the past year, and poverty levels had increased by 30 per cent. Public institutions built up by the international community had been severely weakened by a lack of operational funds, energy shortages and military damage.

The worsening situation on the ground had underscored the limits of what international assistance could accomplish, he said. Without greater freedom of access and movement, and without a political process that was carrying the parties towards a two-State solution, the most aid could do was contain, for a limited time, the spread of grievances and instability. The experience of the past year showed that that type of investment brought rapidly diminishing returns.

Turning to Lebanon, he said that the Secretary-General was today attending the "Paris III" Conference, where he would be reiterating the United Nations strong support for Lebanon and urging redoubled efforts by all sides to return to dialogue and break the paralysing political impasse. The demonstrations that had started in Beirut on 1 December 2006 had been largely peaceful until last Tuesday, 23 January. Following a call from the opposition for a general strike, thousands of Lebanese from opposing political factions had faced each other, often violently, on the streets. Few regions of the country had been spared by the unrest that had led to at least three dead and more than 100 injured – some very seriously. Major roads throughout the country had been effectively blocked by burning tyres and earth barriers. A tense calm had returned to Beirut yesterday, following the decision by the opposition to suspend the strike, but tensions remained high. However, the opposition had stated that further escalation would occur unless the Government acceded to its demands.

He said that general stability had returned to southern Lebanon due to the deployment of the enhanced United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) and the Lebanese Armed Forces, which continued to have a high level of cooperation. Civilians continued to be killed and injured, however, by the cluster munitions dropped on Lebanon during last year's conflict. In December 2006, incidents led to the death of three people and the injury of 21 others, including five children and two Belgian peacekeepers. The United Nations was continuing its programme to identify and remove unexploded ordnance in southern Lebanon. As of today, at least 840 individual cluster strike locations had been identified, each strike location containing up to hundreds of individual bomblets or sub-munitions.

The Secretary-General had designated Major General Claudio Graziano of Italy as UNIFIL Force Commander to succeed Major General Alain Pellegrini, he noted. The handover ceremony was scheduled for 2 February.

"None of us can afford another year like the last one in Lebanon and the Middle East," he stressed. Therefore, a resumed political process between Israel and the Palestinians was a clear priority. The Secretary-General encouraged the two leaders to build on their progress to date by implementing agreements and by starting to address the fundamental issues of the conflict. Solutions were urgently needed to the political impasses, both among the Palestinians and in Lebanon. The Secretary-General encouraged leaders in both contexts to overcome their differences and find a way to move forward, which served the best interests of their people. Lebanon, as its people knew all too well, could ill afford any further deterioration. For many Lebanese, ugly spectres of the past had begun to emerge. All sides had a shared responsibility to resolve their political differences through the democratic process and in a peaceful manner, in order to spare their populations further anxiety, insecurity and turmoil.

He said that prospects for a wider regional dialogue must also be cautiously monitored, and the door should remain open to discussions that might lead to a wider, regional and comprehensive peace. The Secretary-General had discussed with many interlocutors both the opportunities that now existed to make genuine strides towards peace and the very real obstacles. He considered next week's Quartet meeting an important opportunity to chart a way forward to re-energizing the peace process and implementing all relevant Security Council resolutions.

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*The 5623rd Meeting was closed.