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UNDER-SECRETARY-GENERAL FOR POLITICAL AFFAIRS

BRIEFING TO THE SECURITY COUNCIL

ON THE SITUATION IN THE MIDDLE EAST

23 April 2012

Madam President,

1. Achieving a full and sustained cessation of violence and seeking a peaceful resolution of the crisis in Syria is at the center of our efforts in the Middle East. This Council took decisive action on Saturday by authorizing a United Nations Supervision mission to Syria (UNSMIS) in response to the proposal of the Secretary-General, who strongly welcomed the unanimous adoption of resolution 2043. The Joint Special Envoy and the Under-Secretary-General for Peacekeeping operations will brief tomorrow on the good offices efforts and the deployment of the observers. I'll therefore limit my comments to a few critical points before turning to the Israeli-Palestinian issue.
2. We are at a pivotal moment in Syria. The cessation of armed violence remains incomplete. Too many lives have been lost. Human rights violations are still perpetrated with impunity. But it is our hope that the deployment of observers will help to stop the killing and consolidate the calm. The objective however is clearly not to freeze the situation but to create the conditions for a serious and credible political process. The Joint Special Envoy has called on both the Government and the opposition to engage in such a process as a matter of utmost priority. It is essential that the Government of Syria fully and immediately implement its obligations to stop using heavy weapons and to pullback military forces from population centres. Action on the other aspects of the six point plan is no less important. Measures taken by the Syrian authorities to date, including on the release of arbitrarily detained persons and the respect of the right to demonstrate peacefully, are clearly insufficient. Both would be critical elements to create the conditions for a political solution through peaceful dialogue.
3. Ending the suffering of the people most affected by the fighting also continues to be a top priority of our collective efforts. The second Syria Humanitarian Forum took place on 20 April in Geneva. This important mechanism chaired by the United Nations with the co-facilitation of the OIC, the EU and the LAS, gathered some 350 participants from Member States, UN agencies, the ICRC and IFRC, and international NGOs. Syrian Government representatives recognized that there are serious humanitarian needs. However little progress has been

made so far on allowing the full and unimpeded access and increased capacity of agencies on the ground required to ensure the timely provision of humanitarian assistance. We urge the Government to take all necessary steps to facilitate the humanitarian response, as one million people are in need. We welcome in this regard the generous mobilization of donors' support at the Syria Humanitarian Forum meeting.

Madam President,

4. Let me now turn to the Middle East Peace Process. For the United Nations, achieving peace for Israelis and Palestinians is an undiminished priority. The Secretary-General was pleased to join his Quartet partners in Washington DC on 11 April, in order to reflect on developments over the past six months and forge a way forward, that builds on the Quartet statement of 23 September 2011. Quartet Principals heard a briefing from Jordan Foreign Minister Nasser Judeh on ongoing Jordanian efforts to promote exploratory talks. After a pause, negotiators met again in Amman in early April and agreed to an exchange of letters outlining their positions. Both President Abbas and Prime Minister Netanyahu have since continued to reiterate their desire to negotiate. Although the environment remains fragile, any opportunity to pursue dialogue towards a resumption of meaningful negotiations should be welcomed and supported.
5. As previously agreed between the parties, on 17 April, a senior Palestinian delegation met with Prime Minister Netanyahu in Jerusalem to deliver a letter from President Abbas. Prime Minister Netanyahu has indicated his intention to respond in writing. A joint statement following the meeting noted the commitment of Israel and the Palestinian Authority to achieving peace. It is our hope that this exchange of letters can provide an opening for further dialogue.
6. At the same time, the Quartet recognized the urgent need for tangible signs of progress on the ground. They particularly underscored the need for continued international support for the Palestinian Authority's important institution-building efforts. They further drew attention to the need for \$1.1 billion in assistance to meet the Palestinian Authority's 2012 recurrent financing requirements. The Quartet urged the speedy conclusion of efforts to resolve outstanding issues related to tax and customs revenue collection. It further singled out the need to improve development for Area C in the West Bank as central to the viability of a future Palestinian State. Palestinians require access to a fair planning and zoning regime so as not to resort to building of unauthorized structures that lead to unjustified demolitions, which often impact on the most vulnerable people. Access to Area C will also enable much needed urban development particularly in areas adjacent to established cities.

Madam President,

7. Reminding both parties of their obligations under the roadmap, the Quartet reiterated its call for them to avoid actions that undermine trust. Absent a political horizon, the fragility of the situation on the ground raises serious concerns. On 30 March, on the occasion of “Land day”, large demonstrations were held in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, as well as in Gaza, Lebanon, Jordan and, to a smaller extent, in Egypt and Syria. Clashes between demonstrators and the Israel Defense Forces resulted in one Palestinian killed and some 180 wounded. The IDF used crowd control measures aimed at minimizing the number of casualties, or it would have been more. Palestinian security forces in the West Bank and Gaza took measures to avoid bloodshed, and in Lebanon the Lebanese authorities worked to prevent tension and violence in the immediate vicinity of the Blue Line. Nevertheless, we remain mindful that in the current tenuous environment there is always a risk for an eruption of violence.
8. This risk is further illustrated by the security incidents observed this month. Clashes between demonstrators and the IDF resulted in four Palestinian deaths and 293 injuries, including 30 children. The IDF conducted 314 operations in the occupied West Bank, during which one Palestinian was killed and 248 Palestinians injured, including 12 children. 2 IDF soldiers were also injured. 209 Palestinians were arrested. On 18 April the Israeli military suspended a senior military officer who assaulted a foreign activist in the West Bank and a commando soldier who killed a Palestinian during a training session in a West Bank village. On 2 April Israeli security forces raided a Palestinian media center in East Jerusalem seizing equipment and files. On two occasions, on 2 and 19 April, an Israeli citizen was attacked in East Jerusalem, reportedly by a Palestinian armed with an axe in the first instance; neither sustained life threatening injuries.
9. The Quartet has taken note of the significant progress on security achieved by the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank. Palestinian security forces have continued their efforts to maintain law and order in the West Bank. However there were a few incidents. On 15 April one Palestinian militant was killed and several others injured in a shoot-out with Palestinian security forces conducting an arrest raid near Jenin. With respect to the transparent enforcement of law and order by Palestinian Authority security forces in the West Bank, we are particularly concerned over reports about an increase in arrests or intimidation of Palestinian journalists and bloggers for expressing their views.
10. The Israeli Government has announced tenders for over one thousand housing units in the occupied Palestinian territory, 870 of which are in the East Jerusalem settlement of HarHoma and the remainder in a settlement in the West Bank. These actions undermine efforts to achieve a two-state solution and are contrary to international law.

11. As a result of a court case brought by an Israeli settler association, two Palestinian households of refugee families were evicted from their homes in the heart of the Palestinian neighborhood of Beit Hanina in East Jerusalem. In total, 54 Palestinian structures, including 14 residences, were demolished in the West Bank, leading to the displacement of 117 Palestinians, including 63 children.
12. The Quartet is concerned about ongoing settler violence in the West Bank and called on Israel to take effective measures, including bringing the perpetrators of such acts to justice. On 4 April Israeli security forces evacuated 12 settler families who had taken up residence in a house in Hebron.
13. The Secretary-General follows closely the situation of Palestinian prisoners in Israeli detention centers. Some 320 remain under administrative detention. On 1 April, the case of prisoner Hana Shalabi came to an end when she agreed to be deported to Gaza after a 43-day hunger strike. However, on 17 April demonstrations in Gaza and the West Bank took place to commemorate Palestinian “Prisoner’s day”, and 1,200 Palestinian prisoners reportedly started an open ended hunger strike to protest the conditions of Palestinian prisoners.

Madam President,

14. If I may turn to Gaza, the Quartet, while reaffirming its previous positions, stated that the situation in and around Gaza will remain unsustainable so long as it is not reunited with the West Bank under the legitimate Palestinian Authority adhering to the PLO commitments. The reconciliation process has yet to see any progress since the Doha declaration of 6 February. The Quartet further underscored the importance of continued steps to address the needs of Gaza’s residents, and welcomed the Israeli Government’s approval at the AHLC meeting of UN priority infrastructure projects in Gaza.
15. This month a total of 13 rockets, including 1 Grad rocket and 11 mortars, were fired from Gaza into Israel, while the IDF conducted 3 incursions and 3 airstrikes into Gaza. Clashes in Gaza resulted in the death of 2 Palestinian civilians and one militant. 39 civilians and two militants were injured. 1 Palestinian was killed in tunnel related activities. Two Palestinians were killed by IDF troops on 1 and 3 April respectively, when approaching the security fence. One was allegedly armed and trying to plant explosives but the second was a 17 year-old unarmed boy. Indiscriminate rocket attacks from Gaza into Israel must cease and Israeli forces must show the maximum restraint.
16. On 7 April, Hamas de facto authorities executed 3 prisoners, 2 of them charged with criminal cases and one accused of collaboration with Israel. The execution was carried out without the approval of President Abbas, as is required by Palestinian Basic Law. Palestinian and international human rights organization have strongly condemned the

continued Hamas policy of executions in Gaza. The UN continues to call for the cessation of all military trials by Palestinian authorities.

17. In another development, on 5 March two Grad rockets were reportedly fired from the Sinai Peninsula towards the Israeli city of Eilat. One rocket landed near a residential area causing minor damage.

Madam President,

18. The Secretary-General welcomed the recent meeting and joint public commitment of Israelis and Palestinians. What is important now is to transform this fragile opening into an opportunity to incrementally promote dialogue while ensuring continued international support for the Palestinian Authority's institution-building efforts.

Madam President,

19. Let me briefly turn to the situation in Lebanon. On 4 April, Dr. Samir Geagea, the leader of the Lebanese Forces, escaped an apparent assassination attempt when two bullets fired at him in the garden of his residence narrowly missed their target. The Lebanese authorities are investigating this attack on the life of one of its major political figure.

20. The situation along Lebanon's borders with Syria remains of concern. On 9 April, a cameraman for the Lebanese television network Al-Jadeed, was killed in the Lebanese border region of Wadi Khaled by gunfire emanating from the Syrian side. President Sleiman, Prime Minister Mikati and representatives across the entire political spectrum in Lebanon condemned the incident. The Lebanese authorities have launched an inquiry into the incident and have requested that Syrian authorities undertake their own investigation.

21. The United Nations continues to coordinate closely with the Government of Lebanon on the provision of assistance to the 9,700 Syrian refugees registered in Northern Lebanon, as well as on matters of protection and the determination of their status. Special Coordinator Plumbly toured the area on 17 April and met with local political and security representatives and with Syrian refugees. In the eastern Lebanese Bekaa valley, UNHCR's latest assessment is that approximately 7,500 Syrian refugees are receiving assistance.

22. The overall situation in the UNIFIL area of operations has remained generally quiet and stable. Air violations by the Israeli Defense Forces have continued on an almost daily basis.

Thank you very much, Madam President.